

Who Will Unleash America's Economic Potential?

Proposal from the Center for Collaborative Democracy

The Need: American voters largely oppose the steps necessary for their own families to prosper. Most voters would resent the curbs on entitlement spending necessary to keep the programs solvent, the loss of deductions necessary to simplify the tax code, and/or the higher spending on education and infrastructure necessary for most Americans to compete in the global economy.

Each member of Congress has thereby seen how to win election after election: block the tax and spending policies most of his/her voters oppose and blame the other party for blocking the policies his voters want.

In effect, each incumbent has every incentive to let our economy drift — until enough of his/her voters vocally support the steps necessary for our economy to soar.

Who, though, could stir tens of millions of diverse voters to embrace these policies they now oppose?

The Opportunity: Diverse groups of people with opposing political agendas have — several times in recent years — embraced a grand bargain that each side saw as meeting its greatest need.¹ In every case we know of, each of the diverse groups had a spokesperson they trusted — who convinced them that an agreement he/she had negotiated on their behalf was in their best interests.

For example, 25 spokespeople for the main camps battling over environmental policy in the 1990s — exasperated by their decade-long stalemate — negotiated a pact that would resolve their major conflicts to the benefit of all sides.² Their pact's main theme: companies would cut pollution far more if they could choose the most cost-effective ways to cut it.

The negotiators — CEOs from heavy industry, leaders of major environmental groups and senior federal officials — were trusted enough by their own camps to convince every relevant industry association, environmental group and federal agency to endorse this plan.

Every grand bargain we know of emerged this way: Each camp had a trusted representative too intent on advancing their top priority to stop negotiating short of a deal that all camps would abide by.

This suggests what it will take to negotiate a fiscal/economic grand bargain that Americans from each age group, income level, family type and political persuasion would support. The negotiators would need to:

- understand each camp's priorities, needs and values;
- be determined to negotiate an agreement they could sell to a diverse American public as advancing every group's long-term economic interests; and
- be trusted enough by voters from each camp that each would listen to at least one of the negotiators spell out how the plan would benefit them and, ultimately, support it.

No negotiators to date have had this kind of determination, understanding and trust. That includes the Simpson-Bowles commission, which mainly tried to satisfy the 535 members of Congress, thereby crafting a plan the commissioners described as inflicting pain on most Americans. Voters therefore had no reason to trust that the plan was designed to meet their long-term needs.

Where then, do we find negotiators with the determination, understanding and trust to resolve our country's fiscal/economic problems to the satisfaction of voters across the spectrum?

To Assemble the Ideal Negotiators, we propose to build a coalition of non-profit organizations that will:

- identify the economic advocates whom voters from each age group, income level, family type and political persuasion would trust to speak for them on the economy;
- invite these advocates to negotiate a plan that will repair our nation's finances, boost our economy to its full potential and, in time, benefit all the groups they represent;
- convene these advocates with facilitators who will help them negotiate this widely beneficial plan; and then
- provide each advocate a public platform to reach the millions of voters who trust him/her and spell out how this plan will meet their needs and values more than any other politically feasible alternative.

Once enough voters want the plan's benefits sufficiently to vocally support it, members of Congress who want to stay in office will have every incentive to support it.

Ambitious steps. But how else will diverse voters agree on a path to fiscal sanity and wide prosperity — enough voters that our broken political system will respond?

¹ Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

² See http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF_Reports/amer-top.html

Project Name and Objectives

We plan to call this project the Forum for Long-Term Prosperity, to convey to voters of all kinds that its goal is a far brighter future for them and the nation overall.

Economists and business leaders indeed agree that wide prosperity and fiscal health would go hand-in-hand *if* our government took the steps necessary to achieve both.³ These steps — in arbitrary order⁴ — are:

- upgrade our public schools until they are producing the best educated populace in the world;
- simplify the tax code by eliminating preferences and lowering marginal tax rates;
- curb growth in entitlement spending, mainly on Medicare, which can be done without compromising seniors' health;⁵ and
- invest judiciously in infrastructure.

These measures are now undoable because lawmakers look at them through the lens of: “If I work with the other party to enact these controversial policies that would require complex explanations to justify to my voters, I’d sabotage my case that the other party is out to harm them. I’d undercut my bid for reelection. I’d risk my seat.”

Forum members, though, would *not* be running for reelection. Each member would be an advocate for a distinct camp of voters, committed to spending weeks negotiating in private with advocates for other camps. Stonewalling or demonizing other advocates would not benefit him/her one iota.

Indeed, to advance his/her own priorities and those of his/her constituents, each Forum member would have incentives to negotiate a grand bargain that every camp would vocally support and urge Congress to enact into law. Since current fiscal/economic policies are so dysfunctional, an optimal grand bargain could yield trillions of dollars of new wealth that would, in time, benefit every camp.

³ See “Reinventing America,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2012.

⁴ Arbitrary, because everyone concerned with these issues, from experts to voters, has their own sense of which steps matter most.

⁵ Medicare now provides tests and procedures on demand, whether they improve patients' health or not. Medicare's costs are thus escalating at a rate that will, in time, force large cutbacks. Reforming Medicare intelligently could benefit all groups, including seniors.

Questions, Doubts and Answers

How could one group of people achieve such sweeping goals on such complex, divisive issues?

There is a well-established process for negotiating grand bargains:

- To start, the Forum could form a task force to deal with each of the four areas listed above. Each member of each task force would represent one of the Forum's main camps.
- Each task force would gather evidence from experts, identify alternative solutions and spell out their potential benefits, costs and risks.
- Each task force would present to the entire Forum the alternatives that offered the greatest net benefits, spelling out which groups would benefit most and how much.
- Each Forum member would then need to identify which of the four areas above mattered most to his/her camp.
- The members would then begin to trade. Each member would seek policies that best advanced his/her top priorities by offering concessions to other members on issues secondary to him but primary to them.
- This trading would continue until each member saw the final agreement as meeting more of his/her constituents' priorities than they could meet by any other means.

For example, fiscal conservatives could achieve more constructive tax and budget reforms than a paralyzed Congress will ever produce.

Liberals could achieve wider prosperity than they will ever get from a gridlocked Capitol Hill.

This outcome assumes that each Forum member will work to advance his/her agenda more than to block others from advancing theirs. Is that assumption realistic?

It would be realistic if the process for selecting Forum members excluded people whose track records have mainly been about demonizing or obstructing others. Our proposed selection process is described below.

Won't very ideological voters reject any plan that deviates from their ideology?

Many will, but the Forum won't need every voter's support. It will just need enough voters in enough districts to see the Forum's plan as meeting their needs and values that most lawmakers from both parties will see the plan as meeting their need for reelection.

Won't most voters resist a plan very different from what they are now hoping for, expecting or demanding?

Yes. To overcome this resistance, we see it as essential that each voter identify a spokesperson he/she trusts on economic issues *before* the Forum's negotiations begin.

In that way, when each spokesperson presents the eventual plan to his/her supporters, they will be most inclined to listen, most inclined to weigh the plan's benefits carefully and most inclined to eventually see how it is in their best interests.

How could the Forum engage the millions of voters necessary to make a difference on Capitol Hill?

The vast majority of voters mistrust Congress and feel Washington doesn't care about them. Most voters worry about the future. Their median income is shrinking. The percentage of Americans with jobs is at a 35-year low.

The Forum will address all of these needs.

Why would voters believe that?

To have the necessary credibility, we will need to recruit well known nonprofit organizations and entrepreneurs to jointly sponsor the Forum. Our case to them will be:

- a) Congress will remain paralyzed until enough voters vocally support the fiscal and economic legislation our country needs; and
- b) voters will stick with their current demands until advocates they trust offer them something far better.

If we recruit prominent sponsors, they could make a case to America's best known economic experts and advocates that becoming a Forum candidate would be each advocate's best opportunity to negotiate a national economic plan that tackles his/her biggest concerns and incorporates her best ideas.

Next, the sponsors could recruit celebrities in the media, politics, arts, and business to wage an extensive media campaign that taps into nearly every voter's concerns about the future. The message could be something like:

- Do our so-called representatives in Congress actually represent us? Do they look out for our best interests? Are they resolving our country's problems? Hardly.
- Why do we, the American people, accept this? We don't have to.

- There are prominent Americans who understand our country's problems — who'd gladly sit down together to work out solutions voters of all kinds could support.

- If enough of us backed these solutions, members of Congress hungry to keep their jobs would have to listen.

- This is actually going to happen. The Forum for Long-Term Prosperity will bring together in one place the men and women whom we, the American people, would most trust to solve our economic problems. They will then present their solutions to us, the people. If we support their solutions, Congress will have to act.

- At least one Forum member will do all he/she can to ensure a brighter future for you and your family — *if*, on our website, you tell us who you'd trust to speak for you.

On the site, each voter could check off his/her concerns to see profiles of appropriate Forum candidates. Each voter could then list the candidates he/she would trust.

Candidates would then be selected for the Forum so that over 95 percent of voters would get one of their choices. (For details, see www.GenuineRepresentation.org/select) Nearly every participant would thereby get a champion.

Would most voters believe that claim?

The claim would be true. The Forum's sponsors would have high public profiles. The candidates would as well. And most voters despise today's political process. So, expert marketers would have plenty of ammunition for crafting a message that appeals to most voters.

Are most voters sufficiently informed to choose their Forum representatives wisely?

Being informed is not the crucial factor. In most political conflicts, the typical participant sees just part of the total picture and has unrealistic expectations. But those disputes can still be resolved if each participant has a representative he/she trusts and believes is on his side.

Won't some voters prefer representatives too ideological to reach agreement with the others?

Yes. And the Forum will need to offer candidates across the spectrum, including from the far left and right.

However, the sponsors could spell out to each candidate: "The Forum will deliberate out of public view for weeks. So, by participating, the only thing you could gain is a chance to advance your policy agenda — which you will advance *only* if you negotiate a deal with other members."

The sponsors could also require each Forum candidate to pledge: “My sole purpose in participating is to negotiate a deal far better for my constituents than the future now awaiting them. If other members offer that kind of deal, I will accept and urge my constituents to accept it.”

Will all Forum members have the temperament and skills to negotiate a widely beneficial agreement?

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in coaxing representatives with diverse temperaments and skills to negotiate agreements that benefit all sides.

Won't many voters object to the negotiations being conducted out of public view?

Yes. But the sponsors could justify the closed door meetings in the following way, “The Forum’s purpose is to produce a grand bargain by which everyone gains. Hold us accountable for that result.

“Negotiators cannot produce that result in front of cameras. They would posture, rather than build trust with one another and bargain in good faith.

“Our country has a public process: a Congress filled with posturing. Who among us wants more of that?

“As an example of more productive policymaking, consider how the U.S. Constitution was negotiated: in total secrecy. None of the proceedings were disclosed to the public. But when the framers were done, they had to make a full case for their final product to the American people. The Forum will do the same.”

Don't many voters hold such unrealistic views on these issues that they will resist any practical plan?

Yes. So each Forum member will need to make a compelling case to his/her constituents that the deal he’s negotiated is their best possible option, by spelling out exactly how they would benefit, with words such as:

“This deal gives us A, B and C — far more than we’ve achieved up to now, far more than politicians will ever achieve by butting heads. So, what’s our alternative? Demand that other camps give us all we want and give up what they want? There is no such deal. It’s a fiction spread by politicians who put our country in the mess we’re now in. That’s why I negotiated with other camps. And this deal is as far as they’ll go. So, it’s this deal or continued gridlock and economic stagnation.”

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 the best position anyone has to date to win over the majority in each camp.

This could transform the political landscape. In 2012, for instance, it took just 6 percent of voters signing online petitions against two bills on Internet piracy for Congress to scrap both measures. These voters prevailed by *actively* opposing the bills while far fewer voters actively backed them.

If enough voters actively support the Forum’s economic plan, they too could turn the tide.

Won't some groups actively oppose parts of the Forum's plan on Capitol Hill?

Yes, groups that economists call “rent-seekers,” who exploit their access to politicians to extract benefits and subsidies far in excess of what the rent-seekers contribute to the public good.

Indeed, when Congress tackles issues such as the tax code, camps that benefit from specific provisions fight to preserve those benefits far more aggressively than other groups push for reform.

But the Forum will tackle the whole range of fiscal and economic issues. It could therefore produce a grand bargain by which nearly everyone gains so much ground that public pressure for the Forum’s plan will far exceed the resistance of rent-seekers.

Won't wealthy Americans oppose the Forum as a threat to their political influence?

The wealthiest Americans can see that the current political process is so dysfunctional it threatens our country’s future. The wealthy do better than others, but nowhere as well as they would if our economy was more productive and growing faster.

That alone would drive stock prices much higher. People with capital would reap huge benefits.

Is it realistic to expect the Forum to produce such an optimal outcome?

American life is filled with examples of people from disparate backgrounds working collaboratively to produce optimal outcomes. It happens in commerce, science, sports and the arts.

It's rare in politics – because politics is organized in a way that makes excellence unattainable.

For example, each congressperson's job today is to represent voters whose needs and values clash head-on: seniors, the middle-aged and the young; laborers, clerks, professionals and the unemployed; singles, couples and families with children.

How, then, can a typical lawmaker show most voters that he/she is acting in their best interests? That would be like a lawyer trying to assure car company CEOs, environmentalists, auto workers and car buyers that he has all of their best interests at heart. Hardly anyone would buy it. So a typical congressperson doesn't make that case.

But to keep the job, a lawmaker needs to convince voters the other party would harm their interests more, a message most lawmakers reinforce by obstructing the other party on issues such as Medicare, taxes and spending.

By contrast, each Forum member would just have constituents who shared his/her values and would *not* be running for reelection. So, to advance his own values and most satisfy his constituents, each Forum member would need to negotiate with the others to reach the most beneficial deal they could.

How would the Forum link to elected officials?

If the Forum were a tax-exempt 501c3 organization, current law would restrict members from pressuring lawmakers or urging voters to pressure them. But under the law, Forum members could explain to voters the benefits of their plan.

Many economists, celebrities and other opinion makers would likely become vocal advocates as well

And when enough voters favored the plan, lawmakers seeking reelection would feel growing pressure to back it.

How much would the Forum cost?

More than any comparable project. But compared to America's \$16 trillion economy and the trillions being wasted under current fiscal policies, the Forum's potential benefits are orders of magnitude greater than the costs.

In Summation

Nearly every member of Congress wins elections by fiercely opposing the other party's agenda, thriving amidst political paralysis.

Every other American could benefit from a creative grand bargain on the fiscal/economic issues now dividing us. But rousing a critical mass of voters to support a specific grand bargain will require a far more ambitious effort than any to date.

The steps outlined here are, we believe, a more viable blueprint for building that grand bargain and winning public support for it than anything else on the horizon.

To citizens and organizations alarmed about our country's trajectory, we invite dialogue about these ideas. To raise questions or get more information, please contact Sol Erdman at the Center for Collaborative Democracy:

solerdman@igc.org

212-860-0969

Appendix I: Tentative Forum Benchmarks

Assemble Advisory Board

Enlist Nonprofit Organizations as Sponsors

Raise Initial Funds

Recruit Top Staff Members

Develop Full Project Plan

Raise Full Funding

Recruit Entire Staff

Prepare Forum Materials

Wage Initial Publicity Campaign

Recruit Forum Candidates

Mount Media Campaign Asking
Voters to Select Forum Members

Convene Forum Members

Orientation

Sharing Information

Statement of Principles

Working Groups

Deliberations

Negotiations

Assist Forum Members to
Advocate Their Economic Plan

Recruit Opinion Leaders to Build
More Public Support for Forum's Plan