

# 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 found 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.

Lawmakers intent on reelection have every incentive to continue obstructing — until enough voters in enough congressional districts vocally support the steps necessary for our economy to thrive.

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

**The Opportunity:** Diverse groups of people clashing over a variety of issues have — several times in recent years — agreed on a grand bargain that all sides saw as meeting their needs.<sup>1</sup> In every case we know of, each of the diverse groups had a spokesperson they trusted — who, to advance their cause, negotiated a deal on their behalf and convinced them it was in their best interest.

For example, 25 spokespeople for camps battling over environmental policy in the 1990s — exasperated by their stalemate — agreed on how to resolve their major conflicts to the satisfaction of all sides.<sup>2</sup> Their plan'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 cause to stop negotiating short of a deal that all camps would abide by.

Who, then, could negotiate a fiscal/economic grand bargain that Americans from every age group, income level, family type and political persuasion would support?

The negotiators would need to:

- understand each camp's needs, priorities 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 each camp of voters 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. The commission thereby crafted a plan that it described as inflicting pain on most Americans — giving voters no reason to trust that the plan was designed to meet their long-term needs.

What, then, will it take to find negotiators with the determination, understanding and trust to resolve our country's fiscal/economic problems to the satisfaction of all sides?

**To Reach that Goal,** 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?

<sup>1</sup> Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

<sup>2</sup> See [http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF\\_Reports/amer-top.html](http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF_Reports/amer-top.html)

## Project Name and Objectives

We propose to call this project the Forum for Long-Term Prosperity, to convey to voters of all kinds that its purpose is to generate a far brighter future for them. The Forum's objectives will include reducing the national debt as a percentage of the total economy, which we see as attainable *only* if Americans of all kinds see benefits from it.

Indeed, economists and business leaders across the spectrum agree that fiscal health and wide prosperity would reinforce one another *if* our government took the steps necessary to achieve both.<sup>3</sup> These steps — in arbitrary order<sup>4</sup> — are:

- upgrade our schools to equal the best in the world;
- simplify the tax code by eliminating preferences and lowering marginal tax rates;
- curb growth in entitlement spending, mainly Medicare, which can be done without harming seniors' health;<sup>5</sup> and
- invest judiciously in infrastructure.

As things stand, our political system is clearly too dysfunctional to achieve any of the above steps.

But if the Forum develops a grand bargain that achieves these four objectives so as to benefit Americans from every socioeconomic group, America could be on a path to wide prosperity and fiscal health within three years.

## Questions, Doubts and Answers

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

To begin with, each Forum member would be a spokesperson for a large camp of voters. To garner the most benefits for his/her own camp, each member would have incentives to negotiate an agreement with the most long-term benefits for the nation overall.

However, if any camps of voters vocally opposed the final deal, its odds of becoming law would shrink significantly. Each Forum member would therefore have incentives to address the concerns of every other member.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Reinventing America," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Arbitrary, because every individual, from top economists to typical Americans, has their own sense of which steps matter most.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

There is indeed a well-established process for negotiating a grand bargain that meets the top priorities of all sides:

- To deal with each of the above issues, the Forum could form a task force. 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 the most beneficial alternatives to the entire Forum.
- Each Forum member could pick the alternatives he/she saw as most benefiting his/her constituents.
- Each Forum member would then need to identify which of the above four areas mattered most to his/her camp.
- The members would then begin to trade among themselves. Each member would seek policies that 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 is realistic if people whose track records have mainly been about demonizing others were ineligible to become Forum members. Our proposed process for selecting Forum members 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 quite 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 that it is actually in their best interests.

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

Nearly every voter is fed up with Congress. Most voters worry about the future. Their median income is shrinking. The percentage of Americans with jobs is at a 35-year low. And nearly everyone has a desire to be heard.

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 support the fiscal/economic steps our country needs; and
- b) voters will stick with their current demands until advocates they trust make a strong enough case for something better.

If we recruit prominent sponsors, they could make a case to each of America's best known economic experts and advocates that becoming a Forum candidate would be each advocate's best opportunity to negotiate a nationwide 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. If enough of us then support their solutions, Congress will have to act.

- We promise that at least one Forum member will champion *your* concerns and do all he/she can to ensure a brighter future for you and your family — *if* you visit our website and tell us who you would 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](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/select)) Nearly every participant would thereby get a champion.

*Would 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.

*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'd 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 special interest groups try to sabotage parts of the Forum's plan on Capitol Hill?*

For sure, but a practical plan for broad prosperity would draw many more vocal advocates than opponents.

*Is it realistic to expect the Forum to produce such an optimal outcome when Congress falls so far short?*

Each congressperson today has a job that we see as undoable — representing 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 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, how would a Forum member benefit by demonizing people with different values? It wouldn't benefit him/her one iota. On the contrary, 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. But under the law, Forum members could explain to voters the benefits of their plan.

Many economists, business leaders 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. Most incumbents thereby benefit from political paralysis.

Every other American could benefit from a creative grand bargain on the fiscal/economic issues now dividing us. A grand bargain that a critical mass of voters will support would require far more ambitious steps 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:

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## **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