



Center for Collaborative Democracy

## How Leaders Outside Government

Can Overcome the Divisiveness and Dysfunction Hobbling Our Democracy,

Promote Wide Prosperity and Restore Confidence in Our Future

The Center for Collaborative Democracy is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 organization that grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program.

**Our Advisory Board includes:**

Lawrence Susskind, vice chair and co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School

John Marks, founder of Search for Common Ground

Adi Ignatius, editor of the Harvard Business Review

Jerome Climer, founder of the Congressional Institute

Brandon Arnold, Executive Vice President of the National Taxpayers Union

Larry Spears, co-founder of Policy Consensus Initiative

## **A Strategy to Resolve Our Fiscal-Economic Troubles to the Satisfaction of All Sides**

Members of Congress from both parties have won reelection 94 percent of the time over the past 20 years — largely by stirring voters' anger toward ideological opponents, blaming them for America's economic ills.

Lawmakers who proposed cost-effective solutions have, by contrast, alienated key blocs of voters — enough so that most such lawmakers have lost their seats.

Incumbents who remain, facing the choice of staying in office or trying to solve our country's problems, have nearly all chosen to keep their jobs by stoking voters' hostility toward the other side. Our problems will therefore grow, heightening voters' anger at government, at our economic system and at one another

**Yet at other turbulent times, several Americans had enough influence on all the competing factions to work out agreements that all sides supported.** The prime example: the 55 framers of our Constitution.

Recently, several Americans have likewise worked out practical solutions to controversies that elected officials repeatedly failed to resolve — with the groups mired in those conflicts all endorsing the solutions.

The Center for Collaborative Democracy has met with these conflict-resolvers and with former leaders of Congress, finding evidence that several high-profile Americans are motivated and equipped to do what lawmakers have consistently refused to do — work out cost-effective, broadly beneficial solutions for our fiscal-economic troubles and then win support for the solutions from voters of all persuasions.

Laying out our evidence, this proposal will:

- 1) Identify the individuals best prepared to resolve our nation's conflicts over:
  - most Americans' wages stagnating or sinking
  - schools failing to equip most students for this century's economy
  - Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security's rising costs pushing our country toward insolvency
  - a tax code whose 75,000 pages of exceptions favor a select few
  - decaying infrastructure that hobbles productivity
- 2) Show how these conflict-resolvers would hash out their differences, agree on solutions that advance the long-term interests of Americans across the socio-economic-political spectrum and, then, mobilize support for the solutions from voters young and old, left and right, struggling and thriving.
- 3) Spell out how this wide public support would spur lawmakers from both parties to enact these policies.
- 4) Call on business and civic leaders to join with us in initiating the above steps — convening a group of Americans with wide enough influence to:
  - build consensus on a fiscal-economic plan that will lead to broad, sustainable prosperity;
  - thereby helping the middle-class, the well-off and the poor to reach their potential; and
  - demonstrating to all how our country can resolve other seemingly intractable issues.

## **Evidence of Who Can Bridge Our Nation's Divisions**

Congress's deadlocks over environmental policy in the mid-1990s spurred 25 advocates for the various sides to meet face-to-face. They included top executives from Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil, Pacific Gas & Electric and General Motors; leaders of the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defense Council; the director of the EPA; and the president-elect of the AFL-CIO.

Each of the 25 — frustrated by the years his/her side had spent battling the others to a stalemate — agreed to work with them on crafting a plan to cut pollution, reduce the costs of doing so and generate jobs. In time, they hammered out a proposal to raise environmental standards across the board while letting companies choose the most cost-effective means to achieve them.<sup>1</sup>

Each CEO then persuaded top executives in his industry that this plan would meet their needs far better than any politically feasible alternative. Each environmental leader, federal official and labor chieftain likewise won over his/her camp.

"We succeeded," one advocate told us, "because we each understood our own community well enough to know what a deal had to include for them to consider it. And we each were trusted by our community, enough for them to buy our case that *this* deal was the best they could do."

In hundreds of conflicts that politicians failed to resolve, advocates for each side reached an agreement that all sides supported. In every case we know of, each advocate had long worked to advance his/her side's interests, understood which interests most concerned them, and was trusted by his/her side sufficiently to persuade them that the deal he had negotiated would advance their interests much further than their other options.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Govt Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

<sup>2</sup> Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

## **Evidence that Lawmakers Lack the Motivation, Knowledge and Public Trust Necessary to Resolve America's Problems**

When the U.S. Congress began, a typical member represented families tilling crops suited to the local climate and others selling goods to those families, nearly all sharing similar interests on the economic issues of that time. Each representative could therefore explain to voters how he had advanced their interests, if indeed he had.

Each lawmaker today represents a far wider array of voters on far more issues: speaking for the young, the middle-aged and the old on Medicare; for graduates of high-schools, colleges and above on education; for the struggling, the up-and-coming and the thriving on taxes, jobs, wages and trade — i.e., for groups whose interests clash on most issues affecting their lives.

Lawmakers who have tried to reconcile these groups' conflicting interests on major issues have angered several groups enough that most such lawmakers abandoned tentative deals or lost their seats. "Blue Dog Democrats," for example, by trying to reform taxes and entitlements even-handedly, have alienated enough voters to become nearly extinct.

Most lawmakers — seeing colleagues unable to sell realistic solutions to voters — have avoided tackling major problems realistically and, instead, stayed in office by stirring voters' animosity toward ideological opponents, blaming them for America's ills.

Incumbents can easily rouse this enmity because voters' ideology correlates to geography, as maps of the last four presidential elections show: Urban counties overwhelmingly chose the Democrat. Other counties overwhelmingly chose the Republican.<sup>3</sup>

This geographic divide has enabled over 90 percent of lawmakers to win election after election by stoking voters' animus toward the other side.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/>

<https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/2012-election-county-by-county/>

Voters have therefore grown increasingly hostile to one another: 15 percent of Republicans and Democrats held “very unfavorable” views of the other in 1994, now 55 percent hold the other in contempt. And a near majority fear the other party is a threat to our country.<sup>4</sup>

Lawmakers left and right have every incentive to capitalize on this trend: inflaming their voters’ anger to distract from their own inability to solve our country’s troubles to their voters’ satisfaction.

Our problems will therefore persist — if we wait for Congress to solve them.

### **The People Equipped to Resolve Our Fiscal-Economic Troubles to the Satisfaction of All Sides**

For American voters to agree on solutions for our major problems, voters of each persuasion would need to rethink their existing positions. Far-fetched — unless someone those voters trust and respect has an opportunity to show them that approaching the issues differently would advance their values and interests.

To identify the person that each segment of the public is most likely to heed, we would survey voters in each socio-economic-political category, asking: Who would you most trust to be your advocate on the economic issues that most concern you?

We would seek out advocates whose followings exceed 1 percent of the public and invite them to jointly tackle the problems that economists from left to right portray as crucial to our future, the problems listed on page 1.

Solving these problems would lift economic growth. Each 1 percent of annual growth would add \$10 trillion to national income over 10 years, averaging \$30,000 per person.

Yet each solution to each problem would impose burdens that large blocs of voters refuse to bear — such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences or more government spending. Voters reject these burdens so strongly that lawmakers from one party or both have blocked every effort to solve *any* of these problems.

**For this reason, the advocates we plan to convene will work out a *combination* of solutions for all of these problems — a combination by which voters of each type reap enough benefits from economic growth to accept the burdens.**

The advocates would get there by a process similar to the method by which siblings clashing over their parents’ estate can divide it up so that each sibling gets parts he/she very much wants and foregoes the rest — a result all likely prefer over a deadlock that yields each nothing.<sup>5</sup>

To help the advocates find an initial combination of solutions they all prefer far more than living with America’s current troubles, we will ask the top think tanks on each point of the spectrum to submit their optimal solution for each economic problem.

We will then ask each advocate to weigh the pros and cons of each solution from his/her perspective, and, on that basis, assign each solution a numerical rating.

One combination of solutions will be rated highest overall but may still leave some advocates dissatisfied. So, we will facilitate negotiations between them and the others, working out modifications by which all sides gain enough ground to welcome the result.<sup>6</sup>

Once the advocates agree on an initial plan, they will put together a significantly better one. In subsequent meetings, they will evaluate reforms from various other sources to find the one combination they rate most superior to the course our country is on now.

If some advocates are still reluctant, we will again facilitate negotiations, seeking adjustments by which all benefit enough to strongly support the result.

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<sup>4</sup> “Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016,” Pew Research Center.

<sup>5</sup> This process of “fair division” (outlined on various websites) breaks down if some participants think they can impose their will on the rest, as the two political parties often claim to their voters they can do.

<sup>6</sup> To find the optimal modifications, we would ask the advocates least in favor of the plan to identify which elements of which solutions they most object to and suggest substituting equivalent parts of other solutions. The goal: to find an overall plan that those advocates far prefer and that the rest rate almost as highly or, perhaps, even higher.

We will then provide each advocate with expert help in developing videos and other media targeted at voters who back him/her, showing them exactly how this mix of reforms will enhance their lives.

Voters who want the reforms enacted into law could exert most leverage in congressional primaries, which draw just 20 percent of registered voters. So, a small determined group can shape the outcome.<sup>7</sup>

An ambitious series of steps. But efforts missing these steps have all failed to solve our country's problems.<sup>8</sup> These failures have driven voters to unprecedented anger at government, at our economic system and one another — anger that politicians stoke to win elections.

Leaders outside government therefore need to take steps sufficient to move hundreds of millions of angry Americans toward common ground.

The above steps, we believe, meet that standard. We have not read or heard other ideas that do.

### **Actions to Initiate the Above Strategy**

This endeavor could increase national income by trillions of dollars while costing mere millions to implement — and reverse the tide of public anger at government's failures to solve our economic troubles.

We will make these points to civic leaders who have publicly urged Congress to solve our economic troubles yet who have seen Washington sink even deeper into discord and dysfunction. We thereby intend to enlist prominent leaders in business, public policy and the media in a coalition that will refine the above strategy until all are confident it is America's best chance to thrive in the years ahead.

The coalition could then start to recruit high-profile advocates — by making the case to each that: You will achieve far more of your agenda by negotiating with other advocates intent on advancing economic causes than by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle our country's troubles realistically.<sup>9</sup>

To engage voters in this enterprise, the coalition could enlist the most widely known people in the media, arts and business, who would convey to voters — on TV, radio, Internet, print and social media:

- Politicians have saddled our country with \$20 trillion in debt while letting our economy struggle, so that most families earn less than 15 years ago.
- But imagine if the men and women that we, the American people, most trust to tackle our economic problems were to sit down together to work out a plan for boosting the long-term prospects of us all.
- If enough of us supported the plan, politicians who wanted to keep their jobs would listen.
- This is going to happen. It will be called the Forum for Long-Term Prosperity — and we, the American people, will select its members.
- You will get a Forum member who speaks for your economic concerns — we guarantee it — if you visit the Forum's website and follow the simple steps outlined there.

This media campaign would include mailing each registered voter a unique code giving the voter access to the Forum election website, where he/she would be asked to:

- a) fill out a brief checklist of his/her economic values, aspirations and concerns;

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<sup>7</sup> CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who to vote for or against.

<sup>8</sup> The best-known failure, Bowles-Simpson, we attribute to: 1) voters knew too little about its members to trust they had acted in voters' interests; 2) the commission's top goal to curb federal debt ensured a plan that most voters would find painful and thus oppose. So, we intend to seek a mix of reforms that all sides see as benefiting them.

<sup>9</sup> We have made this case to activists left and right. To conservatives, we say: Congress refuses to reform entitlements or simplify the tax code because incumbents know that voters losing benefits or tax preferences would work to unseat them in the next election. But your counterparts across the spectrum would consider these reforms if you negotiate over their top priorities. To liberals, we say: Statisticians predict Republicans will control the Senate until at least 2021. So, your priorities will be stymied unless you negotiate with advocates elsewhere on the spectrum.

b) watch brief videos of advocates whose priorities match his/her own; and

c) identify the advocates he/she would most trust: a first choice, second choice, third and so on.

Advocates will be selected by an algorithm that gives 98 percent of participating voters one of their choices — and gives each category of voters representation in proportion to their numbers. The algorithm is available on request.

### **Obstacles and Objections the Prosperity Forum Will Face in Each Phase of Its Operations and How They will be Overcome**

*Many voters know too little about economic issues to pick Forum representatives by objective criteria.*

Trust determines whether each Forum member can win his/her voters' support for the final agreement. Trust is, in effect, more important than objectivity.

*Some voters will prefer spokespeople who refuse to negotiate with ideological adversaries.*

Granted, but most Americans deplore Washington's paralysis, which they now cannot stop, because each citizen's one vote rarely affects election outcomes.

As a result, few voters show up for primaries, letting partisan zealots choose the winners.

By contrast, each voter who visits the Forum website will have dozens of potential spokespeople to choose from and be virtually guaranteed that one of his/her choices will become a member. Most voters who participate will likely gravitate to spokespeople who make significantly stronger cases than politicians that they will deliver a tangible result.

*Some voters will still choose Forum members who prefer slogans and grandstanding.*

For that reason, Forum meetings will be in private — with no media or audience to grandstand to.

*Many voters will object to private meetings.*

The Forum's sponsors could explain the need for privacy this way: "Congress and its committees meet in public, with the result that lawmakers posture for the cameras instead of negotiating with one another, deadlocking on most issues that matter.

"The quality agreements we know of were negotiated in private, with no cameras present. When the work was done, each negotiator showed his/her constituents how the agreement would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy. Otherwise, we'll be stuck with Congress's handiwork."

*Some Forum members will still want to grandstand.*

So, before the first Forum meeting, we will advise each member: Our goal is to reach an outcome that you can show your followers will advance their interests and values much further than actions they have taken up to now. And if you stick to our parameters, we guarantee you will get there. If, instead, you argue with other members that your approach is right and theirs is wrong, they will likely ignore you for the duration. If the vast majority of them then negotiate an outcome they support and can mobilize enough voters behind it, most lawmakers seeking reelection — including those loyal to you up to now — are likely to favor the result as well. So, if you want to advance your agenda as far as you can, let us help you.

*Some Forum members will lack negotiation skills.*

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in helping representatives with diverse skills to negotiate agreements they all can support.

*Forum members will not have the expertise to reform taxes, entitlements, infrastructure and education.*

The Forum will therefore divide into task forces that gather evidence from top experts in each area about the benefits, costs and risks of various reforms.

Each task force will also have a staff that will distill the evidence into briefs about how each reform would advance or hinder each Forum member's priorities. Each Forum member will have an opportunity to grill staff members about their conclusions.

When that process is complete, each Forum member will be asked to rate each reform. Facilitators will use that data to identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.<sup>10</sup>

The facilitators will then suggest to the biggest potential winners that, for the reforms to become law, groups across the spectrum would need to support them. The biggest winners would therefore benefit by agreeing to modify the mix of reforms so that those who would gain least will gain major ground as well.<sup>11</sup>

The facilitators will strive for an agreement that every Forum member sees as meeting more of his/her camp's priorities than it could achieve by other means.

*Some members may hold out for terms the others cannot abide.*

The facilitators will strive for unanimity but not require it, so that a few holdouts cannot deadlock the whole process. And if the members favoring the outcome can mobilize enough voters behind it, most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor the result as well.

*Many voters hold such unrealistic views on these issues that they will resist any practical plan.*

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<sup>10</sup> By a process known as "multi-criteria optimization," the subject of many articles available on the Internet.

<sup>11</sup> The framers of the Constitution engaged in this kind of trading. Without it, there would be no United States today.

The Forum's sponsors will need to hire experts in communication to help each Forum member show his/her constituents how the deal she has negotiated is their best option. The overall message could be:

"This deal gives us most of the economic policies we have long wanted but that politicians have never delivered. They promise the moon and blame their failure to fulfill those promises on scapegoats. If we pass up this deal, we are signing up for more political doubletalk, gridlock and economic stagnation."

*Some people will still cling to one-sided agendas.*

If the voters who vocally support the Forum's plan clearly outnumber the voters who oppose it, candidates for Congress would see endorsing the plan as helping them win elections.

*Wealthy Americans could see the Forum as a threat to their political influence.*

The Forum is designed to produce a plan that significantly boosts economic growth, which would boost stock prices. The wealthy would become wealthier than they will on our current trajectory.

*The Forum's plan will face fierce opposition from groups that oppose specific provisions.*

Granted, but most politicians will do whatever garners them the most voters. And if the Forum produces a plan that voters across the spectrum see as advancing their long-term interests, politicians across the spectrum would have overwhelming incentives to favor it as well.

*If the Forum were a 501(c)3, Forum members would be barred from urging voters to pressure lawmakers.*

True. But Forum members could explain to voters all the benefits of their plan. Many celebrities and opinion leaders would likely advocate it as well. As more voters favored the plan, politicians seeking reelection would feel growing pressure to back it.

## **In Summation**

Many political controversies have been resolved to the satisfaction of each group involved. In every case we know of, each group was represented by an advocate who understood them well enough to know what an agreement had to include for them to support it. Each group also trusted its own advocate enough to accept that the agreement he/she had negotiated was the best they could do.

The Forum will convene advocates that voters on each part of the spectrum trust to advance their economic values and interests.

The Forum will thereby create the conditions necessary to generate a fiscal-economic agreement that advances the entire public's long-term interests and that voters across the spectrum will support vocally enough for both political parties to support it.

We know of no other means to achieve this objective.

To citizens and organizations alarmed about our country's trajectory, we invite you to discuss these ideas with us by contacting Sol Erdman at the Center for Collaborative Democracy:

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212-860-0969

## **Appendix I: Steps to Initiate the Prosperity Forum**

Center for Collaborative Democracy (CCD) Assembles High-Profile Advisory Board

CCD and Advisory Board Enlist Civic Leaders and Nonprofit Organizations as Forum Sponsors

Sponsors Raise Initial Funds

Sponsors Recruit Top Staff Members

Staff Develops Full Project Plan

Sponsors and Staff Raise Full Funding

Top Staff Recruits Other Staff Members

Staff Creates Forum Infrastructure and Websites

Sponsors Recruit Celebrities to Wage Initial Public Awareness Campaign

Sponsors Recruit Forum Candidates

Celebrities Mount Media Campaign Asking Voters to Select Forum Members

## **Appendix II: Steps for Developing the Fiscal-Economic Plan by which Americans of All Types Will Fare Far Better than under Current Policies — and Believe They Will Fare Better**

- 1** Each American voter is given an opportunity to identify who he/she wants to be their advocate on economic issues
- 2** Forum sponsors convene the advocates that at least 1 percent of the public wants as a spokesperson
- 3** Sponsors present advocates with potential solutions for each economic issue: taxes, entitlements, education, stagnant wages and infrastructure (solutions proposed by top think tanks on each part of the spectrum)
- 4** Each advocate is asked to evaluate each solution by four criteria:
  - \* His/her economic priorities (the main criterion)
  - \* The more a combination of solutions boosts economic growth, the more benefits will be available to the people the advocates represent
  - \* Any package of solutions that increases national debt as percentage of GDP will be unsustainable, and most economists will oppose it
  - \* The more advocates who support a package of solutions, the more voters will likely support it and the more likely both parties will support enacting it
- 5** Forum staff compiles evaluations to find the combination of solutions the advocates rate highest overall
- 6** Advocates dissatisfied with the combination identify which clauses of which solutions they most object to
- 7** Forum facilitators suggest substituting equivalent provisions from other solutions to find a combination those advocates far prefer and that the rest rate as almost as favorably or potentially even higher (higher rating is possible because up to this point the advocates have not rated individual clauses)
- 8** Once advocates agree on initial plan, they form task forces to consider many other solutions for each problem
- 9** Advocates evaluate those solutions by the criteria in step 4 to find the one combination of solutions they rate most likely to boost economic growth as much as feasible; reduce national debt as percentage of GDP; and create maximum opportunity for Americans in each category to reach their potential
- 10** Each advocate works with expert marketers to develop videos and other media showing his/her voters how the combined solutions will improve their lives far more than what politicians have done or will do
- 11** Each advocate interacts with his/her voters in webinars and social media to address any questions and doubts about how the total package will benefit them
- 12** Each voter in favor of the package decides how high a priority to make it in choosing who to vote for