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The Key to Unlocking Partisan Gridlock

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In the days following the presidential election, it's been somewhat encouraging seeing both political parties hint at a new desire to work together. Or is that really the case? According to reports like [this one](#) from *Bloomberg Businessweek*, President Barack Obama and House Speaker John Boehner, as they began their public negotiations to avert the fiscal cliff, expressed "a willingness to compromise" even as they "reiterated their previous positions."

I hope I'm wrong, but after the many millions of votes that were cast and the more than one billion dollars that was spent on the election, gridlock-as-usual might still be with us. If that's the case, Democrats and Republicans in Congress will remain locked in a stalemate; we'll once more fail to confront our most urgent challenges; and the country will most assuredly lose.

Most people intuitively understand the way forward. As Thomas Friedman recently [argued](#), "the only way our country can progress is with some grand bargains forged at the center." What we most need are incentives that encourage our elected leaders to break through the status quo of nearly constant gridlock.

Well, I think we now have a robust set of inducements that can overcome the impediments to real problem-solving.

A few years ago, I heard about a growing grassroots organization called [No Labels](http://www.nolabels.org) (www.nolabels.org). I went to a dinner, listened, and wrote a check. Then I started getting involved. Today, No Labels is a group of almost 600,000 Democrats, Republicans, and Independents dedicated to moving America away from the old politics of point scoring and toward the new politics of problem solving.

To do so, No Labels focuses on three key areas.

- First, fixing the structural problems in Congress.
- Second, fixing the obstacles that the presidency faces.
- And third, bringing together leaders who are willing to take on the system and solve hard problems.

To get a sense of our strategy to “stop fighting and start fixing,” consider these three No Label’s proposals:



***No Budget, No Pay.** No Labels aims to break down barriers and incent Congressional leaders to work together. Our *Make Congress Work!* action plan, which outlines 12 proposals to fix the outdated rules, procedures, and traditions that govern the institution and make it so difficult to get things done. Just one proposal—No Budget, No Pay—requires a new law. It’s remarkably simple. Congress is supposed to pass its annual budget and appropriations bills by October 1st, the beginning of its fiscal year. But every year, *for the past 15 years*, Congress has failed.

Under No Budget, No Pay, if the congressional appropriations process is not completed by October 1st, congressional pay ceases and it isn’t restored until our representatives get the job done. We in business know there are few stronger incentives than a paycheck. The threat of a paycheck “veto” will hold members of Congress accountable for delivering what we pay them to do.

No Budget, No Pay has already been turned into legislation in the House and Senate. It now has over 90 co-sponsors. Count on us to keep pushing to try to make it law in 2013.

***A Truth-Based, Annual Fiscal Report.** As part of *Make Congress Work!*, No Labels also has a proposal to combat the total lack of truth telling in the deficit debate in Congress. Everyone seems to have their own numbers, baselines, and assumptions to conveniently support whatever plan they are pushing at the moment. Malleable metrics might help score political points, but they make it impossible to create smart policies.

That's why No Labels is pushing for an Annual Fiscal Report. This would require the President, his Cabinet, and key members of Congress to publicly affirm the accuracy of an annual fiscal report produced by a nonpartisan leader like the Comptroller General.

It would be akin to a CEO affirming the accuracy of his or her company's financial reporting—and it would help ensure that our leaders are relying on the same facts and figures when debating our fiscal future.

***The Problem-Solvers' Caucus.** In addition to our *Make the Presidency Work!* plan, which includes eleven commonsense proposals, No Labels is also building a "problem-solver's bloc" in Congress. This bloc—which we hope will include dozens of members of Congress by early next year—will meet regularly and work across the aisle to find solutions to our country's problems.

I've been personally recruiting members of Congress to join this bloc. Many representatives are just as sick of the mindless partisanship as their constituents. They understand better than anyone how dysfunctional our system actually is.

The idea is to create a new center of gravity in Congress. The Tea Party has its caucus. The Progressives have their caucus. What we need is a problem-solvers' caucus. Such a caucus would be a vehicle for advancing ideas that some members of the opposing party just might agree with.

In the end, the success of No Labels depends almost entirely on the size and dedication of our grassroots army. We need to step up and insist that the time has come to solve the crisis of governance in the United States.

Now, I can imagine you're probably thinking: "Nice idea, Ron, but there are profound philosophical differences among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents that prevent this from working." Well, the good news is that you do not need to shed your political identity to join the No Labels movement. You can be a proud liberal, a proud conservative, or anything in between. You just need to be open to the idea that people with different beliefs really must set aside the labels and come together to solve problems.

The only thing that's not acceptable is our ongoing stalemate and the continued absence of real solutions to the nation's challenges. If No Labels gets big enough and strong enough, we can provide the political cover that our leaders need to make the bold, and sometimes difficult, decisions that are necessary. So now that you're done voting for your preferred candidates, I hope you'll cast one final vote—for No Labels.