



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy to Overcome Our Country's Destructive Politics,
Promote Wide Prosperity, Restore Our Fiscal Health
and Defuse Voters' Rising Anger

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
Alice Rivlin, former director of the Congressional Budget Office and Office of Management and Budget
John Marks, founder of Search for Common Ground
Adi Ignatius, editor of the Harvard Business Review
Rob Richie, founder and president of FairVote
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

Overcoming the Threats to Our Democracy

For two decades, as rising income inequality and unsustainable increases in the nation's debts have been angering much of the American public, Congress has deadlocked over nearly every major issue, further fueling voters' hostility toward government, our economic system and one another.

Intolerance for opposing views has been rising, while confidence in our future has been declining.

Over those same two decades, representatives for industry associations, labor unions, civic organizations, environmental groups and regulatory agencies have resolved their differences on hundreds of long-standing political controversies — working out widely beneficial, cost-effective solutions that all sides supported.

When asked how they resolved conflicts that elected officials could not, these representatives have told the Center for Collaborative Democracy, in essence:

I have championed my own group's cause long enough and effectively enough that they trust me to act in their best interests. If I see an agreement as benefiting them, I can persuade them to support it. My counterparts were in the same position. And by tackling all the issues dividing us, we were able to work out an agreement advancing each side's objectives — enough so for us all to win our groups' support for the deal.

By delving into these representatives' experiences, this proposal will:

- 1) Show that whoever we elect to Congress cannot win most voters' support for practical solutions to divisive issues — spurring the vast majority of lawmakers to ignore major problems or advocate fanciful solutions.
- 2) Build a case that we can resolve our fiscal and economic troubles to the long-term benefit and satisfaction of Americans across the spectrum if — and only if — we convene representatives that voters in each socio-economic-political category trust to speak for their economic aspirations and concerns. The representatives would then need to tackle the major issues vexing voters in each category, including:
 - most families' earnings stagnating or sinking
 - schools failing to equip most students for this century's economy
 - a 75,000-page tax code widely seen as unfair and economically destructive
 - Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security's rising costs pushing our country toward insolvency
 - decaying infrastructure that hobbles productivity
- 3) Propose steps for identifying the individuals that voters in each category most want to represent them.
- 4) Show how the representatives will reach a comprehensive agreement on these issues — an agreement that advances virtually every American's long-term interests.
- 5) Spell out how the representatives will mobilize voters of all persuasions — left and right, young and old, struggling and thriving — to support the agreement in sufficient numbers to spur both parties to endorse it.
- 6) Show that this effort to build overwhelming public support for policies that will generate — and sustain — wide prosperity is necessary to defuse the voter anger threatening our democracy.

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, Natural Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense Fund; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of interior, commerce and energy; and president of the A*FL-CIO.

Each of the 25 — frustrated by the years his/her side had spent battling the others to repeated stalemates — agreed to look for more productive ways to resolve their differences. In subsequent meetings, they hammered out a 185-page plan to increase “jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits . . . and education” while reducing “pollution, waste and poverty.”¹ All 25 signed the agreement.

Each CEO then persuaded other top executives in his industry that this plan would meet their needs better than any politically feasible alternative. Each environmentalist won over other environmental groups. The labor leader sold the plan to other unions. And each federal official won over colleagues in government.

“We succeeded,” one advocate told us, “because we each understood our own community’s priorities 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, knew which interests they valued most, 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.²

¹ See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Gov’t Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

² Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

Evidence that Members of Congress Cannot Earn the Trust Necessary to Resolve Today's Problems

In our country’s early days, a typical member of Congress represented families tilling crops suited to the local climate and others selling goods or services 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 a far wider range of issues: speaking for the young, middle-aged and elderly on Social Security and 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. Yet, each of these group’s economic interests conflict with other groups.

Lawmakers who have tried to bridge those differences have angered several groups enough that most such lawmakers lost their seats. “Blue Dog Democrats,” for example, tried to reform entitlements even-handedly, alienating enough voters to become nearly extinct.

Most lawmakers, realizing they cannot satisfy their socio-economically diverse voters, have chosen to stay in office by stirring voters’ animosity toward ideological opponents, blaming them for America’s ills.

Incumbents can easily rouse this enmity because most voters’ choice of party correlates with where they live, as maps of the last four presidential elections show: Nearly every urban county chose the Democrat. Other counties overwhelmingly picked the Republican.³

Lawmakers thereby know that stoking voters’ animus at the other party is the surest way to win elections.⁴

³ <https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/>
<https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/2012-election-county-by-county/>

⁴ If districts were drawn by non-partisan criteria, as counties are, urban ones would still lean left, others mostly right. And voters in each district would still range from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, from singles to extended families. Each lawmaker still could not satisfy such diverse voters’ expectations on the issues that most affect them. The surest way to win elections would still be to attack the other side.

Voters' hostility toward one another has, as a result, intensified: from 15 percent of Republicans and Democrats holding "very unfavorable" views of the other in 1994, to 55 percent viewing the other with contempt by 2016.⁵ This polarization has clearly escalated since.

Lawmakers from both parties have every incentive to amplify this divide: enflaming their voters' anger at the other side to keep winning elections.

In effect, incumbents benefit far more by blaming one another for America's long-term problems than by solving them.

How All Sides Can Reach Agreement on Solutions for Our Fiscal-Economic Troubles

Voters will always demand different approaches to major problems — until voters of each type hear someone they trust and respect make a compelling case that agreeing on practical solutions would serve their interests far more than would continued conflict.

To identify the person that each segment of the public is most likely to heed, we propose to 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 and your family?

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, with each 1 percent of annual growth adding \$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 have consistently refused to bear: such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences or more government spending.

Voters reject these burdens so strongly that every effort to solve *any* of these problems has failed.

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.

To start, we will to prove to the advocates there are many combinations they all prefer over a broken tax code, ever-rising debt, an educational system inferior to other countries, and average Americans ill-prepared and scared about their future.

To that end, we will ask the top think tanks on each part of the spectrum to submit their optimal solution for each 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 to find a combination they all rate superior to the future that now lies ahead.⁶

Once the advocates agree on an initial plan, they will put together a far 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.

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

⁵ "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center.

⁶ 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.

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

An ambitious series of steps. But efforts missing these steps have all failed to solve our country's problems.⁸ These failures have driven voters to unprecedented anger at government, at our economic system and at one another.

We thereby face a choice: take steps ambitious enough to move hundreds of millions of angry Americans toward agreement on critical issues, or watch our country grow more divisive and dysfunctional.

Actions to Initiate the Above Strategy

This endeavor could increase national income by trillions of dollars — and assuage the public's anger at government's failures to solve our economic troubles.

We will make these points to civic leaders who have publicly urged Congress to address stagnant wages, tame the deficit and tackle our other economic problems — 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.⁹

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 us with \$21 trillion in national debt and stood by as most families' earnings have stagnated or fallen for decades.
- But imagine if the men and women that we, the American people, most trust were to sit down together to work out an economic 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;
- 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.

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

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 candidates.

Voters who visit the Forum website will, by contrast, have dozens of spokespeople across the spectrum to choose from and be virtually guaranteed that one of their 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 tangible results.

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

For that reason, Forum meetings will be held 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. Each negotiator then showed his/her constituents how the agreement would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy. If we don't, we'll be stuck with Congress's handiwork."

Some Forum members will still be inclined to grandstand.

So, before the Forum's first 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 agreement and can mobilize enough voters behind it, most lawmakers seeking reelection — including those loyal to you 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.

Some members may still believe they could gain more by other means. If so, the facilitators will suggest to the biggest potential winners that the reforms are likely to become law only if groups across the spectrum 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.¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ The framers of the Constitution engaged in this kind of trading. If they had not, 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

Hundreds of controversial issues have been resolved to the long-term benefit and satisfaction of all the groups involved. In the cases we have studied:

- Each group was represented by an advocate whom they trusted to act in their best interests.
- The advocates tackled various issues simultaneously — enabling them to work out a combination of solutions that advanced each group's top objectives.
- Each advocate was thereby able to persuade his/her own group that the agreement he/she had negotiated would benefit them far more than their other options.

Members of Congress, on the other hand, win reelection more than 90 percent of the time by blaming ideological opponents for America's ills — giving lawmakers left and right *disincentives* to work out genuine solutions.

Our country's troubles will therefore persist, escalating voters' anger — unless we tackle our pressing problems with proven methods for resolving divisive issues.

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

solderdman@igc.org

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