

# A Project to Overcome Political Gridlock and Restore American Prosperity

Center for Collaborative Democracy

**The Need:** Nearly every American's future is threatened by entitlement spending that our economy cannot sustain, a tax code that invites economic inefficiency, infrastructure that's decaying, and public schools that leave our children among the least educated in the industrial world. Yet Congress has rejected every effort to resolve differences over these issues, such as Simpson-Bowles.

Most lawmakers apparently believe that it's in their best interests to battle over economic problems, not solve them. In that way, each legislator can appease his or her own voters: Democrats by vowing to preserve entitlements, raise taxes on the rich, and spend more on infrastructure and education; Republicans by vowing to cut taxes and spending on entitlements, infrastructure and education.

Incumbents have won so many elections by taking diametrically opposing stands on economic issues, they have every incentive to keep deadlocking.

How, then, do we avoid fiscal and economic decline? Someone will have to present voters with an economic plan that most will find more beneficial and credible than either party's one-sided slogans. If enough voters embrace that plan, most politicians intent on reelection would endorse it as well.

**The Opportunity:** There have in fact been times when a carefully selected group of individuals has developed a long-term solution to an intractable national controversy, and, then, convinced all the camps involved to support that solution.

A group could be organized along similar lines to resolve America's economic problems in ways that voters in all camps would support.

**The Prototype:** In 1996, for instance — after years of battling over environmental policy — 25 corporate CEOs, environmental leaders, and federal officials negotiated a 185-page plan for resolving their major differences. The plan's main theme: Government should raise environmental standards but let companies seek out the most efficient ways to comply.<sup>1</sup>

Each CEO then won support for the plan from executives throughout his industry. Each environmentalist won over fellow environmentalists. And each federal official swayed other regulators.

In a similar way, diverse hostile camps have reached unanimous agreements on other public policy.<sup>2</sup>

What's made this possible? Mainly, three factors:

**1)** Each camp was frustrated by its lack of progress after years of controversy. So, the representative for each camp was *motivated* to negotiate with his adversaries to reach a deal that would also benefit them.

**2)** Each representative *understood* what mattered most to the people in his own camp and how far they'd go to achieve it. So, the representatives explored ways their camps could work together to meet more of their combined objectives, more efficiently, than they could on their own. They could then allocate the added benefits and costs of that joint effort so that each camp would meet more of its top priorities more efficiently than it could on its own.

**3)** Each representative was *trusted* by the people in his own camp. So he was able to convince most of them that the deal he'd negotiated would meet their needs as closely as they could realistically get.

Yet, when it comes to America's economic problems, who is motivated to solve them, understands how to construct the most beneficial solutions, *and* is trusted enough to win support for those solutions from voters across the political and economic spectrum?

Simpson-Bowles fell short of these criteria. Voters had no voice in selecting its members and thus had little basis for trusting that controversial plan.

**The Project:** America's think tanks, corporations, labor unions, advocacy groups, media organizations and universities include many public figures who understand fiscal and economic policy. So, they realize how much our future is in peril. Most of these public figures would thereby be motivated to develop an economic plan that would benefit the country as a whole.

But which public figures would voters trust to reform taxes, entitlements and federal spending? We at the Center for Collaborative Democracy intend to ask voters across the country. Our objective is to identify 25 public figures so that nearly every voter can point to at least one of the 25 as someone he or she would trust on these incendiary subjects.

We would assemble these 25 and help them negotiate an economic plan that would benefit the entire country as much as possible. The 25 could then allocate the costs and benefits so that each socio-economic group would clearly gain ground.

Each of the 25 could then use diverse media to show the voters who trust him or her how that plan would benefit them. With enough voter support, most lawmakers would then have incentives to back the plan.

<sup>1</sup>*Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and a Healthy Environment* (U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

## Reality Checks

*Would this project produce an economic plan similar to Bowles-Simpson?*

The Bowles-Simpson commission was trying to satisfy Congress. So its main criterion was “what would most legislators be willing to enact into law?” which is very different from, “what is in the best interests of the American people?” That is *not* a criticism of Bowles-Simpson. They were trying to avert a fiscal crisis as best they could under the circumstances. But their plan was seen by many as being mostly painful, not mostly beneficial.

Our project is designed to produce a plan that voters of all kinds will clearly see as better for them than the future that now awaits them.

*Could any fiscal/economic 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 plan to date has allocated costs and benefits that explicitly. Our project is designed to do that.

*How would you motivate voters to participate in this project?*

First, we would invite all public figures who’d spoken out on the relevant issues to become candidates for what we would call the Forum to Save America’s Future. We would help each candidate produce a brief video spelling out his or her economic priorities.

Next, we would recruit celebrities in the media, politics and business to wage an extensive media campaign that would vividly convey to voters:

- America’s rising debts could ruin us all within a decade. Your family is in peril.
- Politicians have let this happen because they focus on winning elections — by endlessly attacking the other party — leaving Washington paralyzed.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

- So we intend to gather 25 Americans who understand our economy and who want to solve our economic problems in ways that will benefit Americans of every type: middle class, rich and poor; young, middle-aged and old; on the left, on the right and in the center.

- We promise that one of those 25 will champion *your* concerns on these issues vital to your family *if* you visit our website and tell us what concerns you.

On the site, each voter would check off his or her main concerns on taxes and spending to see videos of appropriate forum candidates. Each voter would then list the candidates he would trust. Candidates would be selected so that nearly every voter would get one of his choices. (Details in Appendix III).

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

Being informed is not what’s crucial — because in every large scale dispute, most participants see a fraction of the total picture and have unrealistic expectations. But any dispute can still be resolved if each participant has a representative he/she trusts. Because a representative who is trusted is in the best position to convince people that the plan he is proposing is their best alternative. A labor union representative, for instance, often coaxes workers to take a deal that doesn’t meet all their expectations, by saying something like, “This gives us our top priority: job security. There’s no way management will also give us a big raise. So, if demand that raise, we’re headed for a strike.” And, in fact, 96 percent of labor disputes are resolved without a strike.<sup>4</sup>

Each forum member will likewise need to show his or her voters how the plan he’s negotiated will meet their objectives better than any realistic alternative. (More on this subject below.)

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

Unlike politicians or commentators who take extreme positions to keep winning reelection or draw big audiences, forum members won’t be running for reelection or paid to incite an audience. The forum will, instead, deliberate out of public view. Each member will thus have just one potential payoff: a chance to advance his or her policy agenda — which he’d advance *only* if he negotiated a deal with other members.

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<sup>4</sup> “How Do Labor and Management View Collective Bargaining?” *Monthly Labor Review Online* (Bureau of Labor Statistics)

We will in fact require each forum candidate to pledge: 1) he or 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.

*Will every forum member have the temperament and skills to negotiate a widely beneficial agreement?*

Forum meetings will be led by experienced facilitators and mediators who know how to coax representatives with diverse temperaments and skills to negotiate an agreement that benefits them all.

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

Each forum member will need to make a compelling case to his or her constituents that the deal he's negotiated is their best possible option, by making points such as: "We're one camp facing many who differ with us. So if we insist on policies that meet our needs alone, we're signing up for a deadlock, we're signing up for financial ruin. There is no such thing as a deal that serves our values and omits everyone else's. That's a fiction spread by politicians who've put our country in the mess we're now in. Did you want me to duplicate that mess? I assume not. That's why I negotiated this deal with other camps. 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 disaster 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.

That could transform the political landscape. For instance, it took only 6 percent of voters signing online petitions against two bills on Internet piracy for Congress to scrap both measures in early 2012. Those voters prevailed by *actively* opposing the two bills while far fewer voters actively supported them. Likewise, if enough voters actively support the forum's economic plan, they could turn the tide.

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

It can't, because each congressperson represents voters whose economic interests clash head-on: seniors, the middle-aged, the young, blue-collar workers, clerks, salespeople, business owners, the unemployed, singles, couples and families with children. How, then, can a lawmaker show most voters that he/she is acting in their best interests?

That would be 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. No one would buy it.

So a typical congressperson doesn't make that case. Instead, he or she seeks reelection by trying to convince voters that the other party would harm their interests more. To stay on message, most lawmakers refuse to work with the other party on divisive issues like 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 lawmakers or urge voters to contact them. But forum members would be free to make a compelling case for their fiscal plan to the public. And when enough voters favored the plan, lawmakers seeking reelection would likely support it as well.

## **Implementation**

The detailed steps by which we expect to achieve all of the above are outlined in Appendix I. The project timeline is in Appendix II.

To succeed, this project will need to draw nationwide attention and inspire trust in Americans of all kinds. So, the project will be costly. But with America's economic health at stake, the project's potential benefits far exceed the costs.

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

**In Summation:** Current fiscal policies could lead to disaster. Fortunately, there are reforms that would serve virtually every American's long-term interests. But to fully 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 approach we see as necessary.

Without the above steps, most lawmakers will keep focusing on the next election and shortchanging America's future. The forum could focus enough voters on our future that lawmakers would also.

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:

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## Appendix I: The Forum's Phases and Methods

**1) Pre-Launch:** We are forming an Advisory Board that we expect to include former directors of the Congressional Budget Office, former elected officials, the heads of major think tanks, and prominent academics. We are also seeking initial funds to recruit key personnel who will develop a complete operational plan.

**2) Staffing:** When full funding is committed, we will hire personnel in the following categories:

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

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

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

**4) 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 or 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 political spectrum. If not, we would recruit candidates to fill any gaps.

**5) 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 or 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.

**6) Selecting the Forum:** Forum members will be selected in such a way that virtually every voter will get one of his or 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.

**7) 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 help setting up a website through which he or she will 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 or 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.

**8) 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.

**9) 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 or 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 or 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 or 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 or 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.<sup>5</sup>

**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 or her voters. However, we would encourage forum members to seek consensus and not take straw votes.

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<sup>5</sup> 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](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/prefer)

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