Steps to Building Consensus on America's Future

Center for Collaborative Democracy

America's politicians have repeatedly failed to reach agreement on tax policy, entitlements, and government spending. Therefore, to mend our nation's finances, we need to step outside the traditional political process. One alternative is to assemble a small of group of Americans who have the motivation and knowledge to negotiate even-handed budget reforms *and* who have the public standing to win nationwide support for their plan. Politicians from both parties would then have incentives to enact that proposal.

Steps to achieving this goal might include:

● Major foundations, private individuals or Congress would need to provide funds for the project.

● Whoever funded it would need to find an appropriate nonpartisan organization to supervise it.

● The project would need a name that inspired public interest, perhaps something like the Nationwide Forum to Save America's Future.

● The organizers could then recruit high profile Americans who had spoken out on taxes, entitlements and spending to become candidates for the forum.

● The organizers could then publicize the forum widely, so that virtually every citizen would hear of its pledge: "If you participate, you will get a representative who will champion your concerns on these issues that will shape your family's future."

●To fulfill that pledge, the organizers could create a website on which any voter could check off his/her concerns on taxes, entitlements and government spending to find forum candidates who fit the voter's requirements.

Each voter could then be asked to pick the candidates he/she would most trust.

Each voter could get one of his choices if candidates were chosen by a process like Iowa's presidential caucuses. (See Appendix on page 3.)

● We anticipate that 20 forum members would be sufficient to represent the relevant segments of the public.

● When the representatives met, their proceedings would cover several phases:

1) The representatives would have different levels of knowledge about entitlements, tax structure and government spending. To give the representatives a common database, experts across the political spectrum could spend several days spelling out the problems and solutions proposed up to that point.

2) To develop alternative ways for restructuring entitlements, reforming the tax code and setting spending priorities, the forum could be divided into working groups. With the help of facilitators, each working group could develop a range of proposals.

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

4) Once a core proposal is agreed to, forum members could allocate the costs and benefits by trading among themselves. To identify trades that create the greatest value, each forum member could be asked to disclose to a mediator which elements of the proposal mattered most to him or her. The mediators could thus propose trades that would give as many forum members as possible their highest priorities. The goal would be to craft a total package that all forum members deemed superior to the status quo.

● When the representatives had negotiated as inclusive an agreement as seemed feasible, those who endorsed it would need to seek their constituents' support. Each forum member would need to spell out: 1) how, under current tax and spending policies, his constituents' standard of living would decline; 2) how the forum's proposal would benefit his constituents, albeit with some costs; and 3) how the benefits to them exceeded the costs. Each forum member would also need to acknowledge, "This proposal is not all we wanted. But we're just one camp of many. To make any progress, we have to reach agreement with the others. Given that reality, we've done as well as we could. Everyone will have to forego some benefits, we included. The alternative is economic hardship for us all."

Each representative would need to keep making that case on the air, on the Internet, in print, and in public meetings.

● If and when the American people voiced sufficient support — in opinion polls or a referendum — both political parties would have an incentive to adopt the forum's plan.

This project is clearly ambitious, and it would be costly. But it would cost a mere fraction of the trillions of dollars that will be wasted if these issues are not resolved soon.

Appendix: Election Procedure

To visualize the process by which nearly each voter could get a representative he/she trusts, it helps to shrink the task down to a small scale. So suppose the residents of a small town meet in a large hall to elect their town council. 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 townsperson would thereby get a representative closer to him/her politically than in other kinds of elections now in use.

And the election would in effect sort the whole town into coherent interest groups, based on which representative each townsperson chose.

To achieve an equivalent result, the election for the forum would be organized as follows:

1) Voters could access a website to find the candidates who best fit their needs. The website would include candidates' bios, videos, brief statements of their priorities on entitlements, taxes and spending, and full statements of those priorities.

2) Each voter could look at the brief statements to select the candidates whom the voter thought could best represent his/her concerns. The voter could then read those candidates' full statements or watch their videos to decide who was his/her first choice, second choice, third and so on. The voter would mark those choices on a "preferential ballot." Each voter would be asked, but not required, to put his name, address and/or email address on his ballot, so that when the forum began to meet, each member could communicate with his/her constituents about what he was doing on their behalf.

3) Ballots would be counted as follows: The candidate who drew the fewest first-choice votes would be out of the race. All the votes for that candidate would go to his voters' second choices. Then, the next candidate with the fewest votes is dropped. The votes for her go to her voters' next choices. And so on, until each remaining candidates had the support of at least 5 percent of the people who had voted.