

Seeing Past Our Divides: A Conservative and Liberal Work Together on a Proposal for Building the Movement We Need to Respond to our Political Crisis

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The past year has brought us all face to face with the crisis in our democracy. We can no longer avoid the reality of an increasingly divided nation, widespread alienation from politics, unprecedented levels of distrust in our governments, corporations, and institutions, and an inability to work together to meet our serious challenges. It would have been great if one of our political parties had been able to recognize and respond to this crisis with a positive and inclusive solution. But they could not and they did not. As a result, many Americans expressed their frustration by voting for and helping elect the candidate who seemed most likely to upset the status quo. But we are all, despite how we voted, learning quickly that this election will only deepen the crisis we face. Our new President, whatever his motives, does not have a way forward for America that can solve our national crisis. Instead, we see increasing division at home and growing friction with our friends abroad.

That leaves all of us, no matter how we voted, with the difficult task of both ensuring that our democracy is not undermined and, at the same time, building a movement with a vision for our nation that can finally address the crisis facing our democracy. We are all searching for a way out of the kind of politics that has divided our nation and helped to create the crisis we are in. While we may be encouraged by the growth of engagement and the growing understanding of the importance of finding a way to address our crisis, we don't seem to have found a clear path forward that can address the problems we face. Do we really think that we can just intensify politics as usual to get out of this mess? We seem to be stuck in exactly the kind of politics that helped to create this crisis. We have got to look to a deeper kind of change if we are going to really succeed. This is the time for all of us to join in a conversation to figure out how we can move forward.

This essay is an attempt to articulate an approach to building a movement that the authors think has the best chance to succeed in addressing our crisis. We know that our ideas are different and may not be popular, but our experience convinces us that it is time for a different approach. We don't for a minute pretend to think that we are in a position to personally organize and lead the kind of movement we describe below. We are only hoping that our ideas and proposal will help start a broader conversation among all of us across our nation on the kind of movement we need.

Who are we? We are two members of the Steering Committee of Santa Rosa Together, a broad, diverse, and multi-partisan coalition of community leaders that has been working for the past seven years in our small city in California to try to overcome the deepening divisions and the adversarial politics in our city. We decided that to get to the root of this problem in our city, we would need to get more citizens engaged and organized, give everyone a voice and role in the city, and improve the way we work together. One of the authors of this essay is a conservative who voted, if reluctantly, for President Trump and the other is a liberal who voted, also

reluctantly, for Hillary Clinton. Despite our differences, our work together over the past years has allowed us to get to know and respect each other and discover the values we hold in common. This shared experience is the basis for suggesting a new approach to the crisis we face.

We both are still having a difficult time understanding each other's vote in this election. But we are realizing that, despite our shared experience working together, we each are still pulled into partisan worlds beyond our control that make it hard for us to understand each other. In the end, we have decided to trust our shared experiences and work together to find a way out of the kind of partisan politics that separates us and is now paralyzing our nation.

Our proposal for addressing our political crisis has four parts, each discussed below:

1. Build a broad multiparty movement around a shared vision for America that can restore our common ground
2. Develop and promote new and existing leaders who understand the need to work outside the kind of partisan politics that has helped to create our crisis
3. Work at the local level to rebuild and empower the local communities that are the foundation for our democracy
4. Organize to defend our democracy and our shared values and identify and promote candidates in all parties for future elections that share our vision and are prepared to implement it

1. Building a multi-partisan movement around a shared vision for America

The threats to values we all share, the deep divisions, the widespread distrust and alienation, and the breakdown of our ability to find common ground are at the heart of our political crisis so they should be our focus. That means, we think, that we need to build a broad and multi-partisan movement that can unite all of us --Democrats, Republicans, and Independents-- around a shared vision for our nation. A broad multi-partisan approach has the best chance to unite us and reverse the decline of our shared democratic values. It is also the best approach we can take to breaking down the deep divisions that our current politics have created. A partisan approach cannot address the challenges we face. It is time for us to build a movement that can unite us around the real political transformation that we need.

It would not be unusual for us to build a multi-partisan movement. Many times in our nation's past, we have had to respond to challenges that our parties were not prepared to address. Some of the most significant changes in our nation have been advanced by multi-partisan movements. Think, for example about the organization of efforts for abolition, voting rights, civil rights of all kinds, women's equality, family and community values, and environmental protection. We believe that the crisis in our democracy is another challenge that will require us to go beyond our current parties. The challenge to our democracy is especially important for all of us, since it is our democratic heritage that gives us the freedom for movements for change

and, at the same time, the respect for each other and the common ground that unites us while we struggle over our competing views on how to organize our public life and work.

We understand that all of us have issues that we are passionate about and that we put our energies into. We are not suggesting that any of us drop our interest in and work on the important issues facing us today. But, we are saying that the survival of our democracy and our ability to work together is also an issue. We can no longer take our democracy for granted and we need to think about moving the repair of our democracy to the top, or near the top, of our concerns.

To build a broad multi-partisan movement, we will need to work together to articulate a shared positive vision for America in today's world that can reestablish our common ground and restore our ability to work together. Our shared vision should be a broad general articulation of our values with the understanding that we will, and always will, have differences on how to move towards fulfilling this vision. We need to build a movement that will respect our differences and restore our ability to learn from each other as we continue the never-ending work to fulfill the American dream. We will never be able to take the next step we need to unite around concrete policies and actions that can make a difference until we can overcome our divisions and our ability to work together. Creating this positive vision for our nation is also the only real way to defeat both the internal and external threats to our democracy.

What would the vision for our movement look like? Only conversations about our shared values held across our nation in as many of our local organizations, schools, and neighborhoods as possible can form the vision we need to unite our nation. In fact, these conversations may be the first step we need to take to move forward. To contribute just a little to these conversations, suggestions for a shared vision for our nation that the two of us, along with our colleagues in Santa Rosa, have developed through working together for the past years are included below. As you will see, they are, at best, just a starting point for the conversations we all need. Maybe we can call the vision for America that can result from all of our conversations "Fulfilling America's Promise".

Here are our ideas for a shared vision. Remember these are ideas are an expression of shared values that we will never quite reach but always be working towards.

- Our nation is built on a citizen-centered democracy that values and respects all citizens, engages citizens and gives everyone a voice and role in our nation. Our democracy works to bring us together to learn from each other, find common ground, and work together. Our democracy is built on strong and organized citizens actively taking responsibility for their communities. Our governments partner with and support organized citizens. We are united in opposition to the politics of fear, extreme partisanship, elitism, and special interests that have divided us and left us unable to meet our challenges.
- Our national community includes and respects everyone. We value the ongoing discussion of differences over values and ways of life but we conduct this discussion in ways that respect others who may disagree with us. We work persistently to address all forms of

discrimination in our shared public life, including discrimination based on race or ethnicity, sex, class, religion, or sexual orientation. We will oppose all attempts to divide us and undermine the unity we need to achieve our goals.

- We have a fair and just economy that serves everyone and supports our democracy. We respect both the importance of private enterprise and the role of government oversight of our economy. High levels of inequality, economic hardship, and lack of jobs in any part of our nation are incompatible with our democracy and our respect for every citizen's opportunity to reach his or her full potential.
- We meet our challenges by creating a nation that taps the energy and resources of all of its citizens to work together.
- We are a nation of informed and educated citizens that has developed ways to provide its citizens with unbiased information from multiple perspectives that they need to participate in decisions on the direction of our nation.
- We are an active and responsible nation working with other nations to address the world's challenges. We will maintain our participation in the world, keep our commitments to our allies, and work to build cooperation among nations to address challenges, build prosperity, support democracy, and reduce inequality.
- Our nation maintains its tradition of welcoming immigrants and refugees. We will welcome immigrants and refugees in a safe, secure, and lawful manner and provide them with the help and resources they will need to integrate into and become active citizens in our democracy.
- Our nation has a path to citizenship for undocumented residents who have and are contributing to our nation's strength and prosperity by their work and their commitment to our nation. We will do this in a manner that values the importance of our laws to the health of our nation.

We hope, that these ideas, despite their certain need for improvement, will provide some small help for the conversations that we need to create a positive vision for our nation that can reestablish our common ground.

2. Developing and Promoting New Leadership That Can Unite Us Across Partisan Lines

Along with a shared vision, our movement will need new multi-partisan leadership that is not identified too closely with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Both of our major parties have failed to provide the leadership we need to bring us together and, given our current partisanship, too close an identification with either party would make our task of bringing Americans together more difficult. Our party leaders and elected officials would be welcome to join our movement if they support its principles, but many, if not most, of them are not now in a position to lead it. When we see how our current party leaders respond to this movement, we will be able to determine the role that they and our parties might play in the future.

To understand our need for new leadership, it may help to realize that there is something oddly missing in the responses of our current political leadership on all sides to the crisis in our politics. We have a deeply divided nation, an historically widespread lack of trust in our governments and national institutions, and an inability to come together to find the common ground we need to address our pressing concerns. These are exactly the problems that our democracy was designed to address so why isn't there any discussion of rebuilding or strengthening our democracy as a key part of the solution to our current crisis. Our democratic heritage provides a vision for a way of life based on the fundamental respect for each individual and for the value of the contribution that every person can make to our nation. Democracy, the system of government based on this belief, aspires to give everyone a voice and role in the work of the nation. Democracy is also meant to provide an opportunity for people to share ideas, find common ground, and work together. So, focusing on rebuilding our democracy seems like an obvious way for all of us to address our current crisis.

Giving everyone a real voice and role in the nation seems like the essential antidote to alienation and mistrust. People will not feel respected and will not get engaged if they feel that decisions about them and their lives are made by others no matter how well intentioned they are. Clearly too many of us do not now feel like we are a part of our democracy. We need to begin to find ways to rebuild our democracy so that it is a democracy "by the people", not just "for the people." Until we do that, we will continue to have mistrust and continue to waste the great potential of democracy: engaged citizens.

So why aren't our political leaders talking about strengthening democracy? We suggest that we have all grown so out of touch with our democratic heritage that it is now almost impossible for our leaders to imagine a democratic solution to our problems. That, we believe, is an underlying cause of our crisis. If this is true, then we need to understand this and address it if our movement is going to succeed.

Both liberals and conservatives began to drift away from our democratic heritage early in the 20th Century. The respect for and value of each person's unique contribution to society has been replaced by a faith in science and in the talented experts and leaders who have the ability to develop and use the knowledge provided by science. Democracy, as it was conceived by our founding fathers is now, and has been for some time, seen as out of date and wildly impractical in our modern and complex world. Meritocracy and its worship of talented individuals now dominate our culture. Democracy has now been reduced and redefined to mean equal opportunity to live up to your potential and even, if you are lucky, to become part of the meritocracy. It no longer means a system of governance that strives to give a voice and role to all citizens. We do need experts and specialists in our modern and complex world. But we need experts who understand the limits of their knowledge and who understand that in a democracy their role is to use their expertise to help inform and partner with citizens, not to make decisions for us.

President Trump clearly fits right into the current culture of meritocracy. His stated interest in working for neglected citizens relies on an administration of the best and brightest from the

world of business. President Trump's cabinet reflects his commitment to meritocracy, not democracy.

But, President Obama was equally committed to meritocracy. He relied on the experts of academia, think tanks and government to make policy for the people. While Obama is sincere and eloquent in describing what we all have in common, he, like Trump and all modern presidents, does not understand the possibility or desirability of a democracy that would empower people and provide a way for people themselves to come together, learn from each other and find common ground.

In addition to their shared commitment to meritocracy, many of our political leaders, both liberal and conservative have something else in common that prevents them from turning to our democratic heritage to address our political crisis. These leaders promote ideologies that see the world in terms of a partisan struggle between right and wrong. They are convinced that they are on the right side of history and, as a result, they feel the need to divide us into opposing camps organized to fight for victory. They enlist citizens in a politics that does not work to bring citizens from opposing sides together to learn from each other and find common ground. This ideology of historical certainty undermines the basic democratic belief in the value of everyone's contribution to our nation. In a democracy, citizens are treated as individuals with unique experiences that need to be heard. Democratic citizens resist being defined solely by a party or organizational affiliation. Democratic citizens look forward to learning from those with different ideas. And a democratic government understands its role to provide citizens with the opportunities they need to meet together and find common ground.

There will always, even in a more functional democracy, be a need for citizens to organize and even struggle to be heard. But the respect of the views of others and the understanding of the value of giving everyone a voice, transforms that work so that it is done in a way avoids division and mistrust. Martin Luther King and other democratic leaders have understood this and created movements that were compatible with and strengthened our democracy. It is the combination of leaders in a meritocratic culture who do not really value the voice of all citizens and the ideologies of certainty that are so incompatible with our democratic heritage.

We are at a turning point in our politics. We will either strengthen our partisan politics and harden our partisan camps or we will find a way to come together and learn from each other. It is time for a new group of citizen leaders to break from our national leadership trapped by their commitment to meritocracy and begin the work to reclaim our democratic heritage and create a new democracy for our times that can both engage us, give us all a voice and role, and bring us together to find the common ground we need to meet our challenges. Creating a new politics without many of our national leaders will not be an easy task. But, one thing gives us some hope that we might choose democracy: if you ask citizens if they want to continue with our partisan politics or find a new form of politics that will give them a voice and that will bring us together to find common ground, which do you think they would choose?

So where will we find the leaders that we need for our movement? We already have many local leaders who understand the need for a new kind of politics that engages citizens, gives them a real voice and role, and can improve the way we work together. We have seen this in our own city where we have found leaders of faith based communities, leaders of community and neighborhood organizations, leaders of minority communities, and local elected officials and local government staff who are ready and willing to work bring our city together. The question is not who can lead this, but who will take the initiative to get this started. And, hopefully, a good number of our current party leaders will join this effort and work to have the shared vision for our nation affirmed by their parties.

3. Rebuilding Our Local Communities

Developing an organized national movement with new multi-partisan leadership and a shared vision for our nation is only a part the task we face. Partisan national politics has seeped down into many of our towns and neighborhoods creating divisions that now make it difficult for neighbors to even talk about politics and work together on local issues. To get at the root of our national crisis, we will have focus on overcoming the divisions in our local communities. It is in our neighborhoods and local community organizations that people have a chance to meet each other face-to-face, find common ground and learn how to work together. Our local organizations and communities need to be both the schools for our democracy and the balance we need to offset the tendency for our governments and national organizations to centralize and put control in the hands of elites. Strong and organized local communities know how to work together. They will be the foundation for taking our politics back from partisan leaders who rely on and promote the divisions that give them power.

The current divisions in our community are not the just the result of national politics going local. These divisions have resulted from long term changes in our culture and politics. Our governments now assume much of the work and responsibility previously done by engaged citizens organized into neighborhoods and community organizations. Our towns and cities have grown, but we have not done the work to grow the infrastructure of our democracy needed to keep citizens involved. With no real role in or power to affect the places where we live, we are now more likely to organize around issues that bring only like-minded people together to lobby for government action, neglecting the work in our own neighborhoods and communities. Overcoming the divisions in our local communities will mean reengaging citizens in our neighborhoods and local community organizations, restoring their power and responsibility, and transforming our local governments so that they support and partner with empowered neighborhoods and community organizations and provide them with processes that give people a voice and an opportunity to learn from each other and find common ground.

As a nation, we are better prepared for the work to rebuild our local communities than we realize. The work to rebuild local level communities has already developed in many towns and cities across the nation. Some of our most vibrant towns and cities have the most engaged citizens working together to build their neighborhoods and community organizations. Getting citizens organized and involved has even become a focus for the professional associations

supporting our local governments and elected officials. Practices reengaging citizens and giving them a real voice and role are surfacing around the world in both developed and the developing nations. People are ready for and embrace this opportunity to get engaged and work together.

In Santa Rosa, our home, we know that this work to rebuild local communities is possible. Seven years ago, we were part of a diverse and multi-partisan volunteer group of community leaders formed to focus on improving the way we work together in our city. To build unity, we knew that we needed to get more citizens engaged and organized and give everyone a voice and role in our city. We formed a broad coalition called Santa Rosa Together to give us a place to come together to focus on this community-building work. It has taken a lot of persistent volunteer leadership, but we have been able to make steady progress. We now have elected officials and city government beginning to work to support engaged and organized citizens. As a result, we now have a city department focused on promoting civic engagement. We also began the work to develop a new process to give citizens a voice and role in the work to meet challenges facing our city. To do this we chose a key issue facing our city, homelessness, and we organized small group conversations across the city to give more citizens an accessible and safe opportunity to understand and share ideas with each other on how to address this issue. This year we are working on a city-wide effort to get more of our neighborhoods organized. As a result of all of our work in Santa Rosa, we have seen first-hand that people are eager to have a voice and a chance to learn from each other and find common ground. We have a long way to go to build the kind of democracy we need in our city, but we feel like we have gotten off to a good start.

You can see more details of our work and lessons learned at <http://www.nationalcivicleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SantaRosaTogether.pdf> and you can contact both of us directly with comments and questions about our work in Santa Rosa or about the ideas in this essay at hanktopper@gmail.com)

Making the task of rebuilding our local communities a goal for our national movement will require local leaders who can step back from the current partisanship and work to rebuild their community's capacity to learn from each other, find common ground, work together. We will have to reach out and redirect some of the volunteer energy mobilized to meet our national crisis into the work of rebuilding our local communities and reforming our local governments so that they can partner with and support engaged citizens. If we can accomplish this, we will build the foundation we need for the transformation of our politics all the way to the national level.

4. Organizing actions to defend our democracy and our shared values and identifying and promoting candidates for future elections that share our vision

Details for the short-term strategy and tactics of this movement to defend our democracy and our shared values are beyond the scope of this proposal and our experience. But it does seem clear that we will need a broad national movement to defend our democracy and shared values as necessary through non-violent demonstrations and other kinds of actions. We already see

some hopeful efforts from both left and right to bridge differences and take action in the area of health care reform, refugee policy and immigration.

There are many kind of actions we could take. We can only offer a couple of examples that may get you thinking about possibilities. We could, for example, on a national scale, draw on the expertise of interested national organizations to organize a discussion on health care options that would give everyone a voice on this crucial issue. Instead of the special interest groups meeting in Washington, producing a plan that meets their needs, and presenting it to us, we could work together to develop the information and educational materials that lay out in a fair and unbiased manner all the options available for providing health care. We could then organize discussions of this information throughout the nation in our faith-based communities, community organizations, schools, and neighborhoods to give citizens a chance to work together to find common ground on the health care that best meets our needs. Doing this would demonstrate how governments and experts in a democracy could work to inform citizens and give them a real voice on key issues. It would also give all of us a chance to get to know and learn from each other and draw on our shared values to work together to find a way to move forward.

Or maybe we could organize a national effort around our shared value of helping refugees fleeing from war and famine. We could model this effort on the Canadian approach that allows groups of citizens to come together to sponsor and support refugee families. A national bottom-up multi-partisan demand from organized groups of citizens ready to host families might be able to change our current policy on refugees.

And, all kinds of actions and demonstrations at the local level will be needed as well to pressure elected officials and to advocate for local solutions based on our shared values around issues like health care and immigration.

And even though we would be multi-partisan, we will still need to promote and endorse independents or party candidates for elections at all levels who share our vision and are prepared to help us rebuild our democracy. We can find a way to work at the local level with party organizations and independents to make sure that we find, support, and elect the candidates we need.

Final Thoughts

If you agree with some of the ideas in this essay, you may still feel, as we do, that building a national movement that can meet our challenges seems like a daunting, if not impossible, task. But, there are simple things we could all do to get started, such as circulating these ideas to family and friends and to colleagues in organizations that we are part of, to see if they can help generate the conversation we need to find the best way to address our crisis.

It also helps us to realize that much of the work to make the changes we need will take place where we live. This local work can take many forms, all important. For example, if you are a

member of a faith-based community, you could get your community to meet that other faith-based community not far away that you have never really worked with because they seem so different. Or, if you are a part of a neighborhood organization, why not organize a discussion of shared values with your neighbors? Or, you could join or help start a group of volunteers in your town or city to focus on rebuilding your local democracy so that it empowers organized citizens and helps to bring them together to find common ground. In our city, we are working now to see if we can create a bottom-up process for the city's general plan to give neighborhoods the power to shape their local community and our city.

Would this kind of effort and movement turn into a third party or would it last only until one or both of our main parties endorse its principles and carry them forward? We have no idea. But we do believe that our politics is in crisis and that we will have to break out of the straightjacket of our current party politics to be able to meet this challenge, reform our politics, and restore our commitment to the fulfilling the great American vision for democracy. We hope all of you will join us in the effort.