

# GRAND BARGAIN

## PROJECT

The Practical Steps Necessary Now to Resolve America's Critical Problems  
and Preserve Our Democracy

March 31, 2024

The Center for Collaborative Democracy works 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.

## The Steps Necessary for Our Democracy and the American People to Thrive

Our political system has become so polarizing that, whomever we elect, there is no scenario in which the president, the House and 60 senators could agree on practical solutions for our long-term problems. And government's failures to address our chronic ills has so inflamed voters' anger that 23 percent now believe that violence is justified to push our country in the direction they want.<sup>1</sup>

**To break this cycle of divisiveness and dysfunction, the Center for Collaborative Democracy, working with the Consensus Building Institute, has launched the Grand Bargain Project.** We intend to build wide public support for common sense economic reforms that will significantly improve every family's quality of life and future prospects. To get there in 2024, the project is unfolding in five phases:

### Phase 1: Proof of Concept — Completed in December

To start, we commissioned a team of 13 prominent former policymakers and think tank leaders from across the political spectrum (listed in Appendix I) to work out a practical plan for simultaneously:

- Increasing economic mobility, productivity, and growth
- Reforming education so that students can reach their potential
- Making healthcare more effective and less costly
- Stabilizing the global climate
- Shrinking the national debt as a percentage of GDP
- Making the tax code fairer and simpler

To reach that outcome, the expert team agreed with our research that none of these issues can be resolved on its own, because any practical solution will face fierce opposition from various interest groups and blocs of voters that prefer a different approach — or no change at all.

Yet by combining common sense reforms for all six issues, the team produced an overall plan that would significantly increase the total benefits to society while reducing the total costs, so that nearly everyone would be far ahead of where they are now. Each person who has seen the experts' report to date has found parts they would ordinarily oppose, yet all have agreed that the total package would be far better for their families and the rest of the country than the direction we are now headed.

### Phase 2: Enlist 150+ Leaders and Influencers — Begun in March

**To generate a more detailed plan that all sectors of the public could support,** we are drawing on our experience with over 200 political controversies in which the various opposing sides reached unanimous agreement. Years ago, for example, 25 advocates who had long clashed over environmental policy — including top executives from General Motors, Dow Chemical and Chevron Oil; leaders of the Sierra Club, World Resources Institute and Environmental Defense Fund; the chair of the African American Leadership Summit; the director of the EPA; and the president of the AFL-CIO — hashed out a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Nearly one in four Americans believe political violence justified to ‘save’ US,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 25, 2023

detailed plan for significantly “reducing pollution, waste and poverty,” while increasing “jobs, productivity, wages, savings, capital and education.”<sup>2</sup>

Each CEO then won over their industry association; the labor leader enlisted the major unions; the EPA director got buy in from other regulatory agencies; and the environmentalists won over their colleagues.

As one advocate put it, “Each of us had earned the trust and respect of our own community, which is how we won each community’s full support.”

By contrast, congressional leaders from both parties admitted that lawmakers could not sell such a complex agreement, despite all its benefits, to their diverse voters.

From this case and 200 others in which trusted spokespeople resolved conflicts that politicians could not, we have concluded: **We need to identify people outside government whom citizens in each sector of society would trust to speak for them on the issues listed on page 1, because those trusted spokespeople, and they alone, could work out practical solutions that the public would widely support.**

To that end, we are working with APCO Worldwide and Mercury LLC to enlist:

- 10 project co-chairs, people of national stature who have a history of acting in the public’s interests
- 50 leaders of the organizations most politically active on the six issues
- 50 civic leaders who have made notable progress on these issues in their states, cities and towns
- 50 top influencers from media, arts, business, government, faith community, youth, popular culture

The co-chairs and the project steering committee will invite the 100 leaders to meet online in May to work out a detailed agreement that each sees as far better for the people they represent than the status quo. We expect even traditional adversaries to accept that offer rather than sit by as the others strive for a deal.

### Phase 3: Convene the Leaders Online — Target Date: May

**To help the leaders hash out a detailed agreement**, we will ask them to use the experts’ report as a starting point. Given that all who have seen the report to date have agreed that it would be far better for their families and the entire country than the status quo, we expect nearly all to accept.

The leaders will form a separate working group for each of the six issues, exploring changes to the original proposal that could appeal to the greatest number of participants. Each working group will have an experienced facilitator from the Consensus Building Institute to help bridge differences, and two policy experts to help with the details.

Each working group will choose two co-leaders who, once a month, will meet as a Group of 12 to integrate agreed-upon changes into a package encompassing all six issues.

Our expectation is that each month, more of the 200 will strongly support the emerging agreement.

---

<sup>2</sup> See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996

## Phase 4: Messaging

We will widely publicize the initial convening, making the case that whatever emerges will be far better for every family than what our hyperpolarized political system can produce.

We will also help each negotiator who supports the emerging agreement to tailor multi-media messages showing the people he/she represents how the overall pact would vastly improve the quality of their lives.

We will also seek support for the emerging grand bargain from local civic groups, political commentators, media figures, good government organizations, and on appropriate social media.

These combined messages could especially motivate the “exhausted majority” of citizens who deplore today’s hyper-partisan politics to vote in record numbers in 2024.

## Phase 5: Mobilizing Public Support

When the leaders first convene, our affiliated Grand Bargain Action Network and other 501(c)4s will begin to mobilize the exhausted majority of voters with messages such as:

*The people you most trust are working out a grand bargain that will create far more opportunities for your family to thrive. If you want that pact to make a real difference, you need to vote.*

We expect that most organizations promoting democracy, the environment, economic mobility or fiscal responsibility will join in spreading that message.

As the number of Americans supporting the emerging grand bargain increases, a growing number of politicians and candidates would see it as being in their self-interest to publicly pledge to use the pact as the roadmap for navigating our country’s biggest challenges.

## Obstacles to Success and Our Plans to Overcome Them

*Various media will misrepresent the project’s purpose and distort the advocates’ recommendations.*

Media spreading disinformation will keep undermining our society unless Americans who have earned the trust of voters across the spectrum get an opportunity to work together on bridging differences. Those trusted individuals, and they alone, could persuade most voters to ignore the lies and distortions.

*The project is unlikely to change the minds of voters who embrace tribalism, nihilism or extremism.*

Our objective is to offer Americans a policy agenda that the vast majority will see as being in their best interests. That strikes us as the strongest way to motivate most citizens to reject tribalism and extremism.

*The project is far more ambitious than any other endeavor of its kind.*

In hundreds of conversations with political activists, academics and think tank leaders, no one has offered us a viable alternative for resolving our nation’s differences on critical issues.

Indeed, pro-democracy organizations have spent billions of dollars in recent years trying to bridge those divisions, yet our country keeps growing more divided. And the \$30+ billion that will be spent on the coming election campaign will further stoke Americans' animosity toward one another.

By contrast, this project — which will cost under \$10 million — is designed to overcome fundamental flaws in our political system and could have a far greater impact than any recent endeavor we know of.

## Expected Outcomes and Measures of Success in 2024

- Vast majority of stakeholders and public influencers will agree on optimal solutions for the six issues
- Record numbers of the exhausted majority will become far more informed and politically active
- Constructive debate over public policy will become more dominant in our political discourse
- As much of society as feasible will unite around a shared vision of our country's future

## Management Team

To move the project forward, we have enlisted a Board of Advisors (see Appendix II); and formed a Project Steering Committee that we are still expanding. Its current members are:

- **Sol Erdman**, founder and president, Center for Collaborative Democracy
- **David Fairman**, managing director, Consensus Building Institute
- **Travis Robinson**, managing director, Center for Collaborative Democracy
- **Nancy Ozeas**, chief of staff, Center for Collaborative Democracy
- **Rob Fersh** founder and former president of Convergence Center for Policy Resolution
- **Richard Eidlin**, co-founder of the American Sustainable Business Council
- **Malka Ranjana Kopell**, co-founder and CEO of Civity
- **Kabrina Bass**, chair of the National Association for Community Mediation
- **Paul Kramer**, founder and former president of Youth in Policy

## Project Organizers

The Center for Collaborative Democracy (CCD) and the Consensus Building Institute (CBI) are engaged in resolving issues that have long been intractable. CCD's founder, Sol Erdman, took on that mission after working with three founders of Harvard's Program on Negotiation: Larry Susskind, Frank Sander and Howard Raiffa. Larry Susskind also founded CBI. His successor, David Fairman, is a key partner in the project and will be the lead facilitator.

## Budget

Phase 2 expected costs: \$875,000. Phase 3: \$1,800,000. Phase 4: \$2,900,000. Details available on request. Phase 5, open-ended, most to be borne by affiliated 501(c)4.

*For more information, please  
contact Sol Erdman:  
[sol.erdman@ccd-usa.org](mailto:sol.erdman@ccd-usa.org)*



**Eric Hanushek.** Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution (Stanford), specializing in economic analysis of educational issues. Won the Yidan Prize for research

**Bill Hoagland.** Senior Vice President, Bipartisan Policy Center. Former Director of the Senate Budget Committee. Participated in major federal budget negotiations throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

**Douglas Holtz-Eakin.** Founder and President, American Action Forum. Former Director of the Congressional Budget Office. Former senior economist on the President's Council of Economic Advisers.

**Glenn Hubbard.** Dean Emeritus of Columbia Business School. Former Deputy Secretary of the Treasury. Former Chair of the President's Council of Economic Advisers.

**Maya MacGuineas.** President, Committee for a Responsible Federal Government. Specializes in budget, tax, and economic policies. Serves as a consistent resource on Capitol Hill and international media outlets.

**Richard V. Reeves.** Senior Fellow, Brookings. Specializes in economic studies. Former European Business Speaker of the Year. Former principal policy advisor to the Minister of Welfare Reform in Great Britain.

**Robert Reischauer.** President Emeritus, Urban Institute. Former director of the Congressional Budget Office. Former trustee of Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds.

**Gerard Robinson.** Fellow of Practice, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (UVA). Former Secretary of Education in Virginia. Former Commissioner of Education in Florida.

**Isabel Sawhill (Team Co-Leader).** Senior Fellow and former Director of Economic Studies at Brookings. Former Associate Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

**Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach.** Professor of Human Development and Social Policy, Northwestern. Former Director of the Hamilton Project at Brookings. Scholar at Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

**Richard Schmalensee.** Former Dean of Sloan School of Management, MIT. Former Director of the National Bureau of Economic Research. Former member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers.

**Eugene Steuerle.** Fellow, Urban Institute. Former Deputy Secretary for Treasury. Co-founder and former President of National Tax Association. One of the chief architects of the 1986 Tax Reform Act.

**Michael Strain (Team Co-Leader).** Director of Economic Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute. Member of Aspen Economic Strategy Group. Research fellow at Germany's IZA Institute of Labor Economics.

## APPENDIX II: Grand Bargain Project Board of Advisors

**LAWRENCE SUSSKIND** vice chair and co-founder, Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School

**LARRY DIAMOND** senior fellow, Hoover Institution; founding co-editor, Journal of Democracy

**FRANCIS FUKUYAMA** professor, Stanford's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law

**JOHN STEINER** co-founder of the Bridge Alliance and the Social Venture Network

**MARGO KING** collaborator, Threshold Foundation, Integral Institute, Mediators Foundation

**JERRY TAYLOR** co-founder and former president of the Niskanen Center

**EUGENE STEUERLE** Richard Fischer chair at the Urban Institute; co-founder, Tax Policy Center

**HAHRIE HAN** inaugural director, SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University

**BARRY ANDERSON** former acting director, Congressional Budget Office

**NEALIN PARKER** executive director, Common Ground USA

**FRANCIS JOHNSON** president, Take Back Our Republic

**CHARLES WHEELAN** founder and co-chair, Unite America

**KELLY JOHNSTON** former Secretary of the U.S. Senate

**ADI IGNATIUS** editor, Harvard Business Review

**THOMAS KAHN** distinguished fellow, Center for Congressional & Presidential Studies, American University

**JAKE HARRIMAN** founder and CEO, More Perfect Union

**URIEL EPHSTEIN** executive director, Renew Democracy Initiative

**DAVID LEVINE** president and co-founder, American Sustainable Business Council

**BRANDON ARNOLD** executive vice president, National Taxpayers Union

**JOHN PASSACANTANDO** former executive director, Greenpeace

**WILLIAM CYRUS GARRETT** senior policy advisor, America Achieves

**ROB RICHIE** founder and president, FairVote

**LARRY SPEARS** co-founder, Policy Consensus Initiative