No matter who won the recent midterm elections, the voters all lost. People voted their fears, not their hopes. They voted against candidates, not for solutions. Soundbites eroded deliberation. Hatemongering seemed to count for more than ever before.

In the rush to take sides, candidates and commentators alike sliced complex issues into noisy bits of sound and fury signifying nothing. "It's like intellectual violence," said a Virginia bookstore owner. "There's so much hatred it scares me. This campaign ... appeal ed to people's lowest emotions."

Candidates who won often did so by mobilizing the discontent of some voters and demobilizing others whose anger could not be directed at easy scapegoats. This technique has been called "the politics of exclusion" or the "cult of otherness." Its eventual message is "they" are not like "us," "they" are blameworthy. "We" are the "normal" Americans.

But this discourse of blame hurts Americans of all races. We all lose when negative campaigns with their racial coding about "them" dominate the conversation of democracy. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson, professor and dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, observes, "We have now devised a means of campaigning that creates an angry electorate which then vents its anger by voting no, no, no, no." And she adds, "If you go in and just vote no, you're not really licensing someone to govern."

Negative campaigns not only breed lower voter turnout and polarize the electorate, they also mask a deeper malaise. They are the visible sores of a poisoned, winner-take-all political discourse. This winner-take-all election system disproportionately rewards winners and punishes losers. The struggle to prevail at all costs turns language into public relations. Words become bullets in the struggle for advantage. Citizens are buried in a deluge of negative political messages. Elections become a spectator sport. People don't think about issues; they choose sides. Inspired by a winner-take-all mentality, institutions designed to foster communication operate to pervert and distort it. The mass media provide conflict-driven coverage, with the focus on controversy and extreme points of view. Within the academic community and among intellectual elites, there is little or no conversation across racial or ideological lines. Officials at the highest levels of decisionmaking disdain dialogue as a way of resolving or mediating conflict. Politicians distort the views of those they disagree with and attack the caricatures they have drawn. Candidates tout the most simple-minded solutions to complex issues like crime (three strikes, you're out) or welfare (two years and you're off).

Candidates use race to whip voters' emotions, to get them so excited about some issue or candidate that they will go out and vote. Politicians of all stripes pander to whites' fears of blacks, coding a racial subtext in the language of welfare reform and
tough-on-crime policies. Think of the code words whites have for blacks and the black environment: minority, urban, criminal, crime rate, social program participant, special interests, inner city, welfare mother. Think of the codes blacks use for whites: suburban type, Republican, conservative.

Both groups see each other as "them." And many whites express their resentment at "them" in the language of less government, meaning no more subsidies for "them." According to a September Times-Mirror poll, 51 percent of whites now agree that "equal rights have been pushed too far in this country." Decoded, this statement means: We have gone too far in pushing for equal rights for "them" in this country.

The American people have learned to see race as an issue of blame and punishment: Who is guilty and who is innocent? Who is at fault for the breakdown of our moral compass on this and other controversial issues: individual bigots or raceobsessed blacks; right-wing zealots or left-wing black nationalists; individual incumbents or their individual opponents; the media, Congress, the American people?

In this polarized, winner-take-all climate, our so-called leaders have lost the political will to do more than simply condemn our problems. Even worse, they have lost the political imagination to do more than censure the victims or blame the victimizers. Many liberals seem overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems, convinced that they defy solution or that the solutions are the problem. Others are in deep denial about the need for collective action and community responsibility to solve the problems. Still others openly accept the formulations of personal responsibility and individual behavior modification that characterize the conservative ideological assault on black people and poor people, who are made out to be victims of their own so-called maladaptive behavior or character flaws. No one offers an approach that gives working-class whites and blacks, poor people of all hues and other political orphans a reason or a way to make common ground. No one tries to frame the debate in terms of how government can be made better, more accountable. No one tries to point out that the interests of minorities and the poor are integral to our collective self-interest.

The public's concerns about welfare dependency and random violence are real, but our elected officials have failed to cast the debates in terms of new or compelling ideas. We are stuck in a 1960s paradigm, in which special government programs help deserving individuals overcome barriers erected by bigotry. The trouble is that talk of "equal rights" has also acquired a winner-take-all connotation, reinforcing the notion that the government takes sides in a zero-sum competition between "us" and "them." It encourages the idea that I and my interests are incompatible with you and your interests. In the name of winning all, it is necessary to disparage as unworthy those who oppose "us."

What can be done? First we must envision a truly "democratic conversation" that permits a range of views to be represented in the sturdy halls of the legislatures and other public spaces constructed to carry on vigorous debate and true deliberation—in order to restore trust, overcome antagonism, regain government's legitimacy and achieve our collective wisdom.

We need to take back the democratic space from which American citizens have been driven by the increasingly angry, bitter and polarizing terms of talk radio, negative political ads, winner-take-all electoral politics and gridlock governance. We need to start looking at democracy as a well-conducted conversation.
This means recognizing the need to talk--to communicate. It means talking differently, talking with reasonableness in a more civilized fashion. It means more people talking. It means reasoned talk, informed talk. It also means talking with, not at, one another. And it means talking to our public leaders and talking with fellow citizens in order to find ways to collaborate, to act together.

Changing demographics, the globalization of our economy and the transformation of information technology make it imperative that we utilize all of America's human resources to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The future of "us" depends on understanding and collaborating with "them." By recognizing diversity we will actually be uniting the people of America.

But first we must address America's race problem in a more engaged, more participatory democratic conversation. Race is the great taboo. It is like a giant pothole. If we do not fix it and deny it is there, or simply try to drive around it, it will not go away. One of the arguments I was given for the decision to withdraw my nomination to head the civil rights division of the Justice Department without even a Senate confirmation hearing was that such a hearing would be divisive and polarizing. But I do not believe that talking about race must invariably lead to an us-versus-them debate. Talking, especially if structured to assure reasonable representation of relevant perspectives and the need not just to talk but to listen, may instead reveal points of commonality. Talking can be cathartic rather than chaotic; it can vent and relieve pressure and help identify solutions in which we all win something.

Our goal must be to move beyond the polarizing discourse about race that characterized the 1980s. We need a National Conversation on Race. We need new thinking and new approaches to race and racism that move beyond notions of intentional acts of bigotry and prejudice; beyond the claims of legal racial equality that rallied the civil rights movement in the 1960s; beyond the notion that racial preferences are the only or best way to remedy racial inequality; away from claims based on individual guilt and individual innocence. We need to disavow the drama of divide and polarize in which some people are made to feel comfortable with their prejudices and uncomfortable about "them."

In proposing a National Conversation on Race, I hope to find new ways to discuss race openly and without partisan rancor. I seek to initiate a broad public conversation about racial and economic justice to concentrate the nation's attention on the hard issues that thrash about beneath the surface of debates over urban crime, minority set-asides or the notion of a color-blind society. One of the ways to do this is to use racial inequity as a window on the larger unfairness of distribution of resources.

Let me give an example of how this could work. Lowell High School in San Francisco is a magnet public school that boasts distinguished alumni, including Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer. As a result of a court order to desegregate the San Francisco public schools, admission to the school is now supervised by a consent decree. No one ethnic group can make up more than 40 percent of the population of any magnet school.

Consequently, admission to Lowell High School in 1993 was determined on a sliding scale. Chinese-Americans were initially required to score 66 out of a perfect 69 to
gain admittance; "other whites" and Asian-Americans but not Chinese-Americans could qualify with a 59; blacks and Latinos a 55. As a result of pressure from the Chinese-American community, these cut-off scores were modified somewhat and the entry credentials changed. But the school still employs race-based quotas to protect diversity.

A group of Chinese-Americans are challenging the consent decree; African-Americans are defending it. Both groups are proceeding within a winner-take-all frame that pits minority groups against one another.

Why not escape the false choice of winner-take-all decisionmaking? Why not use a lottery that allows anyone with a score over 56—the lowest the school now uses—to compete for admission via random selection? If the school can demonstrate, however, that those with a perfect 69 or close to it are more likely to do something the school values—such as achieve a seat on the Supreme Court or win recognition as a Westinghouse Science Finalist or as a successful candidate to a competitive college—then put their names in the lottery twice or even three times.

This alternative approach is not perfect, but it might lead to a re-examination of the school’s admissions policy not just for Chinese-Americans or blacks but for everyone. No one would feel “entitled” to admission; nor would anyone feel unjustly excluded. Such an approach recognizes that claims of "merit" and "diversity" are equally legitimate. It does not set "us" against "them." It does not assume that only one group wins. It avoids a zero-sum solution in favor of a positive-sum solution that more broadly accommodates the goals of diversity and genuine merit.

In a National Conversation on Race, we would look for remedies that do not separate working Americans of all hues into warring factions but instead help them recognize that they are all excluded or treated arbitrarily by a status quo that disproportionately rewards winners and stigmatizes losers. Alternative remedies, such as admissions lotteries with a basescore threshold, might help accomplish a broader consensus on objectives. Similarly, cumulative voting, in which everyone’s vote can count toward the election of someone, might be a more palatable and more workable remedy for voting discrimination than separate, racially homogeneous districts. The point is not to identify a single solution to a set of complex problems but to locate each problem and its solution within a context that unites or links people around a common goal.

We cannot solve the race problem simply by talking. But a first step to problem-solving is the development of a model of what a successful conversation about race looks like. The next step is to go to churches, workplaces and other institutions where people must interact across barriers of difference and where ordinary people have the opportunity to participate. The next step is to create opportunities within those institutions for ongoing constructive dialogue and sustained collaboration.

Leadership will come from ordinary men and women grappling with real problems, not from politicians caught up in the sloganeering and mudslinging or winner-take-all election campaigns. Leadership will come from ordinary men and women participating in the conversation of democracy unmediated by the ugly, menacing sounds of campaign consultants telling them how to talk or what to talk about. Leadership will arise when the people become participants, not just spectators, in the democratic process.
Some argue that to govern is to choose. But to govern is also to deliberate. Voting in a winner-take-all paradigm forces complex issues into simple choices; that should be the last, not the first, resort. Voting for a winner who wins all should be secondary to debate and discussion within a representative body.

Ultimately, collective decision-making must be a well-conducted conversation, a conversation in which we all get a chance to speak, to listen, to be heard and to collaborate to solve our problems.