



**The Grand Bargain Project:
The Practical Steps Necessary to Resolve America's Critical Problems
and Thereby Preserve Our Democracy**

The Center for Collaborative Democracy is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We work with experienced practitioners in conflict resolution, behavioral economics and game theory in order to develop innovative methods for resolving societal ills that established institutions are failing to remedy.

Why Our Republic Will Continue to Break Down, Unless

Americans' hostility toward one another has been intensifying for three decades.¹ By now, over 80 percent of Republican and Democratic voters see each other as a “clear and present danger” to our democracy.² And commentators across the spectrum see the current Congress as far too polarized to bridge differences on any of our country's chronic ills, including:

Declining social and economic mobility

Many Americans lacking the skills to thrive in a high-tech, global economy

Unsustainably rising debt

The most expensive and inefficient health care system in the developed world

Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires

A 75,000-page tax code filled with perverse incentives

Background: To understand what it will take to resolve the above problems constructively, the Center for Collaborative Democracy interviewed participants in over 200 political controversies. In each case, elected officials had deadlocked. Yet representatives for the stakeholding groups then worked out agreements that all sides saw as advancing their long-term interests.³

These interviews led us to conclude:

1) To resolve the above ills in ways that voters in each sector of society would support, voters in each sector would need to be asked whom outside government they trust to speak for them on those subjects.

2) These spokespeople would then be far more likely than politicians to resolve our country's biggest conflicts.

3) On many issues, some groups demand particular outcomes that they refuse to forego — unless other topics are brought up, which creates opportunities for all sides to gain enough ground to reach a deal.

4) Each of the six issues above fit this description: Any realistic solution will generate strong opposition, so that these issues cannot be resolved one at a time.

Our Strategy for Bridging America's Critical Differences: For the above reasons, we propose to launch a project that will ask voters in each sector of society to identify their ideal spokesperson.

We will then provide these spokespeople with the tools to work out an agreement resolving the six issues above so that voters across the spectrum see the overall result as advancing their long-term interests further than feasible by any other means.

¹ “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System,” Pew Research Center, Aug. 9, 2022

² “New Initiative Explores Deep, Persistent Divides Between Biden and Trump Voters,” UVA Center for Politics, Sept 30, 2021

³ Examples at www.genuinerepresentation.org/consensus

Evidence that this Project is Necessary and that its Goals are Achievable by 2024

That evidence starts with the 200 cases cited on the previous page. For example, some years ago, with Congress at an impasse over nearly every aspect of environmental policy, 25 advocates for the various opposing sides met to break the stalemate. They included top executives from Dow Chemical, General Motors, Chevron Oil and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund, World Resources Institute and National Wildlife Federation; chair of the African American Leadership Summit; director of the EPA; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

To tackle their various areas of conflict, the 25 formed seven task forces — each of which interviewed more than 60 experts in order to develop a menu of potential solutions.

From among the task forces' recommendations, these 25 long-time adversaries put together a detailed grand bargain for significantly reducing “pollution, waste and poverty,” while increasing “jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education.”⁴ Among its provisions: Major corporations would support much stricter environmental standards if given far more latitude to choose the technologies by which they met those benchmarks.

Each CEO then persuaded their industry association to support this plan as 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 the relevant agencies.

Yet congressional leaders from both parties rejected the plan, saying that members of their caucus could not sell such a complex agreement to their diverse voters.

Indeed, of the former lawmakers we have interviewed, nearly all acknowledged that his/her voters had such conflicting needs that if he/she had tackled divisive issues more realistically, he would have alienated key blocs of voters who could have unseated him. Incumbents have in fact won reelection 94 percent of the time in recent years, all too often by persuading voters that the other party is to blame for our nation's ills and offering soundbites as remedies.

In stark contrast, among the hundreds of representatives for stakeholding groups that we have interviewed, nearly all had long worked on their own group's behalf, fully understood the group's needs and had earned the group's trust. As a result, each representative felt confident that if he/she negotiated a sensible deal, his group would strongly support it.

We have therefore concluded that if voters in each sector of our society were asked to identify whom outside government they trust to represent them on the most serious national problems, these representatives would be far more likely than politicians to resolve those issues in ways that each sector of society would support.

⁴ See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996; https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF_Reports/amer-top.html

We therefore propose to launch The Grand Bargain Project that will:

- Give voters in each socio-economic-political category an opportunity to identify whom outside government they would most trust to represent them on the issues that will shape their families' future.
- Convene the representatives with the largest followings. Provide them with facilitators who will help them hash out an agreement resolving the most critical issues in ways that will advance the entire public's long-term interests.
- Help each representatives show his/her voters how this grand bargain would benefit them.
- Thereby motivate most presidential and congressional candidates to endorse that agreement and, once in office, to enact it.

To accomplish this by 2024, the project will unfold in five phases:

1) To generate a preliminary grand bargain that sparks conversations nationwide, we will convene 15 former policymakers who have earned wide respect; have broad experience with the most critical national issues; are diverse, politically and otherwise; and are alarmed by America's failure to address its major ills — enough so that they will commit to bridging their differences.

The 15 will include former directors of the Congressional Budget Office, cabinet secretaries, agency leaders, governors, congressional committee chairs, heads of think tanks and so on.

We will ask them to work out an agreement resolving the six chronic problems listed on page 1, so that all sectors of society will benefit. To recap, those problems are:

Declining social and economic mobility

Many Americans lacking the education and skills to thrive in a high-tech, global economy

Unsustainably rising debt

The most expensive and inefficient health care system in the developed world

Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires

A 75,000-page tax code filled with perverse incentives

We chose these six issues for the following reasons:

- Each is hobbling our economy and/or stoking enough voter anger to destabilize our society.
- These issues are intertwined. Trying to resolve them individually would yield inefficiencies and contradictions.
- Our research, spelled out in Appendix I, suggests that, individually, none of these issues can be resolved in a way that most voters would accept.
- We therefore put together a hypothetical grand bargain resolving all six issues in ways that the total benefits to each sector of society seemed to far exceed the costs. We then presented the result to political activists across the spectrum. Each agreed with our evaluation, each for different reasons.
- That gave us confidence that a detailed agreement acceptable to all sectors of society is within reach.
- Each of these issues is seen by some sectors of society as critical to their future. By tackling all of them, we intend to unite far more voters around a positive agenda than we would by tackling any subset of the six. Further justification for this conclusion is in Appendix I.
- By contrast, discourse on cultural issues — such as abortion, gun control, immigration — has been so enflamed by various media and candidates that we doubt these issues can be resolved by 2024.

Nonetheless, if the 15 former policymakers discover in their deliberations that they can reach consensus more readily by adding or removing issues, that will be their decision to make.

To help the 15 reach agreement, we will partner with one or more think tanks that would provide 18 experienced researchers, three for each issue, who will collate existing proposals in their subject area and narrow that list down to the three most widely beneficial, cost-effective solutions for each issue.⁵

The 15 former policymakers will then explore various combinations of these alternative solutions until finding a combination they see as benefiting each sector of society far more than it would cost them.

Given that a hyperpolarized Congress is very unlikely to make significant progress on any of the six issues, we expect the 15 will find a combination of reforms they all see as far superior to any politically feasible alternative. But if a few negotiators withhold approval, the process will still move forward.

⁵ We have had preliminary conversations with the Bipartisan Policy Center about taking on this role.

2) In parallel with Phase 1, we will identify the 50 public figures outside government whom voters would most trust to speak for them on the six issues. To that end, we hired Ipsos to conduct a series of national surveys and expect to get a statistically valid list of the 50 in April.

We will also identify the 50 organizations most politically active on the above issues and that have the largest public followings: such as the AFL-CIO, National Federation of Independent Business, AARP, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, NAACP, National Wildlife Federation and so on.

Once the 15 high-profile former policymakers are committed to the project, we expect that their prominence and diversity will enable the members of the project steering's committee and Advisory Board to enlist the heads of the 50 organizations to participate.

Once these organizations are on board, we will seek out the 50 people whom voters most want as their advocates. We will work with a large public relations firm to show each one that the project is the best chance to generate broad prosperity and renewed confidence in our country's future. We expect nearly all of the 50 would rather participate than sit on the sidelines of this potentially historic endeavor.

The total projected costs for Phases 1 and 2 are \$4 million. The budgets are available on request.

3) We will then convene the 100 public and organizational advocates. We will identify and publicize them as the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity and Opportunity.

To start, we will interview each advocate about the issues that most concern them and ask what they see as feasible in the regular political process. We will explain that our purpose is to far exceed that benchmark, in words such as:

Our goal is to help you come up with an agreement all of you can wholeheartedly support. To produce it in time to become a central issue in the next election, we ask that you start with the preliminary grand bargain that the 15 former policymakers all see as far superior to the status quo. You are free to modify any part of it. And the rest of the structure is entirely yours to design.

We will then ask each public and organizational advocate to evaluate the preliminary grand bargain.

Given that 67 percent of Americans fear that our democracy is in danger of collapse⁶ — and more than 75 percent see the country as headed in the wrong direction⁷ — we expect most of the advocates to prefer this initial package over the country's current trajectory.

⁶ Quinnipiac University poll, Aug. 31, 2022

⁷ Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, June 29, 2022

We will also ask each advocate what changes they would most want.

Once all these proposed changes are in hand, the advocates will form a separate working group for each issue, to consider ways to modify the original proposal so as to increase the number of advocates who are satisfied.⁸ Each working group will get help from the researchers who participated in Phase 1.

Once those modifications are ready, each working group will choose two co-chairs who will meet as a Group of 12 to integrate the changes into a complete package encompassing all six issues. We will again ask each of the 100 advocates to evaluate whether he/she prefers the total package over the status quo and, if not, what further changes they seek.

With those changes in hand, the above process will be repeated one more time. We are confident that by then more than 80 percent will prefer the result over what they could possibly get on Capitol Hill.

By November 2023, we will work with any holdouts to satisfy reservations they have about the deal being formulated. Part of our message: By supporting this grand bargain, you can keep pursuing your other objectives while your constituents would reap the benefits of this deal.

We expect most holdouts will be discontent with the country's current trajectory, will not want to end up empty-handed, and will therefore try their best to reach an agreement with the rest.

4) At yearend 2023, with the above phase still in progress, we will help each advocate tailor a message to his/her constituents, showing them how the key elements of the grand bargain would improve the quality of their lives — much more than what our two-party system has done. This will include helping each advocate produce a brief video and website making his/her case.

We will then conduct deliberative polls nationwide to assess and show the level of public support for the grand bargain. We will convene groups of citizens who cover the socio-economic-political spectrum. We will ask each to rate various proposals for the six issues and, based on their responses, show each the relevant pitch for the grand bargain. They will then discuss their experiences with one another. We expect these events to draw significant media coverage.

The expected costs for Phases 3 and 4 are \$5.5 million. The budgets are available on request.

⁸ The members of each working group will be chosen so as to represent the entire Forum as closely as feasible. The steps by which we propose to do this are available on request.

5) To mobilize nationwide support for the grand bargain, we envision forming a separate 501 (c) 4 organization.

As things stand, polls identify more than 60 percent of voters as an “exhausted majority,” who care mostly about economic problems, and feel powerless in the current political process.⁹ They are indeed powerless, because: 1) they disagree among themselves about how to resolve each major issue; and 2) in 90 percent of congressional districts and 85 percent of states, one party is so dominant that candidates can win just by catering to the most partisan voters.¹⁰

However, just 20 percent of registered voters now take part in congressional primaries.

So, to motivate the exhausted majority to turn out in record numbers, each Prosperity Forum advocate could explain to his/her constituents:

You can at last get politicians to act in your families’ best interests. You just need to sign an online pledge to vote in primaries exclusively for candidates who support the grand bargain.

If 15 percent of voters in your district sign those pledges, candidates would have overwhelming incentives to support the pact. And 15 percent of voters would be enough for those candidates to win. Once in office, they would know that failing to enact the grand bargain would cost them their seats at the next election.

We will also enlist support for the grand bargain from political commentators, media figures, national good government organizations and local civic groups.

We will clearly face many obstacles to winning overwhelming public support for a grand bargain by the 2024 election. Below are obstacles we expect and how we plan to overcome them.

Many voters will not know enough about each issue to know who would best represent them.

But most citizens can name individuals they trust to speak for them. And those spokespeople will be in the best possible position to win their voters’ support for the agreement. Whereas if we do not enlist such advocates, most voters and lawmakers will likely ignore the Forum’s recommendations.

⁹ “We See the Left. We See the Right. Can Anyone See the Exhausted Majority?” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2021

¹⁰ “Taking the Voters Out of the Equation: How the Parties Are Killing Competition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2022

Among the 50 advocates whom the public supports, several will prefer divisive slogans and grandstanding rather than negotiating with ideological adversaries.

For that reason, Forum meetings will be held in private, so that members will have no audience or cameras to grandstand to. And any who decline to negotiate are likely to be ignored by those who want to reach agreement.

Some voters will object to private meetings.

Every constructive agreement among political adversaries that we know of, including the U.S. Constitution, was hammered out behind closed doors, so that the participants could talk candidly with one another. Forum members cannot possibly resolve the most divisive issues of these times unless they too can talk candidly and in private. We will however provide periodic public briefings using language agreed on with the participating advocates. And we will fully disclose the eventual agreement, enabling each voter to decide how much it advances their interests.

Some Forum members will lack negotiation skills, including some who will be too aggressive.

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in helping diverse people to reach agreement.

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

Media spreading disinformation will keep undermining our society *unless* voters get the opportunity to name whom they trust to speak for them. Those trusted individuals, and they alone, could persuade most voters to ignore the lies and distortions.

Some voters will have expectations that the final agreement will not meet.

Each Forum member will need to show constituents how the pact is their best option, with a message such as:

This deal gives us the policies we have most wanted but that politicians never delivered. They make huge promises they fail to keep, and blame that on scapegoats. So, if we pass up this deal, we are signing up for political paralysis and zero progress on the issues we care about.

The Forum is unlikely to change the minds of most Americans who embrace tribalism, nihilism or extremism.

Our objective is to unite as many Americans as possible around an agenda they see as being in their best interests and motivate them to vote for that agenda. We see that as the most practical way to make nihilism, tribalism and extremism very unappealing to most citizens.

In Summation

In our current elections, politicians who attack opponents can win far more easily than those who try to bridge differences. Various media have learned that they too can draw the largest audiences by stoking divisiveness. Our democracy has therefore been eroding to the point of breakdown.

By contrast, we propose to:

- Convene a group of representatives such that nearly every American sees at least one as a spokesperson they trust
- Provide these representatives with the incentives and resources to work out a combination of reforms that will advance their constituents' long-term interests as much as feasible
- Help the representatives mobilize their constituencies to vocally support the result and thereby incentivize politicians to endorse it

Ambitious, yes. But when we have asked political activists or heads of think tanks to suggest simpler ways to bridge our nation's differences on the most critical issues, none have offered a practical alternative.

At this point, we are just seeking support to launch Phases 1 and 2, which we expect to show that a grand bargain advancing the long-term interests of all sectors of society is within reach.

If that proves to be so, we expect that to galvanize the support necessary to complete the other phases.

To lay the groundwork for Phases 1 and 2, we have enlisted a Board of Advisors (identified in Appendix III); and formed an initial Project Steering Committee that we are seeking to expand. Its current members are:

Rob Fersh, founder and former president of Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

David Fairman, managing director of the Consensus Building Institute

Kabrina Bass, chair of the National Association for Community Mediation

Stuart Butler, senior fellow at Brookings and former Director of Policy Innovation at Heritage

Sol Erdman, founder and president of the Center for Collaborative Democracy

The members of the committee state that, "We have yet to see another actionable plan for grappling with the critical issues that our democracy must confront if the American people are to thrive. We are committed to making this project a reality."

The committee is recruiting the former policymakers for Phase 1 and has raising the necessary funds.

For more information, please contact Sol Erdman: solerdman@igc.org 212-860-0969

Appendix I: Why Advocates Can Resolve the Six Issues While Congress Cannot Resolve Any

Behavioral economists have proven that nearly every person avoids costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains, a trait known as “loss aversion.”¹¹ So, voters who expect a piece of legislation to place a burden on them usually oppose it far more vigorously than supporters work to enact it.

For example, economists largely agree that Americans would nearly all benefit if Congress lowered marginal tax rates while eliminating most deductions. But the few groups that would lose on balance invariably threaten to unseat incumbents who support such measures, dooming tax reform on Capitol Hill.¹²

Furthermore, we have looked at how think tanks from far left to far right propose to resolve each problem this project will address¹³ — and then looked at the Pew Research Center’s analysis of nine types of voters.¹⁴ Each proposal clearly conflicted with the attitudes of at least five types of voters.

Yet we found evidence that the six problems can be resolved together so that voters in each category would benefit enough to accept the overall costs. To get there, we selected what seemed to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution for each issue — and then sought reactions to that mix of solutions from high-profile political activists ranging from very liberal to ultra-conservative.

To each activist, we described the parts of our grand bargain we expected him/her to strongly support. We then asked: To achieve all that, would you accept the rest, including the parts you would otherwise reject?

After some discussion, each said yes. And from those conversations, it was clear that if we had omitted any of the six issues, at least one activist would have been much less interested or opposed. In effect, from their perspective, the benefits would have been insufficient to accept the parts they objected to.

As for how voters might react, almost 80 percent see the country as headed in the wrong direction¹⁵ — and 70 percent worry about their children’s future.¹⁶ So, if advocates whom voters trust were to present them with a detailed grand bargain that would significantly improve their families’ prospects, we expect that the vast majority would prefer that deal over the country’s current trajectory.

Furthermore, when various stakeholders meet, none make progress unless nearly all agree on an outcome. So, each negotiator is motivated to look for a mix of solutions that will benefit the other sides enough for them to support the result.

Our two-party elections deprive most politicians of this motivation: they can win just by blaming the other side for America’s ills, offering sound bites as solutions, and catering to a few well-organized groups.

¹¹ See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

¹² See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

¹³ The think tanks were Brookings, American Enterprise, New America, Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, Cato, Heritage, Niskanen, Center for American Progress and the Economic Policy Institute.

¹⁴ The nine types: faith and flag conservatives, committed conservatives, populist right, ambivalent right, stressed sideliners, outsider left, Democratic mainstays, establishment liberals and progressive left. “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Nov. 9, 2021.

¹⁵ <https://apnorc.org/projects/bipartisan-dissatisfaction-with-the-direction-of-the-country-and-the-economy/>

¹⁶ “The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids’ financial future,” Marketwatch.com, July 21, 2021

Appendix II: Project Timeline

| Month | 2023 | | | | | | | | | | | | 2024 | | | | | |
|--|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|------|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Phase 1 and Phase 2 Funding | █ | █ | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recruit High-Profile Former Policymakers | | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Complete Contract for Researchers | | | | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Assemble On-Line Resources | | | | | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Six Research Task Forces Collate and Evaluate Alternatives and Then Present to Former Policymakers | | | | | | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Policymakers, with Help of Researchers, Work Out Preliminary Grand Bargain | | | | | | | █ | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Polling to Identify 50 Public Advocates | | | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recruiting 50 Organizational Advocates | | | | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recruiting 50 Public Advocates | | | | | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Full Funding of Phases 3 and 4 | | | | | | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Planning and recruiting additional staff for Phases 3 and 4 | | | | | █ | █ | █ | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Advocates form Working Groups to revise Grand Bargain so as to maximize approval | | | | | | | | █ | █ | █ | █ | | | | | | | |
| Communication Experts Help Each Advocate Develop Presentation of Grand Bargain to Share with Constituents | | | | | | | | | | | | █ | | | | | | |
| Advocates Seek Constituent Pledges for Grand Bargain | | | | | | | | | | | | | | █ | | | | |
| Publicize Degree of Voters Support for Grand Bargain | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | █ | | | |
| Working groups continue refining Grand Bargain throughout 2024 to maximize approval and improve legislative language | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | █ | █ | █ |

Appendix III: Our Board of Advisors

Lawrence Susskind, vice chair and co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School
Larry Diamond, senior fellow at Hoover Institution and founding co-editor of *Journal of Democracy*
Eugene Steuerle, Richard Fischer chair at the Urban Institute and co-founder of the Tax Policy Center
John Steiner, co-founder of the Bridge Alliance, National Commons and Social Venture Network
Margo King, collaborator on the Threshold Foundation, Integral Institute and Mediators Foundation
Barry Anderson, former director of the Congressional Budget Office
Nealin Parker, executive director of Common Ground USA
Kelly Johnston, former Secretary of the U.S. Senate
Francis Fukuyama, professor at Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law
Hahrie Han, inaugural director of the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University
Jerry Taylor, co-founder and former president of the Niskanen Institute
Charles Wheelan, founder and co-chair of Unite America
Uriel Ephstein, executive director of Renew Democracy Initiative
David Levine, president and co-founder of the American Sustainable Business Council
Brandon Arnold, executive vice president of the National Taxpayers Union
John Passacantando, former executive director of Greenpeace
William Cyrus Garrett, senior policy advisor at America Achieves
Marie Margenau-Spatz, founder of Change Works
Adi Ignatius, editor of the Harvard Business Review
Rob Richie, founder and president of FairVote
Larry Spears, co-founder of Policy Consensus Initiative