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**Introduction & Ground Rules \_\_\_ minutes**

**Purpose: Look at Alternative Approaches to the Issue and Hear Different Points of View**

* This is not a debate; we’re not here to “win” an argument. We’re here to listen and learn.
* We’ll look carefully at alternative approaches—all of them with trade-offs and drawbacks.
* At the close of the forum, we’ll reflect on what we’ve heard—looking for common ground, but also recognizing remaining areas of tension. We’ll identify areas where we ourselves might be willing to reconsider.
* We’ll try to think about what matters most to us and what we are willing to give up to make progress on resolving this issue.

**My Role: Serve as Impartial Facilitator**

* I’m here to help us have a conversation that is as deliberative as possible.
* I’ll encourage everyone to consider different viewpoints.
* I’ll watch the time to ensure we talk about all the options and have time for reflections at the end.
* From time to time, I may point to specific questions and ideas in the guide, especially if they represent voices not in the room or trade-offs we haven’t talked about.
* This is your conversation. Please talk to and listen to each other.

**Structure: The Four Parts of a Deliberative Forum**

* Ground Rules
* Personal Stake
* Deliberating on the Options: Option 1, Option 2, Option 3
* Closing Reflections

**Ground Rules \_\_\_ minutes**

**Some sample ground rules used by forum moderators**

* Listen to other voices. Listening is as important as speaking.
* Consider each approach fairly, looking at its benefits and its trade-offs.
* Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one or two individuals should dominate.
* It’s okay to disagree, but do so with curiosity, not hostility. Learning more about how others think is one of the most interesting parts of a forum.
* Keep an open mind. Avoid coming to conclusions until we’ve deliberated on all the options.
* Are there additional ground rules we would like add?
* Do we all agree to follow these ground rules and hold one another accountable to them?

**Personal Stake: \_\_\_ minutes**

**Some questions moderators often use to encourage participants to talk about their personal stake in the issue**

* Why did you come out to the forum today?
* What aspect of the issue concerns you most?
* How could this issue affect you and your family if we don’t address it?
* When you think about this issue, what bothers you?
* How could this problem change your future, your community’s future, if we don’t address it?

**Option 1: Recap and Questions for Deliberation \_\_\_ minutes**

According to this option, it’s time to act decisively to avoid passing crippling debt on to the next generation. In a spirit of compromise, we must make tough choices, raising taxes to cover the government services and benefits we want and cutting back on those we’re unwilling to pay for. This option says we have been too complacent about the national debt for far too long. It’s time to protect our future. BUT this option means paying higher taxes and could require us to work later in life and get by with fewer benefits, including some of those that benefit us as individuals and in our communities.

* What will happen to more vulnerable people in our society if we cut government services in health care, education, and the environment? Are we willing to accept the results of these cuts? Are we willing to raise taxes high enough to pay for them?
* Raising income taxes and requiring higher income people pay higher Social Security taxes could help balance the budget and strengthen the Social Security system. But wouldn’t higher taxes lead millions of Americans to cut back on spending and investment? Wouldn’t this put the country at risk of recession and sluggish growth?

**Option 2: Recap and Questions for Deliberation \_\_\_ minutes**

This option says the national debt is out of control because we don’t have the legislative safeguards we need to prevent the government from going into the red. We need new laws and procedures like a balanced budget amendment and Congressional pay-go rules that require any new spending or benefits be paid for through higher taxes or cuts in other programs. BUT this option only addresses future spending. It doesn’t tackle the debt we already owe, including promised Social Security and Medicare benefits.

* Social Security and Medicare are some of our biggest government expenses and our most important social promises. But this option does nothing to address that massive challenge. Are these legislative rules really where we should put our efforts?
* Ideas like requiring balanced budgets and barring spending unless it is offset by new taxes or other cuts sound like sensible government reforms. But these rules could effectively rule out all sorts of improvements that people want—expanded healthcare, a stronger defense, more investment in education and infrastructure, lower tax rates to spur the economy. Are we willing to make those choices?

**Option 3:** **Recap and Questions for Deliberation \_\_\_ minutes**

This option argues that the best way to address the debt is to grow the U.S. economy faster. A thriving economy with more people working will boost tax revenues and make the debt less of a burden. According to this view, the drastic cost-cutting measures contemplated by other options will choke off growth and make our debt problems worse. Instead, we should make significant investments in infrastructure, education, science, and technology to make our economy more competitive. BUT this option will add to the debt in the short term, and there’s no guarantee these ideas will lead to the economic growth everyone hopes for.

* Spending taxpayer dollars on ideas to grow the economy could be risky, adding even more debt and not producing the hoped-for growth. How comfortable are we taking this bet?
* This option doesn’t tackle the debt we owe and leaves the Social Security and Medicare systems unreformed. Isn’t it wishful thinking to believe we can push growth high enough to avoid these tough decisions?

**Closing Reflections \_\_\_ minutes**

Acting on the ideas and proposals presented here would mean changes in all of our lives and in every city and town across the country. But avoiding the problem of the debt could leave all of us vulnerable—younger Americans who will inherit the debt and older Americans who may have to rely on unstable Social Security and Medicare systems.

It is important to think carefully about the implications of the actions presented here. It is EQUALLY IMPORTANT to think about the consequences of avoiding them.

As we think back on our conversation, here are some key questions to consider:

* Now that we have deliberated, do we agree on how urgent this issue is? Should we push our leaders to act quickly and take decisive measures or is a gradual approach more sensible and doable?
* Tackling this problem will likely require compromise. Where would you be willing to compromise? Are there two or three proposals that you don’t like but could live with if it meant that leaders could come together and address this problem?
* Have you heard any ideas or concerns today that you hadn’t considered before?
* Can you now identify any shared concerns among the group? What are the issues that still divide us?
* Are there other people or groups you would like to hear from, now that you’ve begun to weigh some of the options before us? Is there any information that you need?
* What do we want our elected officials in Washington to do? Are our expectations reasonable?