



Center for Collaborative Democracy

Why — Whomever We Elect —  
America Will Fail to Solve Its Gravest Problems, Unless . . .

The Center for Collaborative Democracy grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We integrate insights from various disciplines — economics, psychology, public policy, game theory and conflict-resolution — seeking to resolve societal ills that established institutions cannot.

**Our Advisory Board includes:**

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

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## A Strategy for Meeting the Challenges of These Times

Congress's failures to solve our country's major ills have, for two decades, fueled voters' escalating anger at government, our economic system and one another.

Yet businesspeople, environmentalists, labor unions, consumer advocates and government regulators have — by choosing representatives within their own ranks — resolved hundreds of long-standing controversies to the satisfaction of nearly everyone involved. Asked how they achieved these results — that politicians could not — these representatives told the Center for Collaborative Democracy, in essence:

Each of us had championed our own group's cause for years, had earned their full trust, and understood in our bones what they most wanted from a deal — and what they could let go of. So, by engaging in lots of give-and-take over all the issues dividing our groups, my counterparts and I were able to reach an agreement by which each side advanced its top objective. Each of us then persuaded our own group that was a bigger win than they would get any other way.

Each former member of Congress we have interviewed has, by contrast, lamented that his/her constituents — who ranged from 18 to 80+, from poor to doing well, from singles to large families — had such different outlooks on issues affecting them that he/she could not sway most voters to agree on substantive remedies.

By analyzing how speaking for the residents of a geographic area — who span many age groups, income brackets and family situations — differs from representing people sharing a set of interests, this proposal will:

- 1) Present evidence that whoever wins election to Congress cannot possibly persuade citizens divided along economic, social, political and cultural lines to agree on practical solutions for the issues dominating these times. Indeed, lawmakers who have tackled America's ills realistically have mostly lost their seats, while incumbents who offered divisive slogans as remedies have won reelection 90+ percent of the time.
- 2) Build a case that our country cannot resolve its critical problems unless voters in each socio-economic-political category are given an opportunity to identify which Americans they would most trust to speak for their aspirations and concerns, represent their interests, and tackle the problems jeopardizing their future.
- 3) Show that these representatives would be highly motivated to resolve these problems, including:
  - most families' earnings stagnating or sinking
  - schools failing to equip most students for this century's economy
  - climate change inflicting increasingly severe and costly droughts, floods, hurricanes and fires
  - Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security's rising costs pushing our country toward insolvency
  - a 75,000-page tax code that invites evasion, scorn and economically dubious decisions
  - decaying infrastructure that hobbles productivity
- 4) Prove that the representatives could work out a comprehensive pact resolving these problems to the long-term benefit of all — far more easily and effectively than politicians could address any of these issues
- 5) Spell out how the representatives could mobilize voters to support that agreement in sufficient numbers and vocally enough for lawmakers in both parties to see endorsing the pact as necessary for their careers
- 6) Show that our democracy will grow more divisive and dysfunctional — unless we take these steps to solve the chronic ills that elected officials have proven they cannot handle.

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

In more than 200 conflicts that politicians failed to resolve, advocates for each side reached an agreement that all sides supported.<sup>1</sup>

For example, Congress's deadlocks over environmental policy in the mid-1990s spurred 25 advocates for the various sides to meet face-to-face: including top executives from Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil, General Motors and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund and Nature Conservancy; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of interior, commerce and energy; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

Frustrated by the years they had spent battling one another to a stalemate, the 25 agreed to seek a more constructive arrangement. Over a series of meetings, they 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 enlisted colleagues in government.

"We won such wide support," 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, when the advocates spoke to congressional leaders, they were told most lawmakers would not give up the environment as a campaign issue in return for a complex solution that would be much harder to sell to voters.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

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

## Evidence that Whomever We Elect Will Fail to Solve America's Critical Problems

When the first U.S. Congress convened, nearly every family was tilling crops suited to the local climate 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 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; for all of the above on climate change.

On these issues, each group's needs and perceptions are at odds with other groups.

Lawmakers who try to bridge these differences among constituencies rarely stay in office. "Blue Dog Democrats," for example, who sought to reform entitlements even-handedly, alienated 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 major 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.<sup>3</sup>

Lawmakers thereby know that stoking voters' animus at the other party is the surest way to win elections.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> Divisive tactics were much less effective during the Cold War, when the country was largely united against an existential threat: the Soviet Union. At that war's end, ideologues clearly found it much easier to persuade voters the other party was the main threat to their way of life.

Voters' mutual hostility has therefore intensified in each election: 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.<sup>5</sup>

Two-thirds of the public expect these divisions to keep escalating — while 87 percent worry that our political leaders lack the capacity to solve our major problems.<sup>6</sup>

These worries are clearly justified.<sup>7</sup>

And they are self-fulfilling: If the vast majority of us see our elected officials as unable to lead us, they cannot.

### **How We Can Resolve Our Most Pressing Problems**

The United States began when each state selected delegates its citizens trusted to act on their behalf and — after deliberating over each issue dividing the states — the delegates reached a comprehensive agreement that they nearly all preferred over the course the states were on at the time. The delegates and their allies then persuaded their respective states to endorse the result.

The Constitutional Convention was, in effect, a fore-runner of the consensus-building efforts cited on page 2.

Given Congress's proven inability to resolve any major problems of this time, our country needs a 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of that Convention. Politicians will surely oppose that effort. We therefore intend to recruit influential citizens and organizations across the spectrum to launch this endeavor. (This document is part of our case.)

We envision this enterprise having the following phases:

- Each American voter would get an opportunity to select who they want to be their advocate on the issues that will shape their future.

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<sup>5</sup> "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center.

<sup>6</sup> "Public Sees an America in Decline," Pew Research Center, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> As long as one lawmaker speaks for each district and two for each state, Congress will remain incapable of resolving our nation's differences — because, regardless of how any district is drawn, its 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.

- We would seek out the advocates whose followings exceed 1 percent of the public, invite them to meet, and provide them with the staff and resources they need to tackle the problems that economists from left to right portray as the biggest impediments to America's future (the problems listed on page 1).

- The staff would help the advocates work out a comprehensive agreement they see as far better for their constituents than our country's current course.

- Each advocate would then spell out to his/her constituents how that agreement would benefit them, seeking to stir enough voters to support the pact that politicians intent on staying in office will endorse it.

Winning that much support for such a complex agreement, daunting as that sounds, will be far easier than getting the public to back an agreement on any one issue, for the following reasons:

Any solution to the problems listed on page 1 would impose burdens that large blocs of voters have consistently refused to bear: including curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences, higher energy prices and/or more government spending. Voters reject each of these burdens so strongly that efforts to solve these problems *individually* have all failed.

By contrast, solving *all* of 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.

**So, the advocates we plan to convene will strive for a combination of measures solving all of these problems in such a way that voters of each type reap enough benefits from economic growth to accept the burdens.**

To start, at the advocates' first meeting, we will prove to them 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; more extreme floods and droughts; 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 trajectory.

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.

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.<sup>9</sup>

Ambitious steps. But efforts lacking the above steps have all failed to solve our country's problems.<sup>10</sup> These failures have fueled voters' rising anger at government, our economic system and one another. Our political institutions have, in effect, become engines of divisiveness.

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<sup>8</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.

<sup>9</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.

To reverse this growing discord, to move hundreds of millions of angry Americans to agree on solutions for our major ills, to boost national income by trillions of dollars to the benefit of all, and to preserve Earth's capacity to sustain life, we need to be far more ambitious than we have been to date.

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

Prominent leaders in business, public policy and the media have, for years, been urging Congress to cut the deficit, address stagnant wages, and tackle climate change — 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 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* fiscal, economic and/or environmental agendas than by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle our country's troubles realistically.

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, now \$22 trillion, is headed much higher. Floods, droughts and fires are getting much worse. And politicians have done nothing about any of this except blame one another.

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<sup>10</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. By contrast, we will seek a mix of reforms that all sides see as benefiting them.

- But, imagine if the men and women that we, the American people, most trust were to sit down together to work out a comprehensive 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 then 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 thus 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 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.

*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 have never delivered. They promise the moon and blame failures to keep those promises on scapegoats. If we pass up this deal, we are signing up for more political double-talk and no 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**

This proposal has been based on 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 thereby able to persuade his/her own group that the agreement he/she had negotiated would benefit them far more than their other options.

By contrast, members of Congress win reelection 90+ percent of the time by blaming ideological opponents for America's ills — giving lawmakers incentives to stoke voters' anger at the other party and *disincentives* to work out practical solutions.

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

[solerdman@igc.org](mailto:solerdman@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 a Comprehensive 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 the issues that will most affect their future
- 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 major issue: stagnant wages, education, entitlements, climate change, taxes and infrastructure (solutions proposed by top think tanks)
- 4** Each advocate is asked to evaluate each solution by four criteria:
  - \* His/her fiscal, economic and environmental priorities (the main criterion)
  - \* 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
  - \* 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 or that fails to slash greenhouse gas emissions will be unsustainable, and most economists will oppose 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 superior to the alternatives. Steps 6 and 7 are repeated to find a combination by which Americans in each category benefit far more than they could by any other means
- 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