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Opinion: Give Americans real choices, and they will find common ground

By Steven A. Rosell and Robert L. Bixby
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Political leaders must not only develop better fiscal policies for the country, they must also build popular support for them. But many Americans seem convinced that any initiative making its way out of Washington serves special interests, not the public good.

The president's bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform will have to find better ways to engage the public, or risk seeing its efforts founder in a sea of skepticism and mistrust. If the public trust issue isn't resolved, the deficit issue probably won't be resolved either.

To help overcome mistrust, the commission needs to give people real choices to consider, an opportunity to come to terms with the consequences and a genuine say in decisions that affect their lives.

Workable models are out there. Over the past five years, our organizations — Viewpoint Learning and the Concord Coalition — have educated and engaged Americans on some of the most difficult issues facing the nation, including health care, Social Security, taxes and the federal debt.

In daylong sessions around the country, we gave random samples of people a range of options representing the full political spectrum. We laid out

the pros, cons and trade-offs involved in each. And we gave people a structured opportunity to wrestle with those trade-offs and arrive together at solutions.

In San Jose, for example, about 40 people from a wide variety of backgrounds were

randomly selected to participate in a session last summer. The results were remarkable. As people came to grips with the issues and searched for common ground, their thinking broadened, their minds changed, and they became more willing to support difficult decisions.

The participants in such sessions encountered perspectives they had not considered before. Wealthy retirees spoke with single mothers on food stamps. Low-wage workers gained insight into the pressures facing business owners. One young woman was astonished to learn that people on Medicare actually like it.

People who began the day focused on their own interests ended up arguing passionately for increasing investments in the nation's future. Others who had started dead-set against entitlement cuts came to advocate adjusting benefits to income and placing evidence-based limits on Medicare coverage.

The president's fiscal commission should model a conversation with the public that can reach across party lines around the country. Our experience suggests a few guidelines:

- Engage the public early in the process of finding solutions, when there is still time for them to affect the outcome.
- Do not jump directly to a single solution. Present a range of alternatives with the arguments for and against each. People

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should be able to see their own viewpoints and values reflected in at least one of the choices.

- Engage people with different perspectives in working together.
- Look for common ground. There is almost always more than you expect. Through open and effective public engagement, the commission can make the public an ally in breaking through special-interest gridlock and finding solutions. Americans are often more flexible and open-minded than their elected representatives — and this is fueling the public's frustration with Washington. Americans are not afraid to face hard choices. What they want is a say in their own future and the confidence that leaders are listening.

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