

January, 2018

An Invitation to a Conversation

Investment in a recovering democracy produces the greatest all around returns for our country. Investment in a tightening plutocracy disintegrates our society and its prospects. What follows is a proposal for an enlightened citizenry funded by the enlightened affluent starting now. Compare the proposed investments with what are the benefits are of having a Congress that is accountable to voters and that respects the just rule of law starting in January 2019?

*Objective:* Organize a Civic Initiative to get-out-the-vote of *ten million Americans* who otherwise would not have voted in selected states and congressional districts, laying the basis from April to November 2018.

It is likely, based on the 2014 turnout, that over two-thirds of the voting-age voters will stay home for the mid-term congressional elections of November 2018. That numbers about 150 million people! If a *different Congress* is not elected, all the present “clear and present dangers” will receive two additional years of accelerating implementation with all their serious direct and indirect harms to our county at all levels among the populace and to our country’s posterity.

Traditional partisan political efforts to bring out the vote from this vast pool of about 150 million non-voters – phone banks, advertisements, mailings and other unilateral exhortations – have not been very successful. We have ample warning that 2018 could give us the same-old-same-old practices and the same fate of past years. There has been no shake up of the political bureaucracies, political consultants and their traditional single-issue allies, for a more vigorous, more creative and more intensive get-out-the-vote efforts. Another disastrous spectre of *déjà vu* is clearly ahead of us. We need a fresh, new entry for bringing out a significant and decisive number of new voters in strategically selected Congressional Districts.

What is proposed here is a *civically driven* labor-intensive, educational, neighborhood effort over about seven months to bring out adequately informed, motivated voters who, registered or not currently registered, have usually stayed home. This civic drive would be enhanced by often discussed, fair and prudent redirections, reforms and realistic visions for the

good society enabling better livelihoods and the good life for millions of deprived people and families.

This Civic Initiative (CI) would not support or oppose specific candidates; voters would decide whose side the candidates are on the most in the months of meetings or gatherings preceding the November election. There would be lively discussions, more formal teach-ins, get-togethers for neighborhood feedback and daily contacts by locally respected “influentials” in various residential venues. The necessities, wants and values of the voters would be related to Congress to which so much of the sovereign powers of citizens have been delegated under our Constitution. This mutual learning/educational process will use the most effective person-to-person and modern media techniques of achieving regular pre-election attendance, increasingly motivated as their perceived empowerment increases.

A major distinguishing feature of this get-out-the vote drive is the prior seven months of organizing to foster a deliberative engagement by the citizens regarding what the Congress has and has *not* been doing on behalf of the sovereign people. After this education effort, voters will then address what a overdue people-oriented Congress should be pursuing promptly through its 535 lawmakers using the immense powers under the Constitution by “we the people.”

This week after week of *personal* attention is designed to bring out *en mass* new voters to the polls. Citizens will have been properly registered and voters will be trained to overcome other, in time, election day hurdles to voting. Organizers will carefully plan for election day so that voters’ voices are heard at the ballot box.

This Civic Initiative (CI) will focus on those Congressional Districts and states where members of Congress have most inadequately represented the broad interests of the poor and working class voters. In many instances, support for widely discussed and broadly supported agenda would result in the ouster of incumbents. While in some electoral districts, incumbents may be returned because, affected by this pre-election Civic Initiative, they persuaded the voters that they will be with them, with authentic commitments, as actually happened in the nineteen sixties, for instance.

Past low voter turnout by citizens living within communities in need of a sensitive, responsive Congress will receive foremost attention.

Too many members of Congress focus on indicators such as GDP, the stock market, corporate profits and the increases in wealth (the greatest percentage of wealth gains going to the top one percent). Unfortunately, too few members of Congress truly focus on the daily life and livelihoods of the majority of Americans and the impoverishment, debt, anxiety, dread and the fear people have for their family's future. Let's face it, half of the people are poor, given what economists think is required for a family of four to have the basic necessities. Collectively, many people have given up on "politics" which they view as a dirty word which of course, assures that we get dirty politics created by such mass withdrawal from the electoral political process writ large, before and beyond election day.

Meanwhile, inside the electoral arena, heavily monetized by clusters of movers and shakers, a "flash news," frenetic mass media, including, alas, public radio/television, our civil society is largely ignored. Modes of civic participation by non-partisan citizen groups, such as arranging debates, proposing serious democratic improvements, arranging public debates on censored priorities, correcting false narratives, and the like are absent in public electoral discussions. Note the Sunday morning network television "news" shows, using our public airwaves free of charge, such as *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation* or *This Week*. Politicians, feature-consultants, pundits, tacticians, insulters, personal gossipmongers and recent faux pas, etc Sadly, this narrowing discourse gets worse every four years. Traditional norms of robust news coverage are shredded. When cash register politics and media ratings make our elections off limits to diverse voices in our democracy, there are serious consequences to the state of the nation with the unravelling of our society's safeguards, commonwealth and nurturing social values.

A critical opportunity beckons. The times are demonstrating daily dire for the stability and quality of our political economy, of our culture and what their degradations portend for future generations. A bold, dramatic undertaking, with resilient initiatives, must now be undertaken and funded commensurate to the momentous stakes people here and abroad.

Large business investors have taken far greater risks with far greater sums than what is proposed by way of investment in a more deliberative, broad-based electoral process where votes begin to count more than campaign cash, where all votes are counted accurately and where voters are informed about the consequences of failing to advance the common good.

Why would ten million non-voters become voters next year? Because for seven months they will be respected – and located, informed and connected to their friends, neighbors, relatives and recognized “influentials” in their communities. Because they will be discovering themselves as sensitive, reflective citizens – much as the poor farmers and their travelling lecturers did in East Texas around 1887 to start the greatest political reform movement in US history around fundamental issues of power, economics and accountability spearheaded by their own candidates (See *The Populist Moment* by the late Lawrence Goodwyn, Professor of History at Duke University). With seven months of interactions and elevated aspirations, the usual stereotypes of get-out-the-vote campaigns are replaced with lengthy educational and motivational sequences for a better life.

It comes down to advancing prospects for a better life and livelihoods in safe, “neighborly” neighborhoods with the essentials of living wages, universal health insurance, decent shelter, safer consumer goods, especially food and drugs, properly maintained public facilities and effective community services. Responsive governments and political reforms also will be necessary to sustain these advantages. These gains can evolve incrementally with the forces being set into motion to reverse Congressional priorities and recognize that people matter first and foremost. Imagine replacing the monetized, cruel, wasteful and short-sighted members of Congress so indentured to those organized interests of the few over the many.

Starting in April 2018, with the identification of non-voters street by street, gatherings will start in small groups, living rooms, union and veterans’ halls, schoolrooms, bookstores and other familiar venues ( Interestingly, Abraham Lincoln produced a tight, very practical manual on getting out the vote that has relevance today).

Although traditional and social media will not be ignored, labor-intensive emphasis on person-to-person civic nurturing will be paramount and will require a budget commensurate with the mission.

Here is a preliminary sketch of the proposal, that will be placed before key funders:

1. A half dozen or so core of experienced civic advocates, scholars, known for their performance, acumen, integrity and reliability, develop the map of selected Congressional Districts and states for the prime focus of the Citizen Initiative (CI).
2. They put together the combination of necessary information, strategies, tactics, incentives to be applied.
3. They select or create the proper institutions for such efforts [501(c)(3), 527s, etc.).
4. They put forward a budget of about *half a billion dollars*, to be prudently disbursed and spent, under rigorous, continual audit. The budget contains the following approximations:
  - a. Two Thousand full-time organizers for 7.5 months - \$100 million, including expenses.
  - b. Two Hundred Thousand buses, cars, or vans for motor vehicle trips – from home to meal to home- \$100 million.
  - c. Media materials, local publicity, rental of empty store fronts and paid staffers with volunteers - \$60 million.
  - d. Expense money for proven local leaders who work in neighborhoods for 7 months and who pull together voters substantively, collegially, all the way to the voting precinct. These local leaders will develop plans to overcome voter suppression hurdles.\$50 million.

Note: The Koch Brothers reportedly spent about one billion dollars in the 2016 election cycle, among other such investments.

- e. Supervisory and legal staff to deal with the maze of state election laws and regulations, an accounting/auditing staff for monitoring and guiding proper expenses and records and a staff of seasoned recruiters handling thousands of resumes, interviews and ongoing personnel matters for organizers and researchers on policy etc. plus travel expenses - \$35 million.
- f. To commence early bonding and the crucial, later continuity, a dinner after voting is offered in clusters of 50 or more voters for solidarity, enjoyment and future directions. (By the way, recognizing the need for jump-starting incentives to vote, corporate attorney and White House advisor, Lloyd Cutler

once suggested a lottery; others have proposed a concert ticket for people who have voted.) Ten million dinners, averaging \$15 per meal *amounts to \$150 million*. These dinners can be in church basements, veteran and union halls, service club cafeteria or even school cafeterias, which would be helped as well. This post-vote dinner or lunch may raise questions which can be answered; but there may be other alternatives that fulfill the same central purposes of incentive, solidarity, enjoyment and future planning. Group voting, group transportation and celebratory dinners make verification possible beyond mere promises to vote one by one answering, eg a telephone bank call.

g. There also is a need for a small budget for subsequent summary, analysis and evaluation of this unprecedented effort – what succeeded and what did not, what we learned during the allotted months and how this mobilization can be continued in other specific directions. \$3 million.

5. After careful preparation in early 2018, the campaign gets fully underway on May 1, 2018 in about 150 Congressional Districts and about 25 overlapping states. There will be no involvement or focus on primaries. While the geographical range extends beyond tipping-point elections, there is short and long-term value in working in a variety of districts.

What it comes down to is 2000 full time organizers, with thousands of people in backup and forward infrastructures, bringing out an average of 5000 additional voters each, totaling ten million non-voters being converted into voters – still only a fraction of the 150 million non-voters of . Given the élan, community spirit, and excitement generated by the seven-month-long campaign, a positive contagion may emerge to increase the turnout – more so should the effort receive mass local media coverage. Other serendipities are possible as collateral benefits for the post-election period, including finding new local leaders.

One final note on the benefits. Consider what this Congress already has done to damage the country, its health and safety, its environment, its acceleration of inequality and inequity, its public lands and its tax code – to mention a few of the early

depredations, not to mention its chosen judiciary. Consider what this Congress plans to do after 2018 to Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, safety nets for children, the poor and the disabled. Then consider what a turnaround toward a humane, fact-based Congress can do for long overdue improvements for our society, its relations with the world and its protection of the vulnerable and defenseless here at home. As an old Texas farmer put it simply decades ago – “when everybody does better, everybody does better.”

Yes, there is a plutocracy and its servicing oligarchy that keeps pushing the envelope. Its collective greed and lust for the power to sustain its avarice, however, is being challenged by several hundred very wealthy people as in trying to save the estate tax (see [ips-dc.org](http://ips-dc.org)) and many other safety nets and environmental protections (eg. [patrioticmillionaires.org](http://patrioticmillionaires.org)).

Yes, there has been class warfare and, as Warren Buffett has warned, “our class is winning.” It is time for a major commitment to voting turnout around proper redirections, reforms and efficiencies, a turn-out effort funded adequately for the massively greater premiums that flow from a more just society.

Is the foregoing sufficient for a preliminary conversation? A conference call?

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