



Center for Collaborative Democracy

Why, Whomever We Elect,
America Will Fail to Solve 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, public policy, game theory and conflict-resolution. Our goal is to resolve societal ills that established institutions have failed to address.

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Overcoming Systemic Dysfunction

Members of Congress who have 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 practical solutions.

The Center for Collaborative Democracy had gathered evidence that whoever wins elections cannot persuade citizens divided along economic, social and political lines to agree on solutions for any critical problems of this era, including stagnant wages, soaring national debt and potentially catastrophic climate change.

The evidence: Hundreds of times when elected officials deadlocked, unable to find outcomes the public would accept. Yet subsequently, the interest groups affected by the underlying issues — such as businesspeople, environmentalists, labor unions, consumer advocates and government regulators — chose representatives from within their own ranks. And these representatives worked out agreements that all sides perceived as advancing their long-term interests.

Asked how they achieved these results — that politicians could not — the representatives we have 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 long enough track record with our own group and had earned 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 critical problems will grow far worse — unless voters in each socio-economic-political category are given an opportunity to identify which 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 than members of Congress to advance their respective 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 virtually 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.

Who Can Bridge Our Nation's Divisions?

In more than 200 political conflicts, advocates for each side have resolved differences that politicians could not.¹

For example, 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 General Motors, Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense Fund; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of interior, commerce, agriculture and energy; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

Frustrated by years of battling one another to stalemates, the 25 agreed to discuss all the issues that had long divided them, eventually hashing out a 186-page plan to advance each side's top priorities, by 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 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 pitched their plan to congressional leaders, they were told 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, Whomever Wins Elections, America's Ills Will Grow Far Worse

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 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 perceptions are at odds with other groups.

Lawmakers who try to bridge these differences among constituents invariably alienate many of them. "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 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. 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 found that stirring fear of the other side is the most effective election tactic.

Voters' mutual hostility has therefore intensified in each election since 1994: from 15 percent of Republicans and Democrats holding "very unfavorable" views of the other 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

Those worries are clearly justified.⁶

A Strategy Proven to Resolve Intractable Problems

When the original 13 states won independence, they were divided and economically weak — stirring many Americans to fear civil unrest and foreign interference. To avert these dangers, each state selected delegates its citizens trusted to act on their behalf. After deliberating for four months over the various issues dividing them, the delegates worked out a comprehensive agreement they nearly all preferred over their states remaining independent. The delegates and their allies then persuaded their respective states to endorse the result.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 was, in effect, a forerunner of the hundreds of consensus-building efforts cited on the previous page. Had it not convened, the United States would not exist, much less have thrived.

Given the current Congress's proven inability to resolve any of today's critical problems, our country's future once again depends on convening citizens that the American people trust to act on their behalf.

In the expectation that politicians would see this effort as a rebuke and oppose it, we intend to recruit influential citizens and organizations across the spectrum to launch this endeavor.

We envision it unfolding in the following stages:

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

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

⁶ Even if districts were drawn by nonpartisan criteria, the voters in each district will 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 that affect them. The surest way to win elections will still be to offer slogans as remedies for our ills and attack ideological opponents.

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

- 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; rapidly worsening climate; rising entitlement costs pushing the country toward insolvency; an economically destructive tax code; and decaying infrastructure

- The staff would help the advocates work out a comprehensive agreement resolving these problems in ways they all see as far better for their constituents than our country's current trajectory.

Crafting that wide-ranging deal will be far easier than resolving any one of the above problems issue, for this reason: any practical solution would impose burdens that large blocs of voters have consistently refused to bear — such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences, significantly 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, behavioral economists have shown that most people will reject any change unless they perceive the benefits to themselves as far exceeding the costs.⁷ And to date, no practical solution to any of these problems has met that standard, or politicians would have enacted it.

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.

⁷ See Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A., "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, (March 1979), pp. 263-292.

So, when the advocates described above first convene, we will spend that initial day proving to them that they can find a combination of economic policies by which voters of each type will reap enough long-term benefits to want those policies enacted despite the burdens.

To that end, we will have asked the top think tanks on each part of the spectrum to submit 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.

One combination of these solutions will receive the highest rating overall but may still dissatisfy some advocates. So, we will ask them to identify which elements of which solutions they most oppose and then suggest substituting equivalent parts of other solutions — until finding an overall result that all the advocates far prefer over a broken tax code; ever-rising debt, failing schools, extreme floods and droughts, and average Americans ill-prepared and scared about their future.

Once the advocates see that this goal is within their reach, they will seek the one plan they rate superior to all others. For that purpose, in subsequent meetings they will evaluate reforms from many other sources until finding the one combination they rate the highest — and that they all favor over the future they now foresee.

Each advocate would then need to spell out to his/her constituents how the final agreement would benefit them. To that end, we will 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 ballots exclusively for candidates who support the advocates' plan, those voters could change Congress's priorities.⁸

Ambitious steps. But efforts lacking the above steps have all failed to solve our country's long-term ills.⁹ These repeated failures have fueled voters' rising anger at government, our economic system and one another.

Our political institutions have, in effect, become engines of divisiveness.

To reverse this growing discord, to enable hundreds of millions of angry Americans to reach agreement on solutions for our major problems, to boost national income by trillions of dollars to the benefit of all, and to maintain a climate hospitable to life, we need to be far more ambitious than we have been to date.

What Will it Take to Initiate the Above Strategy?

Major change, researchers have found, typically requires orchestrators, people who are equipped to mobilize wide support for large-scale innovations.¹⁰

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 begin to enlist high-profile advocates to participate, by making a case to each that: If you negotiate with other advocates pursuing fiscal, economic and/or environmental agendas, you will advance your cause much further than you can by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle our country's ills realistically.

⁸ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who to vote for or against.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Julie Battilana and Marissa Kimsey, "Should You Agitate, Innovate, or Orchestrate?" *Stanford Business Review*, Sep 18, 2017

To engage voters 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 have grown far worse. Yet politicians have done 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 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 indeed happening, 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 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.

Following that process, each Forum member will be asked to rate each reform, so that we can 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. We either support this deal — in its entirety — or we are signing up for endless 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

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 indeed 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 their any other 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 call for adopting 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

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