

A Project to Restore America's Economic Health

Center for Collaborative Democracy

The Need: Virtually every American's future is threatened by entitlement spending that our economy can't sustain, a tax code that rewards economic waste, infrastructure that's decaying, and public schools that leave our children among the least educated in the industrial world.

Yet, most politicians clearly believe that it is in their best interests to battle over these issues — and not to resolve them. In that way, each party can most easily appease its voters: Democrats by vowing to save entitlements; Republicans by vowing to cut taxes and spending, including on education and infrastructure.

So, when bipartisan groups such as the Bowles-Simpson commission have urged Congress to enact the fiscal policies America needs — policies that many voters oppose — nearly every lawmaker has refused to risk his/her chances of reelection. Most legislators have, therefore, ignored these bipartisan groups. Most voters have ignored them as well.

The Opportunity: But there have been times when a select group of individuals has convinced all the camps involved in a national controversy to endorse a practical, long-term solution.

A group could be organized along similar lines to coax America's diverse voters to support a practical, even-handed, long-term solution to our fiscal problems. And if enough voters backed that optimal solution, lawmakers seeking reelection would feel the need to endorse it as well.

The Prototype: In 1996, for instance, six corporate CEOs, seven environmental leaders, and five senior federal officials — weary of their escalating battles over environmental policy — negotiated a 185-page plan for resolving their main conflicts.¹ Each CEO then convinced executives throughout his industry that the plan would serve them far better than continuing their costly battles. Each environmentalist won over colleagues in the environmental community. And each federal official persuaded other regulators.

¹*Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and a Healthy Environment for the Future* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996). The plan's main theme was that government should raise environmental standards, but let companies seek out the most efficient ways to meet those targets.

Similar groups have resolved other longstanding conflicts, such as over fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks, food safety, and disposal of nuclear waste. Each time, diverse hostile camps reached agreements that all sides welcomed.

How was this possible? Three conditions, mostly:

- 1) Each camp was represented by someone they trusted to speak for them on the issues at hand.
- 2) All the relevant camps were represented.
- 3) No camp or coalition of them had enough power to make headway on its own.

Given those conditions:

- Each representative realized that to make progress for his/her own camp, he had to negotiate a deal with his counterparts — a deal with significant benefits for all at the least possible cost.
- The representatives could thereby divide up the costs and benefits so that each one gained enough ground to support the deal.
- Each spokesperson was then able to convince most people in his/her own camp that the deal met their priorities as closely as they could get.

Until now, committees and commissions that have tackled America's fiscal plight have been appointed by a few politicians or self-appointed. Voters had no voice in the matter, no investment in it. Most voters therefore never had reason to trust that these committees acted in their interests. So these committees could not win voters' support for proposals on such incendiary issues.

The Project: The Center for Collaborative Democracy intends to form a committee that voters across the spectrum will trust to reform fiscal policy. For that purpose, each committee member will be chosen by a segment of the public to speak for them — to speak for their concerns on taxes, entitlements and federal spending. The committee will consist of 25 members.

When they meet, they will strive to negotiate a fiscal plan that will benefit all segments of the public. Each of the 25 will then use diverse media to show the citizens he/she represents how that plan will benefit them. With enough voter support, lawmakers from both parties would then have incentives to back the plan.

Reality Checks

Most voters are uninformed or apathetic about these issues. So, how could you stir a majority to participate in this project?

It wouldn't require a majority. In January, for instance, 6 percent of voters signed online petitions against two bills on Internet piracy, which prompted Congress to scrap both measures.

Turning the tide on fiscal policy would clearly take more than 6 percent, but probably not 50. It would require that more voters actively support the policy than actively oppose it.

To engage the maximum number of voters, we will wage a media campaign to vividly convey:

- America is piling on debts at a rate that will ruin us within a decade. Your family is in peril.
- Most politicians are letting this happen because they focus far more on winning the next election than on saving America's future.
- So we're organizing a Forum to Save America's Future. It will seek long-term solutions that will benefit Americans of all kinds.
- If you participate, you will get a representative who champions your concerns on these issues crucial to your family. Your voice will be heard.

We will fulfill this pledge by inviting all public figures who've spoken out on these issues to become candidates for the forum. Every registered voter will then be asked to pick three or more candidates he/she would trust. Nearly every voter will get one of his/her choices. (For details on how this will be done, see Appendix III.)

Won't some voters pick very ideological representatives who can't reach agreement with the others?

Ideologically driven politicians and commentators know that a divided Congress won't pass their extreme proposals — but, apparently, most don't care. A politician can, after all, win reelection and a commentator can draw a big audience even if Congress ignores them.

Forum members, though, won't be running for reelection and won't be paid to incite an audience. Instead, the forum will meet and deliberate out of public view. So each member will have just one potential payoff: a chance to advance his/her policy agenda — which he'd advance only if he negotiated a deal with other members.

We will in fact ask each candidate for the forum to pledge: 1) he/she is participating for the sole purpose of negotiating an agreement that would be significantly better for his constituents than the future that now awaits them; and 2) if other members offer that kind of deal, he will accept and make a full case for it to his constituents.

Could any fiscal plan benefit every group?

Compared to America's current trajectory, nearly everyone will do better if we rid the tax code of its harmful incentives, cut tax rates, upgrade public education, repair our infrastructure, and rein in Medicare's costs without compromising seniors' health — all of which are doable.²

However, for voters to overwhelmingly support that kind of plan, its costs and benefits would need to be allocated so that voters in each age group, income bracket and family type gained on balance. No one has presented a plan with costs and benefits allocated that explicitly. The forum will strive to develop that kind of plan.

Will every forum member have the temperament and skills to negotiate that kind of agreement?

Forum meetings will be led by experienced facilitators and mediators who know to coax representatives with diverse skills and temperaments to negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement.

Even so, will voters of all persuasions ever agree on how to tackle such controversial issues?

Diverse camps of voters (albeit less diverse than now) once endorsed a radical plan for tackling the divisive issues of their day: a new Constitution. This was possible because most voters trusted their state's delegates to the Constitutional Convention and thus could accept the delegates' case that the new charter would serve them far better than the course they were on.³

To win wide support for a fiscal plan today will likewise require that voters trust the representatives who draft that plan. The forum is designed to do this better than any effort to date.

² Medicare now provides tests and procedures on demand, without measuring how they improve health. Even seniors will benefit if Medicare is restructured intelligently. Otherwise, its escalating costs will force large cutbacks.

³ In each state, the Constitution was ratified by a convention of delegates chosen by the state's voters. Without popular support, the state conventions would surely have balked.

Don't many voters hold such inflexible views on these issues that they won't listen to reason?

If "listen to reason" means changing voters' values, no, that's not doable. Each forum member will in fact need to show his/her constituents how the deal he's negotiated will advance their values. Each member would need to make the following points: "We're one camp facing many who differ with us. So we either negotiate with other camps or we're all headed for hard times. That's why I made this deal. It meets more of our needs than we'll get any other way. It gives us A, B and C — which is as far as other camps will go. So, it's this deal or a financial train wreck within a few years."

Won't some people still feel they could do better or still cling to unrealistic expectations?

Yes. But if the representatives craft a deal that benefits nearly every family, they would be in a position to win over the majority in each camp, which would transform the political landscape.

How could this project stir public attention during a Presidential election year?

This year we would recruit personnel, develop written materials and build websites. The forum itself would start in 2013 when the public was again focused on Washington's dysfunction.

Won't Congress eventually resolve these issues on its own?

Not before a crisis. After all, can a congressperson convince most voters that he/she is acting in their interests on these issues, given that he represents voters whose interests clash head-on: seniors, the middle-aged, the young, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, business owners, the unemployed, singles, couples and families with children? A lawmaker making that case is like a federal regulator trying to assure car company CEOs, environmentalists, auto workers and consumers that he has all of their best interests at heart. Few would believe him.

So a typical congressperson doesn't try to make that kind of case. Instead, he/she seeks reelection by trying to convince a majority of voters that the other party would harm their interests more. Each lawmaker thus has constant incentives to make the other party look untrustworthy, incompetent or worse. Most lawmakers thus see little benefit to themselves in resolving

differences with the other party on issues as divisive as taxes, entitlements and spending.

How would this project link to elected officials?

Current laws limit lobbying by a tax-exempt 501c3 organization. So, we would not pressure Congress or urge voters to contact their lawmakers. But forum members would still be free to make a compelling case for their fiscal plan to the American public. And when enough voters favored the plan, lawmakers seeking reelection would presumably support it as well.

Implementation

To succeed, this project would need to draw nationwide attention and inspire trust in Americans of all kinds. The project will therefore be costly. But America's economic health is at stake. The project's potential benefits are therefore orders of magnitude greater than the costs.

At this time, we are just seeking funds to recruit key personnel: the project's chief operating officer, chief communications officer, chief facilitator and initial administrative staff. We will then develop a full operational plan and determine the exact resources the project will require. Our budget for these purposes is \$850,000.

We estimate this project would take two years from initial funding to complete. The various phases and methods of this project are outlined in Appendix I. The timeline is in Appendix II.

In Summation: Current fiscal policies are so dysfunctional that there are bound to be reforms that would serve the entire country far better than the status quo. But to develop these reforms, divide the costs and benefits equitably and then win nationwide support will require a process more ambitious than any to date. This proposal lays out the steps we see as necessary.

Without these steps, most lawmakers will keep focusing on the next election, not on America's future. The forum could focus enough voters on America's future that lawmakers would also feel the need to do so.

To citizens and organizations that seek to restore our country's economic health, we invite inquiries about this project. For more information, please contact Sol Erdman at the Center for Collaborative Democracy:

solderdman@igc.org

212-860-0969

Appendix I: The Forum's Phases and Methods

1) Planning & Staffing: When initial funds are in hand, we will recruit key personnel and assemble a board of advisors that, ideally, will include former directors of the Congressional Budget Office and heads of major think tanks.

When full funding is committed, we will hire personnel in the following categories:

- a) forum administration;
- b) tax, entitlement and fiscal policy;
- c) external communication;
- d) intra-forum communication; and
- e) facilitation.

2) Initial Publicity: When appropriate staff is in place, we will produce videos that graphically show how current fiscal policies will affect every family.

We will use the videos and other media to widely publicize the forum and its goal to restore America's fiscal health.

3) Recruiting Forum Candidates: We will invite all public figures who have spoken out on these issues to become candidates for the forum. Candidates could come from academia, think tanks, industry, labor unions, the media, advocacy groups and so on. Each candidate will need to submit a statement of his/her priorities on entitlements, taxes and government spending, plus a CV.

Candidates will have to pledge that they are participating for the sole purpose of negotiating an agreement with other forum members whose priorities differ from their own. Candidates will also have to pledge they would be available to meet for 12 consecutive weekends near the geographic center of the country — the major city nearest the center being St. Louis.

Candidates will be told that if selected for the forum, they will receive a travel allowance and stipend (tentatively: \$1,500 per day) to compensate for their time.

We will verify that the candidates are who they claim to be and ensure that they cover the polit-

ical spectrum. If not, we would recruit candidates to fill any gaps.

4) Engaging the Public in Choosing Forum Members: We will widely publicize our pledge to every citizen that if they participate in the forum, they will get a representative who champions their concerns on the issues that will shape their future. To fulfill that promise, we will create a website on which any voter can check off his/her concerns on taxes, entitlements and government spending. The website will suggest forum candidates who fit the voter's requirements, linking to those candidates' videos and written platforms.

Each voter will be asked to pick several candidates: a first choice, second choice, and so on.

5) Selecting the Forum: We will select forum members in such a way that virtually every voter gets one of his/her choices. A majority will get their first choice of a representative; most of the rest will get their second choice; and so on. The selection process is outlined in Appendix III.

6) Forum Meetings: Four weeks after being chosen, the representatives will begin to meet. The forum will have five phases:

a) Orientation: Forum members will become acquainted, agree on ground rules and set overall objectives.

Each forum member will also receive technical assistance to set up a website through which he/she can send regular updates to his constituents about how the forum is proceeding and how he is working on their behalf.

b) Sharing Information: To give the representatives a common database, experts across the political spectrum will spend three weekends spelling out America's fiscal problems and solutions proposed up to that point. Written materials covering that ground will be given to forum members and posted on a website open to the public. Forum members will have an opportunity to challenge any information presented.

c) Statement of Principles: Once forum members have a common database, we will ask them to agree on the principles that will frame their eventual solution. We will strive for consensus. But if there are a few holdouts, the process would still move forward. In ensuing weeks, we would explore what might get the holdouts on board.

d) Framing Alternatives: To develop alternative ways to reform entitlements, taxes and spending policies, the forum will be divided into working groups. Members will be chosen for each group so that each represents the entire forum as closely as possible.

With the help of facilitators, each working group will develop a range of proposals over three weekends. Computer models and graphics will display the economic effects of each alternative. Working group members will be able to alter each variable to see the effects.

e) Deliberations: Each working group will present its alternatives to the entire forum.

Forum members will then start to develop a detailed plan. Facilitators will encourage the members to explore various combinations of proposals, ask the members to rate each package, and thereby discover which packages would satisfy the participants the most.

Once a core proposal is agreed to, forum members will need to allocate the costs and benefits by trading among themselves. To that end, each forum member will be asked to disclose to a mediator which parts of the proposal he/she values most. The mediators will thus be able to propose trades that give as many forum members as possible their top priorities.

Our goal will be to assemble a total package that all forum members deem superior to the status quo.

7) Advocating the Plan: When the forum has negotiated as inclusive an agreement as feasible, members who have endorsed it will need to seek their constituents' support. Each member will need to spell out:

- 1) how, under current tax and spending policies, his constituents' standard of living will fall;
- 2) that to make progress for them he had to reach agreement with the other members;
- 3) how the forum's plan would benefit his constituents, how the benefits to them outweigh the costs; and
- 4) that the alternative is economic hardship for all.

We will assist forum members to make their case on the air, in Internet chat rooms, in print, and in public meetings. That will include producing videos that show how each segment of the public would fare under the forum's plan versus current fiscal policies.

8) Alerting the General Public: We will recruit opinion leaders to make the case for the forum's plan. We will sponsor opinion polls to show rising public support.

If and when the public voices sufficient support, both political parties would presumably have incentives to adopt the forum's plan.

Appendix II: Tentative Project Timeline

Assemble Advisory Board:	weeks 1 - 8
Raise Initial Funds:	weeks 9 - 16
Recruit Top Staff Members:	weeks 17 - 28
Develop Full Project Plan:	weeks 29 - 40
Raise Full Funding:	weeks 41 - 52
Recruit Entire Staff:	weeks 53 - 64
Prepare Forum Materials:	weeks 65 - 76
Wage Media Campaign:	weeks 77 - 84
Recruit Forum Candidates:	weeks 85 - 92
Voters Evaluate Candidates:	weeks 93 - 96
Voters Select Forum Members:	week 97
Forum Members Meet:	weeks 100 - 111
Orientation	
Sharing Information	
Statement of Principles	
Working Groups	
Deliberations	
Forum Members Advocate Plan:	week 112 – open-ended
Opinion Leaders Alert the Public:	week 116 – open-ended

Appendix III: Selecting Forum Members

To visualize the process by which each voter could get a representative he/she trusts, it helps to shrink the task down to a small scale. So imagine the residents of a small town meeting in a large hall to choose a town council that could engender the most trust.

To start, each person who wants a council seat hands out copies of his/her platform. Each candidate then moves to a different point in the room. Next, everyone present gathers around their favorite candidate.

The person running the meeting then asks the candidate with the fewest backers to drop out of the race. That candidate and each person gathered around him then goes to their second choice. When all of those people get to their second choices, the moderator turns to the next candidate with the fewest backers and asks her to drop out. She and her supporters go to their next choices.

This process continues until each remaining candidate has the support of, say, at least 10 percent of the town.

Each townspeople would thereby get a representative as close to him/herself politically as is practical.

This process would also sort the townspeople into coherent interest groups, based on which representative each person chose.

To achieve an equivalent result for the forum, its members would be selected as follows:

1) We would invite all public figures who'd spoken out on the relevant issues to become candidates for the forum. Candidates could come from academia, think tanks, industry, labor unions, the media, advocacy groups and so on.

We would verify that the candidates were who they claimed to be and ensure that they covered the political spectrum. If not, we would recruit candidates to fill any gaps.

2) Any voter could access our website to find appropriate candidates. The voter would first check off his/her concerns on taxes, entitlements and spending. The website would link to

the appropriate candidates' videos and written platforms. Each voter could watch the videos or read the statements to decide which candidates would best represent the voter's concerns.

As in the small town example, each voter would pick his/her first-choice. But in case that candidate didn't win, the voter would also pick a second choice, a third and so on. The voter would mark those choices on a "preferential ballot."

3) We would count the ballots in the same way as in the small town scenario: That is, the candidate who drew the fewest first-choice votes would be out of the race. Each voter who had picked that candidate would have their vote go to their second choice.

Then, the next candidate with the fewest votes would be out of the race. Each of her voters would have their vote go to their next choice.

This process would continue until each remaining candidate had the support of at least 4 percent of the people who had voted.

4) Each voter would thus get a representative as close to him/herself politically as is practical.

And, in effect, voters would have sorted themselves into coherent interest groups, based on which representative each voter chose.⁴

Note: Each voter would be asked, but not required, to put his/her name, address and/or email address on his ballot, so that each forum member could communicate directly with constituents about his/her efforts on their behalf.

5) By the above process, each forum member is likely to attract a different number of voters. So, if the forum took straw votes, each member's voting power should be proportional to the number of his/her voters. However, we would encourage forum members to seek consensus and not take straw votes.

⁴ Every election process, including this one, has some mathematical quirks. Nonetheless, this election process is the one most likely to give as many voters as possible a representative they would trust. For more on this subject, see www.GenuineRepresentation.org/prefer

For more information, contact:

Sol Erdman
Center for Collaborative Democracy
200 East End Avenue
New York, NY 10128

212-860-0969

solerdman@igc.org