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Breaking through gridlock

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Having served in the U.S. Congress for a combined 48 years, we have an abiding love for our country and its institutions. But we share a deep concern about the gridlocked state of our democracy and the inability of government to address some of the most critical challenges of our time.

Public confidence in Congress has never been lower, and a disillusioned public believes government isn't working and politicians aren't listening. Members of Congress from both parties need a way to break through this gridlock and restore public confidence.

The question is, how?

We see a way based on the founding principles of our republic: That government exists to serve the people, and to do so, the people must have a stronger voice in government. Stronger does not mean louder, more shrill, better funded, or better organized. It means, as Alexander Hamilton said, that "the deliberate sense of the community ... should govern."

Americans believe, as did the Founders, that the common sense of the people can help break through polarization and gridlock, find common ground, and help government better serve the common good.

An abundance of research says they are right. The American people are far less polarized than Congress and more apt to compromise and arrive at practical solutions. When given correct information, the public as a whole shows remarkable intelligence. And, research consistently demonstrates that the public tends to put the common good before self-interest. Clearly, hearing from the people — a truly representative sample of all the people — would help our government make better decisions.

That is why we're proud to be associated with a new organization called Voice of the People (www.VOP.org), which just launched. This group has found a way to use modern technology and new methods to give the American people a more effective voice in government.

Voice of the People is calling on Congress to establish a national “Citizen Cabinet” — a large, standing panel of U.S. citizens, scientifically selected to represent the people. Every member of Congress would hear from a sample of their constituents with a degree of accuracy not previously available, even for those who know their districts well.

Citizen Cabinet members would not run for office or be appointed by politicians. Instead, a truly representative sample — 120,000 of our fellow citizens, consisting of 275 in every congressional district — would be tapped to serve for a finite period of nine to 12 months. Like a jury impaneled to represent the community but protected from external pressure, Citizen Cabinet members’ names would be confidential. But their aggregated views on issues of the day would be made public.

Citizen Cabinet members would be briefed and asked to weigh in on issues facing Congress. Through an online interface, they would be given unbiased background information reviewed by experts and congressional staff from both parties. They would evaluate competing arguments, and then make their recommendations. Results would be broken out by Congressional district and state, and reported to the President, Congress, the media and the public.

Congress and the president would continue to decide policy, but with the benefit of informed input from a truly representative sample of their constituents.

A Citizen Cabinet would provide our nation’s leaders far more useful information than any poll. Those surveyed may be ill-informed or misinformed. Telephone calls, emails and letters to Congress, the echo chambers of social media, and those most vocal at town hall meetings, are not reliable purveyors of the totality of public opinion. These inputs are often generated by organized interests, or extreme voices that are not truly representative.

Moreover, a Citizen Cabinet’s “deliberate sense of the community” arrived at after reviewing facts, hearing all sides, and weighing trade-offs, would provide reinforcement to members of Congress to do what they think is right when faced with difficult choices.

Although members of the Citizen Cabinet would be scientifically selected, the entire process they go through would be put online, giving all Americans a way to get informed and engaged.

Providing this new system to better connect Congress to the people — one that cannot be skewed or distorted by organized interests — would give members an accurate understanding of their constituents’ views.

And through technology, the public can participate in the process of finding common ground to help move us forward when our political system doesn’t measure up to our ideals.

Former Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., and former Rep. Michael Castle, R-Del., serve on the advisory board of Voice of the People (www.VOP.org).