



Center for Collaborative Democracy

Why, Whoever Wins Elections,
America Will Succumb to its Economic and Environmental Problems,
Unless . . .

The Center for Collaborative Democracy grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We integrate insights from economics, psychology, game theory and conflict-resolution. Our goal is to resolve societal ills that established institutions have failed to remedy.

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Overcoming Systemic Dysfunction

Members of Congress who offered simplistic or incendiary slogans as remedies for our nation's ills have, for two decades, been winning far more elections than candidates who advocated pragmatic solutions.

This document will present evidence that whoever wins elections will fail to resolve today's critical problems, including stagnant wages, soaring national debt and potentially catastrophic climate change.

The evidence: Hundreds of controversies in which elected officials deadlocked, unable to find outcomes the public would accept. Yet subsequently, each interest group affected by the underlying issues — businesspeople, environmentalists, labor unions, consumer advocates, government regulators and so on — chose representatives from within their own ranks. And these representatives worked out agreements that all sides perceived as advancing their long-term interests far more than it would cost them.

Asked how they achieved these results — that politicians could not — the representatives that the Center for Collaborative Democracy has interviewed have said, in essence:

Each of us knew in our bones what our own group most wanted from a deal — and what they could let go of. So, my counterparts and I, by tackling the various issues dividing us and making lots of trade-offs, worked out a comprehensive agreement by which each group advanced its top objectives. And each of us had a track record with our own group that had earned us enough trust to persuade them that this was too much progress to pass up.

By analyzing these cases, this document will:

- 1) Build a case that our country's ills will grow far worse — unless voters in each socio-economic-political category are given an opportunity to identify the individuals outside government they would most trust to represent them on the issues jeopardizing their future.
- 2) Show that these representatives would be far more motivated and better equipped than elected officials to advance each group's long-term interests.
- 3) Prove that these representatives — by tackling our country's fiscal, economic and environmental problems simultaneously — could work out a comprehensive agreement resolving these problems to the long-term benefit of nearly every citizen.
- 4) Spell out how the representatives could persuade voters in each category to support that agreement vocally enough that politicians across the spectrum would see endorsing the pact as aiding their careers.
- 5) Show how influential citizens could mobilize enough public support to launch this consensus-building process and marshal the resources necessary for it to succeed.
- 6) Answer each objection to this endeavor we have heard to date and show that the alternative is that current trends of increasing class warfare, unsustainable federal spending and catastrophic climate change will continue or accelerate.

Evidence of Who Can Resolve Intractable Problems

In controversies of almost every kind, advocates for each side have resolved differences that politicians could not.¹

For example, after years of congressional deadlocks over environmental policy, 25 advocates for the various sides were sufficiently frustrated by the impasse to meet face-to-face. They included top executives from General Motors, Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation and the Environmental Defense Fund; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of interior, commerce, agriculture and energy; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

By dividing into task forces that tackled each of the issues that had long divided them, the 25 eventually hashed out a comprehensive plan to advance each side's top priorities: increasing "jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, information, knowledge and education" while reducing "pollution, waste and poverty."² All 25 signed the agreement.

Each CEO then persuaded other industry executives that this plan would meet their needs far 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 enlisted colleagues in government.

"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 had enough history with our own community for them to trust our case that this deal we had negotiated on their behalf would advance their interests much further than their other options."

Yet, congressional leaders rejected the plan, telling the advocates that most lawmakers would not give up the environment as a campaign issue in return for a solution too complex for them to sell to voters.

¹ Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

² See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

Evidence that Whoever Wins Elections Will Fail to Resolve America's Ills

When the first U.S. Congress convened, nearly every family was tilling crops suited to local conditions or selling goods and services to nearby families. Voters in each region thereby shared similar economic interests, enabling each Congressperson to show his voters how he had advanced their interests, if indeed he had.

Each lawmaker today represents voters whose economic interests directly conflict: the young, the middle-aged and the elderly; high-school dropouts, college graduates and advanced degree-holders; the struggling, the up-and-coming and the thriving.

On every contemporary issue — jobs, wages, education, taxes, trade, Medicare, Social Security, climate change — each socioeconomic group's needs, priorities and/or perceptions are at odds with other groups.

Lawmakers who try to bridge these differences invariably alienate many constituents. So-called "Blue Dog Democrats," for example, who tried to reform entitlements even-handedly, angered enough voters for two-thirds of those incumbents to be voted out.

Most lawmakers — realizing they cannot satisfy voters ranging from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, on the complex 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, while the rest overwhelmingly picked the Republican.³

Lawmakers thereby know that stoking voters' animus at the other party wins elections, especially since the Cold War ended. That is, when the Soviet Union loomed as an existential threat, few voters could accept that the other party was the main threat to their way of life.

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

Since then, ideologues have seen that stirring fear of the other side is the most effective campaign tactic.

Voters' mutual hostility therefore keeps intensifying: 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

Two-thirds of the public expects these divisions to keep escalating — while 87 percent worry that our political leaders lack the capacity to resolve our major problems.⁵

These worries are clearly justified. Even if districts were drawn using non-partisan criteria, each district's voters would range from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, from singles to large families — too diverse for any lawmaker to satisfy most voters on the issues critical to them. The surest way to win elections would still be to offer slogans as remedies for our ills and attack ideological opponents.

In effect, requiring each lawmaker to speak for residents of a geographic area renders Congress incapable of resolving the problems dominating these times, and rewards incumbents for stoking cultural divisions.

A Strategy for Advancing the Interests of All

Despite politicians' incentives to divide the American people against one another, there remains a proven way to resolve our differences to nearly everyone's long-term benefit: convening individuals that each side trusts to negotiate on its behalf — with voters, not geography, deciding which side they are on.

The process, as we envision it, would unfold as follows:

- 1) We would enlist influential citizens and groups across the spectrum to organize, fund and launch the endeavor.
- 2) We would build and widely publicize a website asking each American voter to identify the individuals outside government they would most want to be their advocate on the issues that will shape their future.
- 3) We would convene the advocates whose followings exceed 1 percent of the public and provide them with the staff they need to tackle the problems that economists from left to right portray as critical to our future:

most families' earnings stagnating or sinking
automation eliminating well-paying jobs
much faster than creating them

schools failing to equip most students for the
economy-to-come

potentially catastrophic climate change

rising entitlement costs pushing the country
toward insolvency

an economically destructive tax code

decaying infrastructure

- 4) The first day the advocates convene, we would prove to them that they can work out a comprehensive agreement resolving these problems in ways that are far better for nearly every constituent than our country's current trajectory.

The proof would start by pointing out that each practical solution to each of the above problems would impose burdens that large blocs of voters have consistently refused to bear — such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences, much higher energy prices and/or more government spending.

Voters reject each burden so strongly that efforts to solve these problems individually have all failed.

Indeed, as behavioral economists have shown, most people will reject significant changes unless they perceive the benefits to themselves as far exceeding the costs.⁶ And no practical solution to any of these problems has met that standard in enough voters' eyes for politicians to enact those measures.

However, resolving these problems simultaneously would lift economic growth far more than other government actions could. And each 1 percent rise in annual growth would add \$10 trillion to national income in the next decade.

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

⁵ "Public Sees an America in Decline," Pew Research Center, 2019.

⁶ See Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A., "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, (March 1979), pp. 263-292.

So, we will help the advocates find a combination of policies by which voters of each type reap enough economic benefits to want the entire combination enacted despite the burdens.

To that end, we will have asked the top think tanks on each part of the spectrum to submit a one-page summary of their optimal solution for each economic problem.

We will 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.

We will present the solutions with the highest ratings to the advocates. A few will likely oppose some elements sufficiently to resist the total package. So, we will facilitate negotiations between them and the rest, modifying the original plan until finding one they all prefer over leaving their constituents mired in their current troubles.

If a few advocates still resist, we will reassure them that, in subsequent meetings, they will explore many other solutions until finding a combination far more beneficial to every constituency than a broken tax code; ever-rising debt, failing schools, extreme floods and droughts, and being ill-prepared for a rapidly changing economy.

5) The process by which the advocates will find that optimal combination is described in the following sections of this document.

6) Once the advocates agree on an overall plan, each one would need to highlight to his/her constituents how it will benefit them far more than burden them.

For that purpose, we will provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her voters exactly how this mix of reforms will significantly enhance their lives.

7) Voters who want the reforms enacted into law could exert most leverage in congressional primaries — which draw just 20 percent of registered voters. So, if say 15 percent of voters cast ballots exclusively for candidates who support the advocates' plan, those voters could change Congress's priorities.⁷

Ambitious steps. But more modest efforts to solve our country's ills, inside Congress and out, have all failed.⁸

For a sharply divided American public mired in a dysfunctional political system to reach agreement on solutions for the complex problems of these times, we need to apply methods by which a wide array of hostile groups have resolved equally intractable conflicts.

Where Do We Begin?

Major change, researchers have found, typically requires orchestrators — people equipped to mobilize wide support for large-scale innovations.⁹

To fill the role of orchestrators, we intend to enlist the leaders in business, public policy and the media who have publicly exhorted Congress to address stagnant wages, the deficit and climate change — yet who have seen Washington sink even deeper into dysfunction.

We will make a case to these leaders that the strategy spelled out on these pages is necessary to achieve their objectives. We thereby intend to enlist these leaders in a coalition that will refine this strategy until they are confident they can win wide public support for it.

The coalition will then need to assemble the staff and resources necessary to launch this endeavor.

The coalition could also start to enlist high-profile advocates to participate, making a case to each that: If you negotiate with people like yourself, who are intent on pursuing economic, fiscal or environmental goals, you will advance your cause much further than you can by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle complex problems 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, the Bowles-Simpson commission, 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 were thus sure to oppose. By contrast, we will seek a mix of reforms that all sides see as benefiting them far more than it costs them.

⁹ Julie Battilana and Marissa Kimsey, "Should You Agitate, Innovate, or Orchestrate?" *Stanford Business Review*, Sep 18, 2017

To engage a skeptical, angry public in this enterprise, the coalition could enlist the most widely known people in the arts and business, who would mobilize voters through all forms of media with a message such as:

- Most families' earnings have stagnated for decades. Our national debt has soared past \$22 trillion. Floods, droughts and wildfires keep growing worse. Yet politicians do nothing except blame one another.
- But, imagine if we, the American people, identified the men and women we most trust to act in our best interests, and asked them to work out a detailed 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 effort is indeed starting now. It's called the Forum for Long-Term Prosperity.
- And one or more Forum members will speak for your biggest 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 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 each voter who follows the website's instructions will get one of their choices, while 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 Stage and How They Will be Overcome

Many voters know too little about the major 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 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 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 meets, 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 that would benefit virtually everyone and can mobilize enough voters behind it, even lawmakers loyal to you until now are likely to favor the result.

“So, if you want to advance your agenda and hold onto your constituents, work with us and the other Forum members.”

Some 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, energy policy and education.

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

Each task force will 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.

Following that process, each member will be asked to rate each reform. We thereby intend to identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.

If some members are still discontent, the facilitators will ask them to identify which clauses they most oppose and then suggest modifications — until finding an overall result that the advocates all prefer over leaving their constituents’ fate in Congress’s hands.

Some advocates may hold out for terms the others cannot abide.

If so, we will remind them that if the rest agree on a plan far better for the public than the status quo — and enough voters support it — most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor it as well. The holdouts would thereby be left pushing a narrow agenda with little chance it will be enacted into law, in effect, accomplishing nothing for their constituents. We therefore expect the vast majority to agree on a plan far better for each group than Congress can devise.

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 gist could be: “This deal gives us the policies we have most wanted but that politicians never delivered. They promise the moon and blame failures to keep promises on scapegoats. We either support this deal in its entirety, or we are signing up for endless political double-talk and no progress on 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.

Various media will likely spread conspiracy theories about the Forum and distort its recommendations.

Media that intentionally distort reality are indeed a growing phenomenon. That is precisely why our nation's ills will grow far worse *until* we convene individuals that each segment of the public trusts. They, better than anyone, could persuade each segment to ignore the lies and distortions.

In Summation

When President John F. Kennedy called for landing a person on the moon within a decade, the scientific community, according to one physicist, responded: "There were no technical show-stoppers; it would just take a hell of a lot of engineering."

The moon-shot we propose is, likewise, innovative in scale, proven in practice: This document has pointed to hundreds of divisive issues that were resolved to the long-term benefit and satisfaction of all the groups involved. In every case:

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 then able to persuade his/her own group that the overall agreement would benefit them far more than any feasible alternative.

By contrast, members of Congress who have tried to solve America's long-term ills pragmatically have nearly all lost their seats to candidates making fanciful or divisive promises.

Lawmakers thereby have strong *disincentives* to work out practical solutions.

Our country's troubles will therefore persist, and voters' anger will escalate — until leaders in business, public policy and the media use their high visibility to mobilize public support for the one method that evidence shows can resolve the kinds of differences now afflicting our country.

Until then, our democracy, our political stability, our fiscal health and, ultimately, Earth's capacity to sustain life will be in peril.

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:

solderdman@igc.org

212-860-0969