



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy to Overcome Our Country's Increasingly Destructive Politics,
Generate Wide Prosperity,
and Restore Our Fiscal Health

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
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Why Our Political System Cannot Solve Our Current Problems, Unless . . .

While the members of Congress have failed for two decades to agree on solutions for America's major ills, groups that typically oppose one another — such as businesspeople, environmentalists, labor unions, consumer advocates and government regulators — have chosen representatives who resolved hundreds of controversial issues to the satisfaction of all sides.

These representatives — asked how they achieved these results — told the Center for Collaborative Democracy, in essence:

Each of us had championed our own group's cause long enough and effectively enough to earn their full trust. Each of us also knew what our own side had to achieve — and was willing to forego — to reach a deal.

By understanding these trade-offs for all the issues dividing our groups, my counterparts and I were able to hash out a combination of solutions that advanced each side's top priorities and, then, persuade our respective groups to support the overall result.

By analyzing how these representatives induced all sides to agree on constructive outcomes for hundreds of controversies, this proposal will:

- 1) Show that whomever we elect to Congress cannot induce most constituents to agree on practical solutions for the issues dominating these times. Lawmakers from both parties, in fact, attract far more voters by offering impassioned slogans as remedies — and demonizing opponents — than by tackling problems realistically.
- 2) Present evidence that, to solve our country's fiscal and economic troubles, we will need to identify and convene representatives that voters in each socio-economic-political category trust to speak for their economic aspirations and concerns.

The representatives will then need to tackle the problems we must address if we are to generate — and sustain — wide prosperity and stability, including:

- most families' earnings stagnating or sinking
- schools failing to equip most students for this century's economy
- a 75,000-page tax code that invites evasion, scorn and economically dubious decisions
- Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security's rising costs pushing our country toward insolvency
- decaying infrastructure that hobbles productivity

- 3) Show how each category of voters could select the individuals they most want to represent them.
- 4) Outline how the representatives will craft a comprehensive agreement resolving these issues to virtually every American's long-term benefit.
- 5) Spell out how the representatives will motivate voters in each category to support the agreement strongly enough for lawmakers in both parties to see endorsing the pact as aiding their political careers.
- 6) Show that voters' anger at government, our economic system and one another will escalate to the breaking point — unless we undertake this effort to generate a brighter future for all sectors of our society.

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 the president of the AFL-CIO.

Each one — frustrated by the time and money his/her side had spent battling the others to a stalemate — agreed to seek a more constructive arrangement. Over a series of meetings, the 25 hammered out a 186-page plan to advance each side's agenda, by increasing "jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, information, knowledge 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 our communities trusted us enough to accept our case that this deal was the best they could do."

In more than 200 conflicts that politicians failed to resolve, advocates for each side reached an agreement that all sides supported.² In every case we know of, each advocate had long worked to advance his/her side's interests, understood what mattered to them most, and had earned enough trust to persuade them that the deal he had negotiated would advance their interests much further than their other options.

Evidence that Politicians Cannot Earn the Trust Necessary to Resolve Today's Problems

When the first U.S. Congress convened, 80 percent of families tilled crops suited to the local climate, while most others sold goods or services to those families. Voters in each region thereby shared almost identical interests on the economic issues of that time. So, each lawmaker could explain to voters in his state or district how he had advanced their interests, if indeed he had.

Each lawmaker today represents voters whose interests directly conflict: speaking for the young, middle-aged and elderly on Social Security and Medicare; for high-school dropouts, college graduates and advanced degree-holders on education; for the struggling, the up-and-coming and thriving on taxes, jobs, wages and trade.

On these issues, each group is at odds with other groups.

Lawmakers who have tried to bridge these differences among their constituents have nearly all lost their seats. "Blue Dog Democrats," for example, who proposed to reform entitlements even-handedly, have alienated enough voters for two-thirds of them to be booted out of office.

Most lawmakers — realizing they cannot satisfy voters ranging from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, on the economic issues of these times — stay in office by offering sound-bites as remedies for voters' troubles and stirring animosity toward ideological opponents.

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.

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

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

² Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

Voters' hostility toward one another has therefore 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 2016.⁴ This polarization has clearly escalated since and, as the 2020 election approaches, is likely to get worse.

How We Can Resolve Our Fiscal-Economic Troubles

The United States began when each state selected delegates its citizens trusted to act on their behalf, and those 55 delegates deliberated for four months until reaching an agreement that all but six of them saw as preferable to the course the states were on at the time — an agreement they persuaded all the states to endorse.

Given our current election process, Congress cannot earn the trust necessary to win the public's support for sensible solutions to our major ills.⁵

We therefore propose to survey voters across the socio-economic-political spectrum, asking: Who would you want to be your advocate on the issues that most affect you and your family?

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

Solving these problems (listed on page 1) would spur economic growth. Each 1 percent of additional growth would boost national income by \$10 trillion over 10 years, averaging \$30,000 per person.

Yet any solution to any current fiscal or economic problem would impose burdens that large blocs of voters have refused to bear: such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences or more government spending.

Voters reject these burdens so strongly that efforts to solve any of these problems have all failed.

⁴ "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center.

⁵ Regardless of how districts are drawn, each district's voters will range from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, from singles to extended families. Each lawmaker will remain unable to satisfy such diverse voters on the issues they most care about. The surest way to win elections will still be to offer slogans as remedies for our ills and attack ideological opponents.

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 prove to the advocates that there are many combinations they all prefer over a broken tax code, ever-rising debt, an educational system inferior to that in 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 receive the highest rating overall but may still dissatisfy some advocates. So, we will facilitate negotiations between them and the rest, seeking modifications that produce a result they all prefer over the future that now awaits them.⁶

The advocates will then seek a significantly better plan. In subsequent meetings, they will evaluate reforms from many other sources until finding the one combination they rate superior to all others. If some advocates are still reluctant, we will again help them find changes that yield an overall result they all favor over our country's current course.

We will then provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her voters 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.

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.

So if, say, 15 percent of voters cast primary ballots exclusively for candidates who support the advocates' plan, those voters could change Congress's priorities.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 rising anger at government, our economic system and one another. Our existing political institutions have, in effect, become engines of divisiveness and dysfunction.

To overcome this destructiveness, to move hundreds of millions of angry Americans to agree on solutions for our major ills, and to boost national income by trillions of dollars to the benefit of all, we will need to be ambitious.

Actions to Initiate the Above Strategy

Prominent leaders in business, public policy and the media have, for years, been publicly urging Congress to cut the deficit, address stagnant wages, and tackle our other economic ills — yet have seen Washington sink even deeper into discord and dysfunction.

We intend to make a case to these leaders that the above strategy is the only practical way to achieve their publicly proclaimed objectives. We thereby intend to enlist these leaders in a coalition that will refine this strategy until they are confident they can persuade the public it is America's best chance to thrive.

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 their economic causes than by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle our country's troubles realistically.

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. By contrast, we intend to seek a mix of reforms that all sides see as benefiting them.

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

- Most families' earnings have stagnated or fallen for decades. Our national debt has hit \$22 trillion and is headed much higher. Politicians have done nothing about this except blame one another.

- 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.

- One or more of those members will speak for your economic concerns — we guarantee it — if you visit the Forum website and follow the steps outlined there.

This media campaign would include mailing each registered voter a unique code providing access to a website where the voter 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.

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

Obstacles the Prosperity Forum Will Face at Each Step and How They will be Overcome

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

No selection process can force voters to be objective. But trust will determine whether each Forum member can win his/her voters' support for the final agreement. So, most of all, the selection process needs to engender trust.

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 assured that one of their choices will become a member. Most voters who participate will likely gravitate to spokespeople who make the strongest cases 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 constructive deals.

"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 to work out the kind of deal that Congress never does."

Some Forum members will still grandstand.

So, before the Forum's first meeting, we will advise each member:

"Our goal is to reach an outcome that your followers will see as advancing their interests and values much further than any other actions could. And if you stick to our guidelines, 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 and temperaments 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 the staff about their conclusions.

When that process is complete, each Forum member will be asked to rate each reform. Using that data, we will identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.

Some members may still think they could gain more by other means. If so, the facilitators will help the advocates modify the reforms to find a mix by which all gain major ground. If the biggest winners resist, we will suggest 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 these modifications.

Extreme segments of the public will likely pick Forum members who demand terms the others cannot abide.

Granted. But if even 60 percent of the members reach an agreement far better for the public than the status quo — and enough voters support the result — most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor it as well.

Many voters hold such unrealistic views that they will resist any practical plan.

The Forum's sponsors will need to hire experts in communication to help each member show his/her constituents how the Forum plan 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 keep those promises on scapegoats. If we pass up this deal, we are signing up for more political doubletalk and zero progress on the issues we care about.

Some people will still cling to one-sided agendas.

If the voters vocally supporting the Forum's plan clearly outnumber the voters opposing it, candidates would see endorsing the plan as helping their careers.

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 enough voters see the Forum plan 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 opinion leaders would likely advocate it as well. As more voters favored it, politicians 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 priorities.

Each advocate was thereby able to persuade his/her own group that the agreement he'd negotiated would benefit them far more than their other options.

Members of Congress, by contrast, win reelection 90+ percent of the time by blaming ideological opponents for America's ills — giving lawmakers disincentives to work out practical solutions.

Our country's troubles will therefore persist, and voters' anger will escalate — until we adopt methods that we have evidence can resolve our differences.

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

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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