COMMON SENSE ACTION

The Agenda for Generational Equity: The Framework

Common Sense Action | August 1, 2013

BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

ABOUT CSA

Created by and for Millennials, Common Sense Action (CSA) is a bipartisan organization that brings youth voices to the policymaking table to fight for generational equity. Generational Equity is the guarantee that the gateways of American opportunity are open as wide – if not wider – for Millennials as they were for our parents and grandparents. With active college chapters nationwide, CSA convenes young leaders from across the political spectrum to craft and advance solutions to the public policy issues so important to our generation that they transcend party lines.

ABOUT BPC

Founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole, and George Mitchell, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a non-profit organization that drives principled solutions through rigorous analysis, reasoned negotiation, and respectful dialogue. With projects in multiple issue areas, BPC combines politically balanced policymaking with strong, proactive advocacy and outreach.

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An Open Letter From Common Sense Action

Date: August 1, 2013

To our brothers and sisters, our parents, and our grandparents:

AGE is a conversation starter. We cannot afford to have young Americans—"Millennials"—on the sidelines for critical debates about our nation's future. Though no exact definition exists, we, the Millennials, are the generation of young Americans born between the early 1980s and early 2000s. We are the generation that came of age with September 11 and were sobered by the Great Recession.

By virtue of being young, we have the largest stake in the long-term prospects of this nation. Should we succeed in becoming more fiscally responsible, widening the gateways to economic opportunity, investing in the future, and strengthening the civic capacity of the United States, Millennials will experience the 21st century as another American century. Should we fail, Millennials will be the first generation to experience American decline.

On August 1, 2013, a group of 30 young leaders from across the political spectrum and hailing from across the country released a Framework for the Agenda for Generational Equity (AGE) in partnership with experts at the Bipartisan Policy Center. To us, AGE is a charge—the first step in bringing youth voices to the policymaking table. This charge calls upon Millennials to discuss, formulate, and drive solutions that not only advance generational equity but also solve some of the most pressing problems facing this country.

We believe generational equity is the guarantee that the gateways of American opportunity should be open as wide—if not wider—for us than they were for our parents and our grandparents before them.

And there are real inequities. In fact, almost half of Millennials think we will be worse off than our parents.[1] It is getting harder to climb the ladder of American opportunity. Too few Millennials have access to affordable education and quality employment. Between 1982 and 2007, college tuition costs increased 439 percent while the median family income only rose 147 percent.[2] Meanwhile, Social Security and Medicare at their current rates will be unable to pay out full benefits well before the first Millennial retires at age 65. Worse still, $17,000,000,000,000 (trillion) in ever-increasing federal debt is squeezing investments in the future.

Further compounding our problems is a Congress that remains paralyzed in gridlock. Unfortunately, our politicians have incentives to care more about reelection than making the tough choices that advance our future. Why? Because Millennials don't have a microphone in national debates to protect our interests against the status quo.

Of course, to have a microphone in the conversation, to incentivize politicians to represent your interests, you need money, connections, or numbers. By virtue of being young, youth do not have money or connections. If we can organize and empower young people to engage in our political process, we can have numbers, particularly on college campuses. With numbers, we can transform our communities into megaphones that can catapult us into the national conversation, even if we can't get a mic.

The AGE Framework is a charge to build a network of those megaphones on college campuses across the country. The idea is that youth don't need another interest group in Washington—where few of us live and none of us have proportional influence. We need to build our voices within our own communities.

For that reason, the AGE formulation effort will spread across the country on America's college campuses. Each campus hosting a Common Sense Action chapter will build its own Agenda for Generational Equity based upon this Framework; this allows us to engage more voices and distinct perspectives in the formulation of AGE. In January, we will bring our chapter leaders back together to finalize a national Agenda for Generational Equity, drawing from each campus' respective proposal.

The AGE Framework delineated here proposes a list of 19 policy objectives that advance solutions to four issues that particularly impact Millennials—fiscal responsibility, economic mobility, investments, and national service. These issues are the foundational pillars of AGE. We consider each of these issues to be uniquely important and interconnected to the future prosperity of our generation. In that vein, we are guided by the principle that fiscal responsibility and investment are not mutually exclusive. We have an obligation to keep our financial promises and make critical investments in education and infrastructure.

National service is a pillar of AGE, because we understand that, since we are asking something of our country in the form of greater investments and fiscal responsibility in our generation, we must ask ourselves what we can do for our country. In addition to national service, our responsibility in the face of these national challenges is to learn, debate, serve, and keep an open mind.

For those reasons, we are open to a range of policies that will advance the AGE policy objectives and the mission of generational equity. What we are not open to is inaction. What we are not open to is failure to make nation-building compromises. What we are not open to is expanding generational inequities—the closing of the gateways of opportunity.

Sincerely,

The AGE Steering Committee

AGE Steering Committee

Common Sense Action

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Our Process

Over the course of summer 2013, Common Sense Action (CSA) brought together a Steering Committee of 25 young Americans from 18 states to craft the Agenda for Generational Equity (AGE). For eight weeks, we met to debate, deliberate, and design the agenda. Each Steering Committee director came to the table with different perspectives and distinct ideological beliefs. That is, we came to the table as partisans to forge a bipartisan agenda, not as moderates to form a nonpartisan agenda.

We spent our first meetings forming our principles and pillars. We believed that articulating the principles was a crucial stepping stone to conversations about objectives and solutions, because we needed to build a foundation of common ground. Once we settled on the broad principles, we discovered that the issues roughly fell into four categories: fiscal responsibility, economic mobility, investments, and national service.

Instead of arriving with distinct sets of talking points, we compiled a single set of facts along with the major policy positions from the left, right, and center in order to guide our deliberations and provide us with a sense of the politics behind the issues.

As we advanced in our discussions, we crafted more specific objectives. For each meeting, the CSA team created a menu of possible objectives, some leaning left, some leaning right, and some in the center. First, the committee would break up to discuss the policy objectives in small groups, debating the proposals so everyone's voices could be heard. Slowly, we would build consensus in our small groups. After we came back together, the Steering Committee followed a loose version of Robert's Rules of Order, inviting each director to share their opinions and propose changes to the objectives.

We then voted on the proposed objectives, with a two-thirds majority being necessary to pass any objective. If an objective did not achieve a two-thirds majority, it was not accepted into the AGE Framework. The resulting Framework was adopted by the Steering Committee. While directors may not support each and every individual objective, the Committee endorses the Agenda as a whole.

Finally, throughout the process, we worked with experts from the Bipartisan Policy Center to help guide our research, craft meaningful objectives, and identify potential policy options for achieving those objectives.

AGE Foundations

AGE breaks down into four components: Principles, Pillars, Objectives, and Policies.

- **Principles** are the overarching values that define the AGE Framework.
- **Pillars** are the policy areas that AGE addresses: Fiscal Responsibility, Economic Mobility, Investments, and National Service.
- **Objectives** are the specific policy goals that will help advance our aspirations. Each pillar contains four or five objectives.
- **Policies** are initiatives proposed by campuses that accomplish the AGE objectives.

PRINCIPLES

1. AGE must be credibly bipartisan, and it must address Millennial priorities that transcend party lines: Fiscal Responsibility, Economic Mobility, Investments, and National Service.
2. Fiscal responsibility and investments are not mutually exclusive. We have an obligation to both keep our financial promises and make critical investments in education and infrastructure.
3. Advancing generational equity demands service, shared sacrifice, and consensus-building.

PILLARS

The Agenda for Generational Equity is built on four pillars:

1. **Fiscal Responsibility** ensures that our government can keep its financial promises. This pillar addresses the long-term federal-debt-to-GDP ratio by focusing on the largest drivers of the federal debt, as well as reforming Social Security, Medicare, and the tax code.
2. **Economic Mobility** empowers future generations of Americans to climb the ladder of opportunity. The pillar of Economic Mobility addresses workforce development, incarceration, postsecondary education, and K–12 education.
3. **Investments** provide the foundation for free enterprise to prosper. This pillar addresses infrastructure, research and development, broadband, as well as clean and affordable energy initiatives.
4. **National Service** encourages each of us to take individual responsibility for ourselves, our community, and our nation. The pillar of National Service includes service opportunities, civic engagement, and voting.

AGE Framework

Fiscal Responsibility: We must reduce the debt. Policymakers should take steps to ensure that our debt-to-GDP ratio is reduced to sustainable levels in order to promote economic growth, investment, and provide fiscal stability.

- **Fiscal Reform:** Fiscal reform should take on the fastest-growing drivers of the debt—Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security—as well as tax reform, before further cuts in non-defense discretionary spending and defense spending.
- **Social Security Reform:** Social Security reform should strike a balance between ensuring the 75-year solvency of the program and maintaining a fair and adequate social safety net.
- **Medicare Reform:** Policymakers should comprehensively reform Medicare in order to achieve the Triple Aim—improved patient experience, improved population health, and decreased per-capita cost.
- **Tax Reform:** Policymakers should simplify the tax code by reducing tax expenditures, make it more efficient by lowering rates in a way that is equitable, and increase economic growth and investment while raising revenue to reduce the debt.

Economic Mobility: We should increase economic mobility by making critical investments in education, strengthening workforce development initiatives, and addressing the problem of mass incarceration.

- **Workforce Development:** In order to address structural unemployment, policymakers should promote a national initiative that encourages workforce development and vocational-training programs administered at state and local levels through continued and increased federal grants to states and expanded public-private partnerships that tie education and labor to industry.
- **Incarceration:** We must lower both incarceration and recidivism rates. Federal and state governments should reform sentencing guidelines and expand programs that rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-offenders back into society.
- **Postsecondary Education:** We must increase access and completion of affordable postsecondary education.
    - We must ease the burden of student debt through loan and repayment-plan reforms.
    - We must also slow down the growth of a student's full cost of a postsecondary education.

    - We must encourage—and schools must support—greater degree completion, the pursuit of Science, Engineering, Technology, and Math (STEM) degrees, and enrollment in community colleges, trade, and vocational programs.

- **K–12 Education:** We need to have a national conversation about the K–12 education system to ensure that schools attract, develop, and reward quality, accountable teachers, increase our graduation rates, and improve our readiness to compete with a global workforce. We must particularly focus on improving severely underperforming schools.

Investments: We must address the lack of investments in the next generation by improving our infrastructure, strengthening our research and development capabilities, modernizing our broadband, and advancing clean and affordable energy initiatives.

- **Infrastructure:** Federal, state, and local governments should improve our infrastructure by developing partnerships between the public and private sector, by increasing government investment in infrastructure projects, and by finding the right balance between funding and financing projects. At the same time, the federal government should also allocate direct grants to states for local, state, and interstate infrastructure projects

- **Research and Development:** The federal government should increase research and development funding—with an emphasis on basic research—and incentivize private-sector investment in research and development, as well as increase international research partnerships.

- **Broadband:** The federal and state governments should modernize our virtual infrastructure and increase access to improved broadband Internet.

- **Clean and Affordable Energy Initiatives:** We should encourage responsible and efficient energy production and consumption, as well as investment in affordable and clean-energy initiatives.

National Service: We, the Millennials, must invest in our own country through national service—volunteering for civilian, military, faith-based, or nonprofit service, leading our communities through government, learning and teaching civics, and informed voting.

- **Service Opportunities:** Each of us must take responsibility for ourselves, our community, and our nation. Therefore, we should expand national-service opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds—especially returning veterans and youth—by increasing funding for public-service agencies and elevating service of all kinds: civilian, military, faith-based, and nonprofit.

- **Civic Engagement**: We, the Millennials, should provide, support, and emphasize civic engagement amongst our generation to increase democratic participation.

- **Voting**: We should vote and encourage informed voting amongst our peers.

Fiscal Responsibility

In the 1990s, the United States recognized that it needed to save for retirement—the retirement of its large baby-boomer workforce. With several hard-fought legislative compromises, like the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, coupled with tremendous economic growth in the late 1990s, the United States had its fiscal house in order and achieved a balanced budget for three straight years (1999–2001).

During the early 2000s, Democrats and Republicans each took credit for popular expansions of Medicare and other federal spending programs while simultaneously passing tax cuts. Coupled with two unfinanced wars and the financial collapse, these policies quickly reversed U.S. surpluses into rapidly growing deficits. The result of these spending and tax policies, the recession, and a rapidly aging population is a total federal debt of nearly $17 trillion—an unfathomable number. Worse still, our commitments to an aging population will cause federal spending to increase at an accelerating rate, far outpacing the growth of our economy. The resulting debt will increase the cost of the federal government's interest payments and crowd out public and private priorities.

Deficits are decreasing now thanks to modest GDP growth, cuts to discretionary programs (especially the indiscriminate sequester cuts), and some small tax increases, but we're still in hot water. Driven by massive expenditures on Social Security and Medicare as the baby boomers retire, deficits will begin to increase again soon. Under the Congressional Budget Office's projections, federal debt held by the public will exceed the size of our economy by 2037.[3]

FRAMING OBJECTIVE:

We must reduce the debt. Policymakers should take steps to ensure that our debt-to-GDP ratio is reduced to sustainable levels in order to promote economic growth, investment, and provide fiscal stability.

Why did we choose the objective?

Outsized debt is a threat to the basic functioning of government. When debt is too high, interest payments crowd out other more desirable uses of federal dollars. The United States has a potential debt crisis looming in its future. Eventually, if debt is growing too fast relative to the economy, lenders will begin to question America's credit worthiness. This results in a vicious cycle of yet higher borrowing costs. This in turn leads to even higher interest-rate payments. Essentially, as debt rises, taxpayers see less of each tax dollar returned to them in the form of effective government.

As the Federal Reserve tightens monetary policy, interest rates will rise and our borrowing will become more costly. As the baby boomers retire, Social Security and Medicare will compound the problem. Social Security is funded mainly by payroll taxes from current workers, so as fewer people pay into the program relative to those collecting benefits, higher deficits will result. The combination of more beneficiaries and health care inflation

will drive up the cost of Medicare as well. All of these problems point to a future of high debt and high interest payments. This future makes the United States much less flexible to respond to a threat at home or abroad, whether military, financial, or natural. The earlier we address the growth of our federal debt, the more flexibility we will have to craft effective and equitable policy.

FISCAL REFORM

What are the facts?

In 2012, the U.S. federal government spent $768 billion on Social Security[4] and $466 billion on Medicare (roughly 22 percent and 13 percent of the federal budget, respectively).[5] While these numbers by themselves are not enormously problematic, it is the projected growth of the programs that is cause for concern. In particular, health care costs are projected to skyrocket.

Medicare's hospitalization dedicated trust fund is projected to be exhausted in 2026, with Social Security's trust fund projected to follow suit in 2033.[6] Once the trust funds run out, only incoming taxes from workers would be available to pay out benefits for those programs. Absent reform, benefits would be drastically reduced overnight. These programs are essential for millions of elderly Americans, a generation that has paid into the programs for years and deserves the support they were promised. Yet these programs are running out of money, which means that, unless we enact reforms soon, their benefits and services will be insufficient for future generations.

Medicaid, the joint partnership between states and federal governments to fund health care for poor Americans has expanded enormously since its founding. In 1970, combined federal and state Medicaid expenditures were 0.5 percent of GDP. In 2011, Medicaid accounted for 2.8 percent of GDP.[7] The combined cost of Medicaid was $432 billion, with the federal government paying $275.1 billion. Over the next ten years, Medicaid expenditures are expected to increase at a rate of 6.4 percent (much faster than inflation) and rise to $795 billion by 2021, as enrollment is expected to jump after the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA is expected to increase Medicaid expenditures by 9 percent over the baseline cost without the legislation.[8]

On the opposite end of the balance sheet, the federal government foregoes an enormous amount of revenue through tax expenditures. Tax expenditures, lost revenue due to tax incentives, amount to nearly $1.3 trillion per year, which is more than the combined costs of Medicare and Social Security.[9]

Meanwhile, with the Budget Control Act of 2011, Congress set discretionary spending on a path to fall below its lowest levels since 1970.[10] On top of initial caps on discretionary spending, automatic, across-the-board cuts—known as the sequester—have begun to take their toll on the domestic and defense budgets. The sequester is projected to eliminate roughly $1 trillion in spending over nine years.[11] It has already indiscriminately cut defense budgets by 8 percent in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, and the sequesters set to take place in upcoming years promise to do more of the same.[12]

OBJECTIVE:

Fiscal reform should take on the fastest-growing drivers of the debt—Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security—as well as tax reform, before further cuts in non-defense discretionary spending and defense spending.

Why did we choose the objective?

Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security are crucial parts of the American safety net that must be maintained, though growing costs mean we can no longer delay reform. Many domestic discretionary programs have been cut more than enough already, squeezing out crucial investments in the next generation. Furthermore, defense spending is beginning to fall as conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and discretionary spending is falling to its lowest levels since 1970.[13] Therefore, any reform that addresses the growing national debt must focus on reining in the federal government's largest and fastest-growing programs. Lastly, the United States needs to create a less confusing, more pro-growth tax code with fewer expenditures that also ensures that the federal government raises sufficient money in an efficient and fair manner.

SOCIAL SECURITY REFORM

What are the facts?

Since it was signed into law in 1935, the Social Security program has served as a critical safety net for retirees, their survivors, and people with disabilities (through disability insurance). The program is a signature part of the American way of life—a promise to Americans that they will not fall through the cracks in their later years. The government awarded 57 million Americans Social Security benefits in June 2013.[14] Many of the recipients rely on Social Security for a large portion of their income; in fact, 14 million elderly Americans, or more than 40 percent, rely on Social Security to keep them above the federal poverty level.[15]

However, in 2013, the Social Security Board of Trustees predicted that the program's trust fund will be exhausted in 2033 and will operate on a pay-as-you-go basis, drastically reducing benefits.[16] For those of us in the Millennial generation, this means that the program that we paid into for many years will provide us with severely reduced benefits.

OBJECTIVE:

Social Security reform should strike a balance between ensuring the 75-year solvency of the program and maintaining a fair and adequate social safety net.

Why did we choose the objective?

Social Security is the last line of support for millions of Americans, and austere cuts to benefits would be devastating for many who rely on the program. We cannot simply slash benefits across the board and let elderly Americans—who have paid into the program—suffer. On the other hand, the Social Security trust fund will soon run out of money, well before Millennials are of age to collect. Social Security will turn into a pay-as-you-go system, drastically reducing benefits for future retirees if it is not fixed.

MEDICARE REFORM

What are the facts?

Health care is the fastest-growing cost for the United States. In 2012, the federal government spent $466 billion on Medicare (roughly 13 percent of the federal budget).[17] On its current track, Medicare as we know it will not be around for the Millennial generation, and seniors may eventually see reductions in benefits. Though health care costs have slowed as a result of the recent recession, they will rise faster as we recover.[18] Medicare costs are projected to increase as a share of GDP, and the Hospital Insurance Trust Fund program is projected to be exhausted in 2026—just as the baby boomers are in the midst of their retirement years.[19]

Two main factors combine to drive Medicare's growth. The first is the increasing number of Medicare-eligible citizens. As of last year, there were 49.4 million Medicare recipients.[20] In 2035, that number will rise to a staggering 85.3 million.[21] The second is health care inflation. In 2010, drug prices increased by 3 percent, the cost of inpatient admissions by 5.1 percent, and the cost of outpatient visits by 10 percent,[22] all of which are substantially higher than the overall inflation rate of 2.3 percent.[23]

OBJECTIVE:

Policymakers should comprehensively reform Medicare in order to achieve the Triple Aim—improved patient experience, improved population health, and decreased per-capita cost.

Why did we choose the objective?

As the fastest-growing driver of the debt and one of the largest federal expenditures, Medicare must be reformed. Too many seniors and near seniors rely on the program for the government to cut benefits, and too many Millennials will not receive the benefits they paid for with their tax dollars for us to not reform the program.

A sustainable Medicare program cannot be achieved through a budgetary fix alone. Though Medicare makes up a large portion of the budget, only a comprehensive approach can stem the tide of inflationary health care costs. Budgetary fixes, like raising the eligibility age, do not address the structural problem—a fee-for-service model that incentivizes high-cost procedures and acts as a disincentive for population-based care. A comprehensive approach to fixing Medicare incentivizes more preventative, population-based care; Accountable Care

Organizations; financing reform; and delivery-system reform. These reforms will advance us toward the path of the Triple Aim.

TAX REFORM

What are the facts?

The federal tax code is impossibly complicated. The tax code itself is almost four million words.[24] Many Americans struggle to understand their personal tax obligations, meaning that most citizens are forced to pay for a tax service or specialist. American taxpayers and businesses spend 7.6 billion hours each year figuring out how to comply with the federal tax code.[25] This is massively expensive; in 2009, the estimated cost of all personal and corporate tax compliance was $193 billion.[26] The complexity of the tax code makes personal financial planning more difficult.

A significant source of the tax code's complexity is tax expenditures, which is spending through the tax code or foregone revenues due to certain tax incentives. Besides making the tax code harder to understand, they are a significant revenue drain. The Joint Committee on Taxation estimated that, for FY2013, if Congress eliminated all tax expenditures, it could cut individual income tax rates by about 44 percent and stay revenue-neutral.[27] In absolute terms, tax expenditures add up to $1.3 trillion per year—that's a lot of money that could otherwise be going to pay for federal programs or to reduce the debt.

The opaque and loophole-ridden nature of the tax code favors large corporations and sophisticated taxpayers, whose teams of lawyers use complicated legal structures to pay the lowest possible rates. The average citizen or small business doesn't have this option, meaning that the opacity of the tax code is, by its very nature, inequitable. Unsurprisingly, in a 2012 survey, only 12 percent of respondents said they thought the tax code is fair.[28]

OBJECTIVE:

Policymakers should simplify the tax code by reducing tax expenditures, make it more efficient by lowering rates in a way that is equitable, and increase economic growth and investment while raising revenue to reduce the debt.

Why did we choose the objective?

The tax code is unnecessarily complicated and should be simplified. It should be simplified for three primary reasons. First, simplification of the tax code will save private citizens enormous amounts of money. Second, it provides the government with billions of dollars in additional revenue. And, third, it lowers rates.

To raise revenue and simplify the tax code, we should eliminate many tax expenditures. Congress should adopt a blank-slate approach to reducing tax expenditures that forces special interests and lobbyists for private organizations to defend their clients' special tax privileges.

Finally, it is important to lower rates but in a way that is revenue positive to support our investments in the future. Therefore, we advocate for an equitable tax code, one that taxes citizens fairly based on their incomes.

Economic Mobility

The gateways to the American dream have slowly been closing, and it is becoming harder and harder to climb the rungs of opportunity. This promise has begun to dissolve as our investments in the future erode. It is getting harder for students to gain access to postsecondary education: between 1982 and 2007, college tuition costs increased 439 percent while the median family income only rose 147 percent.[29] Even with the help of student loans and financial aid, students and their families are feeling the pinch. Tellingly, many states now spend more money on incarcerating citizens than educating them.[30] In fact, over the last 30 years, incarceration rates have increased by more than 500 percent, while the American population has increased by only 36 percent.[31]

Meanwhile, youth unemployment has risen by 58.6 percent in the last five years and sat at 16.8 percent as of March 2013.[32] We need to add 4.1 million new jobs for young adults in order to return to pre-recession employment levels.[33] If we continue to add jobs at the current rate, it will be 2022 before the country recovers to full employment.[34] Even then, workers under 25 will face unemployment rates of double the national average.[35]

Socioeconomic mobility is difficult to achieve in the United States: over half of children born in the top quintile of income distribution get a college degree, while a mere 7 percent from the bottom quintile graduate from college.[36] These statistics are especially discouraging given the importance of higher education to economic mobility: only 5 percent of children born into the bottom quintile who don't graduate from college end up in the top quintile. On the other hand, 30 percent of bottom-quintile children who graduate from college rise to the top quintile.[37] Opportunity is unfortunately elusive for those who can't afford postsecondary education.

FRAMING OBJECTIVE:

We should increase economic mobility by making critical investments in education, strengthening workforce development initiatives, and addressing the problem of mass incarceration.

Why did we choose the objective?

Opportunity doesn't just happen. The United States needs to take positive steps to ensure that the promise that was made to our parents and grandparents—that work truly brings reward—is alive for the Millennial generation. This means investment in the various drivers of prosperity—a high-tech and cutting-edge economy, a well-trained workforce, and a judicial system that isn't overly punitive.

To truly achieve economic mobility, we need to address structural unemployment. This means training workers for the unfilled jobs, both with job-training initiatives and by improving the vocational, community, and collegiate options for postsecondary education.

Though we don't believe that opportunity guarantees outcome, we know that expanded opportunity leads directly to economic mobility—the statistics don't lie.[38] Millennials, the generation that is currently working its way through America's education system, must demand that our government and our society tackle increasing educational inequities and high youth unemployment. We need policymakers to maintain existing opportunities for postsecondary education and expand opportunities for the next generation.

Finally, we believe that mass incarceration stifles economic mobility. One in every ten black males in his thirties has been in jail at some point during his life and when incarceration rates have risen by more than 500 percent in the last 30 years. Moreover, opportunities for societal reentry are limited. The human and financial costs to society are unacceptable.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

What are the facts?

The fundamentals of our economy are changing rapidly. An increasingly globalized and technology-driven economy is changing the way employers do business, and it is significantly impacting the skills that prospective employees must possess to be employable. To experience sustained economic growth, and to continue the process of emerging from the depths of the Great Recession, we need a workforce that is well-trained in the skills of the 21st-century economy.

America's federal workforce development system established a variety of programs—notably the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998—that are currently overseen by more than 600 Workforce Investment Boards.[39] Interestingly, in 2007, the United States still ranked 27th out of 34 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in workforce development spending despite our focus on federal workforce development programs.[40] Federal spending then increased by $5 billion in 2009 due to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).[41] Yet, after ARRA, federal funding for workforce development programs, especially WIA programs, dried up and states did not pick up the slack.[42] The recent sequester could also lead to total cuts of $460 million from employment training programs. This would result in up to 13,000 youth losing access to WIA youth employment services.[43]

Funding is not the only problem facing workforce development programs: there is much debate over the manner in which workforce development programs should be administered. In 2009, the federal government controlled 47 federal workforce development agencies, many of which overlapped.[44] State Workforce Investment Boards are responsible for implementing the WIA programs. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, there is little information regarding the cost-benefit analysis of consolidating or maintaining a large number of federal programs.[45] Additionally, the research on whether these programs are effective is inconclusive.

OBJECTIVE:

In order to address structural unemployment, policymakers should promote a national initiative that encourages workforce development and vocational-training programs administered at state and local levels through continued and increased federal grants to states and expanded public-private partnerships that tie education and labor to industry.

Why did we choose the objective?

Workforce development programs cannot be improved solely by using a top-down approach. Rather, these programs must be the result of collaborative efforts by the federal government, state governments, local governments, and the private sector.

The federal government should spearhead the initiative and provide funding. Because state governments are legally required to balance their budgets, they are not in a position to take on the burden of funding these essential programs. Furthermore, according to a 2012 Urban Institute report, workforce development funds are underfunded and frequently the sole financial support of the more than 2,700 state workforce offices that provide public labor exchange and other reemployment services as well as offer training referrals to workers.

While the initiative must originate at the federal level, workforce development programs and vocational schools should continue to be administered at the state and local levels, as the WIA system does not effectively communicate within itself or allocate resources in the most efficient manner. Programs are often put in silos and isolated from one another, preventing coordination. If state and local entities are responsible for the administration of the programs, it becomes easier to facilitate a cooperative, interconnected system, by lifting federal restrictions on how money can be spent.

Both the federal, state, and local governments must actively engage the business community to discern what skills they demand in an effective employee, and these stakeholders must then join in a shared effort to design programs aimed at equipping Americans with these skills. This can be accomplished through the development of public-private partnerships and the formation of vocational-training initiatives that address structural unemployment. If business plays a stronger role in identifying necessary skills and fields as well as in providing leadership, government can play a larger role in tying programs to results and holding programs responsible.

INCARCERATION

What are the facts?

Incarceration impedes economic mobility in the United States. Over the last 30 years, incarceration rates have increased by more than 500 percent, while the American population has only increased by 36 percent.[46] Indeed, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 716 citizens out of every 100,000 were behind bars in

2011.[47] The United States holds only 5 percent of the world's total population, yet holds 25 percent of the world's prisoners.[48]

The statistics also reflect a disproportionate effect on minorities: one in every ten black males in his thirties is in jail on any given day.[49] In 2012, more than 60 percent of the incarcerated population was convicted of a nonviolent offence.[50] In fact, nonviolent drug offenders are roughly one-fourth, or 25 percent, of the incarcerated population, a number that has grown from less than 10 percent in 1980.[51]

U.S. recidivism rates are similarly high, as roughly 43 percent of those who have recently been released return to jail within the next three years.[52] Though the United States already has several ways of addressing recidivism, including a 2013 federal budget of $90 million for the reintegration of ex-offenders[53] and several programs designed to rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-offenders, recidivism rates have stayed nearly constant for more than a decade.[54] Even in a healthy economy, ex-offenders experience economic marginalization. Individuals with prison records experience a 10 percent diminution in earnings, solely based on their status as a former offender.[55]

OBJECTIVE:

We must lower both incarceration and recidivism rates. Federal and state governments should reform sentencing guidelines and expand programs that rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-offenders back into society.

Why did we choose the objective?

Increased incarceration and recidivism rates create two burdens on society. First, there is a human cost of incarcerating such a large—and disproportionately underprivileged—portion of the population. Men and women who otherwise could have a positive impact on society have been disproportionately sent to prison, where they have no gateways to American opportunity.

Secondly, there are financial burdens on society. Some states have actually spent more money on incarceration than they do on education—California spent $1 billion more in 2012.[56] Pew Charitable Trusts calculates that a 10 percent drop in recidivism rates would save states $635 million in prison costs for the first year alone.[57] Indeed, reforms to this effect have received support from both sides of the aisle: 19 Republican and nine Democrat governors or state legislatures have reformed their criminal justice system to de-emphasize jail time for nonviolent offenders and emphasize rehabilitation and reintegration.[58] Reforming sentencing guidelines and expanding rehabilitation and reintegration programs will help ease the pain of incarceration's human and financial costs.

Reducing recidivism is an almost unattainable goal if looked at exclusively through the lens of reintegration and not rehabilitation as well. The United States must be proactive in the way it handles criminality. Providing those who are released from the prison system with the necessary tools to reintegrate into society plays a vital role in alleviating the taxpayer

burden associated with the high recidivism rates currently plaguing the U.S. criminal justice system, but it will only provide the alleviation that is needed in a vacuum. Using reintegration as a means of reducing recidivism is a wholly retroactive solution if it is not coupled with rehabilitation. For example, it is estimated that individuals with prison records will experience a 10 percent depression in earnings.[59] Furthermore, a felony conviction, of any kind, denies an individual the right to seek employment in many vocations. This system of economic marginalization assists in the cyclical criminal justice system that has created vastly inflated recidivism rates. Using rehabilitation to keep drug users out of prison effectively lowers the overcrowding seen in the U.S. prison system and cultivates a system in which reintegration can flourish.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

What are the facts?

A college degree has long been viewed as the ticket to prosperity. This is still largely true. As of May 2013, the unemployment rate for Bachelor's degree holders was 4.5 percent, well below the national unemployment rate.[60] But skyrocketing expenses and falling completion rates are making a degree harder than ever to get.

College costs are rising astronomically and access to postsecondary education is becoming harder for those who do not have the means to pay exorbitant prices. Between 1982 and 2007, college tuition costs increased 439 percent while the median family income only rose 147 percent.[61] Meanwhile, states are actually reducing spending on their universities, putting a greater burden on students to pay tuition and fees. Total state spending on postsecondary education dropped by almost $9 billion from 2008 to 2013.[62]

As rising costs threaten access to postsecondary education, students are burdened with more and more student debt. The average student loan debt is $26,000, though many students have debt upward of $100,000.[63] Student loans are the only debt that is not dischargeable, meaning that there is no bankruptcy relief for debtors.[64] To make matters worse, 41.2 percent of the cohort who entered college in 2005 failed to attain a degree within six years, which means that some students are taking out expensive loans and never even finishing their degrees.[65] [66] [67] As icing on the cake, subsidized Stafford loan rates doubled from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent.[68]

OBJECTIVE:

We must increase access and completion of affordable postsecondary education.

- We must ease the burden of student debt through loan and repayment plan reforms.
- We must also slow down the growth of a student's full cost of a postsecondary education.
- We must encourage—and schools must support—greater degree completion, the pursuit of Science, Engineering, Technology, and Math (STEM) degrees, and enrollment in community colleges, trade, and vocational programs.

Why did we choose the objective?

To increase the affordability of higher education, we must ease the burden of student debt. There are two sides to this coin: the initial terms and rates of loans as well as the repayment plans that follow. By addressing both, we aim to ensure that students are not only connected to the right loans in the first place, but are also able to repay their debt in a timely fashion without being swamped by interest payments.

Tackling student loans alone cannot solve the affordability problem. Even without interest payments, our colleges and universities are too expensive. High tuition poses many students with the unenviable choice of foregoing higher education or undertaking massive debt. We need to explore every option for lowering costs, such as potentially including pegging federal research dollars to slowing tuition growth.

It is college completion, not college attendance, that truly leads to employment. The unemployment rate for those with some college but no degree (7.7 percent) is hardly better than for those with only a high school diploma (8.3 percent).[69] We need to encourage degree completion and create support systems for students at risk of dropping out. In 2005, 41.2 percent of freshmen failed to get a degree within six years—an unacceptable statistic.[70] We can and must do better.

The next step is ensuring that students graduate with the skills that employers seek. Right now, this means STEM. Currently, more than two-thirds of the graduates from U.S. Ph.D. engineering programs aren't American citizens.[71] Moreover, only 40 percent of STEM candidates eventually graduate with degrees in their fields.[72] We need to support American STEM candidates, improve primary and secondary STEM education, and raise the profile of STEM fields.

Finally, we should recognize that higher education is not the best fit for everyone. We should respect this and provide options for those who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Increasing the availability of trade and vocational programs, as well as community

colleges, will help solve this problem. All students—regardless of the type of postsecondary education they are pursuing—deserve a chance to succeed.

K–12 EDUCATION

What are the facts?

The K–12 education systems in the United States have failed to adequately prepare American students for the global workforce or for democratic participation. The United States ranks 28th in quality of education system in the World Economic Forum's 2012–2013 report and 47th in quality of math and science education, dismal rankings when we know education is key to competing in a global workplace.[73] While the graduation rate nationwide is 75 percent, there are still one million students who drop out of high school and do not graduate.[74]

The disparities between underperforming schools and the rest of the country are staggering. One in three high schools graduate at least 90 percent of their students in the United States, while 13 percent of schools see their freshmen year classes shrink by 40 percent by senior year.[75]

At the same time, teachers are not paid well in this country. The average U.S. public-school-teacher salary was $55,418 in 2011–2012, and over the last ten years, the purchasing power of teachers' salaries has decreased by 2.8 percent.[76] Teachers are some of the most important professionals in the United States, and they are currently financially undervalued.

Some, however, make the case that we must hold teachers more accountable—for example, a study by Eric Hanushek points to a "clear positive impact" on student achievement from accountability systems in the 1990s.[77]

OBJECTIVE:

We need to have a national conversation about the K–12 education system to ensure that schools attract, develop, and reward quality, accountable teachers, increase our graduation rates, and improve our readiness to compete with a global workforce. We must particularly focus on improving severely underperforming schools.

Why did we choose the objective?

We have not had a national conversation about K–12 education since No Child Left Behind, just after the 2000 elections. The current K–12 education-reform debate is a heavily charged political space with sharply drawn battle lines. On one side, teachers and unions see their professions threatened by standardized testing and accountability standards; on the other, advocates for greater accountability and standardized testing want more school choice and transparency. There are clear divides and we are not the experts—there are many things we do not know. The Steering Committee chose not to enter into the fray or to

immediately pick sides. Instead, we want to help transition the education debate from pitched battle to collaborative conversation.

Changing the tone of this debate is imperative. Until education is no longer a political third rail, we will not see the improvements that our system needs. Without the political will of their constituents, the incentives for politicians will be against serious reform. We will need creative thinking and bold action from policymakers to attract the best and brightest teachers—as well as develop current teachers—while making sure that our schools are accountable to students and parents. We also know that we cannot abandon the underperforming schools that see the majority of their students fail year after year.

Investments

By definition, the term "investment" implies that spending now not only saves money in the long term, but also more than returns the initial amount. Almost undisputedly, studies agree that this is the case with physical infrastructure as well as with research and development—both when funded by public or private dollars. [78] In today's budget debates, however, these programs have been squeezed by ever-increasing mandatory spending. The sequester has only made matters worse, cutting federal agencies' budgets indiscriminately.[79] This has meant fewer new construction contracts and less money available for scientific research and development.

While ensuring fiscal responsibility is paramount to meeting our financial obligations, now is the time to make these investments. Current low interest rates mean it is more cost-efficient to make these investments today than in the future. In fact, delaying investments in infrastructure and research and development at a time when we are falling behind in economic competitiveness compared with peer countries is irresponsible to future generations hoping to enjoy the American dream of prosperity and opportunity.[80]

First, we must consider how America's infrastructure is outdated, inefficient, and in need of repair. The American Society of Civil Engineers awarded our overall infrastructure a D+ in 2013.[81] It estimates that the United States needs to see $3.6 trillion in infrastructure investments by 2020 to maintain our current grade.[82] In addition, our infrastructure is falling behind that of our international peers, hurting the relative competitiveness of our economy. In a survey of infrastructure, the United States ranked 25th globally.[83] Despite the dreary statistics, infrastructure spending is at a 20-year low, totaling only 1.7 percent of GDP.[84]

We're not falling behind in physical infrastructure alone, but also in research and development (R&D). In 2008, the United States spent only 2.6 percent of its GDP on R&D, which ranked the United States seventh among peer OECD countries.[85] In the same year, the United States ranked 22nd out of 30 countries in government-funded university research and 21st out of 30 countries in business-funded university research.[86] Here, youth are especially hard hit as universities conduct 42 percent of federally funded research.[87] In 2008, this caused the National Science Foundation to issue a warning that "the stagnation in industry support for its own basic research" coupled with the "current decrease in support of

academic R&D and basic research by the federal government" could have "severe implications for US competitiveness in international markets and for highly skilled and manufacturing jobs at home."[88]

As for the Internet, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ranked the United States 24th out of 38 countries in average actual download speeds.[89] Roughly 119 million do not have broadband—19 million Americans live in areas where broadband is not offered, and 100 million have access but are not subscribers.[90]

Finally, we lack a coordinated and cost-efficient energy strategy that uses the private sector's technical expertise and public sector's research. By investing in promising technologies through public-private partnerships, we can secure supplies of clean energy at affordable prices as well as increase the energy independence of our nation.

FRAMING OBJECTIVE:

We must address the lack of investments in the next generation by improving our infrastructure, strengthening our research and development capabilities, modernizing our broadband, and advancing clean and affordable energy initiatives.

Why did we choose the objective?

To regain our prominence, we must make the critical investments that build the foundations for free enterprise to prosper. Infrastructure is crucial to America's growth and prosperity—mass infrastructure projects like the railroads, inland waterways, and the highway system have helped power our economy in the past and can continue to do so in the future. High-quality public infrastructure lowers the costs of doing business, promotes public safety, and allows a more efficient exchange of goods and services.

Similarly, we should advance our R&D capabilities to ensure that the next great inventions are researched and developed here in the United States. R&D has the capacity to propel industry forward and galvanize the nation with brilliant technologies.

To compete in a global environment, all Americans should have access to broadband Internet. When one-third of Americans are unable to access the Internet in their homes, the government must address the situation.

Finally, we advocate for developing clean and affordable energy initiatives in order to increase our country's energy independence and develop more sustainable energy sources. As we transition to these cleaner energies, we must promote increased efficiency and responsible usage.

INFRASTRUCTURE

What are the facts?

America's infrastructure is sorely in need of rehabilitation and, in certain areas, expansion. The 2013 American Society of Civil Engineers Report gave D grades or worse to our aviation, dams, hazardous waste, inland waterways, levees, roads, transit, and wastewater infrastructure—meaning that each sector was individually deemed to be in substandard condition and at risk of failure.[91] Our poor infrastructure harms our nation's international economic competitiveness—the United States is ranked 25th globally in overall infrastructure.[92]

Our outdated transportation infrastructure costs us billions. In 2012, Americans in 439 metropolitan areas spent 4.8 billion hours in congestion, burning more than $100 billion of extra fuel.[93] Additionally, airport congestion and delays cost the economy an estimated $22 billion.[94] Our crumbling infrastructure is a threat to public safety as well. Recent sudden collapses of bridges in Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Washington state are indicative of a larger problem—one in nine bridges across the country are rated "deficient."[95]

Interestingly, the labor necessary to meet these demands appears to be available. As of June 2012, the unemployment rate for construction workers was 9.8 percent, well above the national rate of 7.6 percent.[96] According to the Treasury Department, nearly two-thirds of jobs created by investment in infrastructure would be in the construction industry, with the next-highest industry being manufacturing, another area of high unemployment.[97]

OBJECTIVE:

Federal, state, and local governments should improve our infrastructure by developing partnerships between the public and private sectors, by increasing their investments in infrastructure projects, and by finding the right balance between funding and financing projects. At the same time, the federal government should also allocate direct grants to states for local, state, and interstate infrastructure projects

Why did we choose the objective?

Infrastructure is the building block of a prosperous nation. In the past, infrastructure investments have been known to increase short-term and long-term economic growth. Projects like the Interstate Highway System have been associated with significant future private-sector productivity gains.[98] Beyond the direct financial benefit to Americans, mass infrastructure projects are critical for accessibility to jobs, businesses, and supply chains. Additionally, by providing jobs and lowering transportation expenses, infrastructure investment is particularly beneficial to lower- and middle-class Americans.[99]

To accomplish these goals, we must ensure that government matches resources with the most valuable type of infrastructure projects. We recognize that we cannot fund all projects and must be smart about which ones we choose—leaving options for state and local governments when applicable. We advocate for increased funding at the federal and state

level, with an emphasis on federal grants that are allocated to states for the most essential projects. Partnerships between the private and public sector are also crucial to the development and maintenance of U.S. infrastructure—cooperation between government and industry leads to more jobs and higher project-completion rates. With the right combination of funding, financing, and private-sector partnerships, the federal government can take advantage of the current low interest rates and invest now to save us money over the next few decades.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

What are the facts?

Today's scientific investment will shape our economy for decades and even centuries to come. Federal R&D investments, paired with public-private partnerships, have helped launch the Internet, GPS, voice-recognition software, and countless medical breakthroughs. The Apollo Space Program alone led to 1,500 start-ups.[100] Economists have found that R&D funding has an unusually high return on investment (estimated to be between 30 percent and 100 percent).[101]

In addition, public-private partnerships have been especially productive in this area of the economy. For example, in 2004, industry performed nearly half of federal product development.[102] In addition, industry benefits greatly from federal research while tax incentives have been a cost-effective way for government to reduce the price of developing new technologies into usable consumer products. In 2007, a Congressional Budget Office report, *Federal Support for Research and Development*, found that, after 1989, firms spent an additional $2.10 on R&D for each dollar of the credit.[103] In particular, the government only funds 17 percent of development—meaning 83 percent is funded by industry.[104]

While private R&D investment in rising, the federal government is investing less and less. In 1966, R&D spending was almost 12 percent of the federal budget. Today, it is less than 4 percent—federal R&D spending is now only 0.85 percent of GDP.[105] [106] The sequester has only made matters worse, cutting all R&D budgets by 5 percent. For example, an estimated $1.55 billion was cut from the National Institutes of Health budget.[107] Like all discretionary programs, R&D is getting slashed.

OBJECTIVE:

The federal government should increase R&D funding—with an emphasis on basic research—and incentivize private-sector investment in R&D, as well as increase international research partnerships.

Why did we choose the objective?

Private industry funds 61.8 percent of all R&D,[108] but its incentives are sometimes not aligned with society's broader priorities. The high risk and expense of speculative scientific research often makes it an unprofitable proposition for corporations.[109] Direct federal R&D funding must fill the void, investing in areas that are socially needed but not necessarily

financially profitable. These investments, though they aren't profitable for individual corporations, often have a high yield for the federal government in the form of economic growth, better national security, and improved public health.

Secondly, the federal government also has various tools to incentivize private research, such as tax breaks, low-interest loans, and patent protection. As discussed above, public-private partnerships have been enormously successful at commercializing investments.

Lastly, developing international partnerships for research is essential, especially in today's economy. Research initiatives like the Higgs-Boson experiments illustrate how important it is for the United States to be connected with the international research community in other parts of the globe.

BROADBAND

What are the facts?

In the modern information economy, Internet access and strong virtual infrastructure are crucial to our prosperity. The United Nations has deemed Internet access to be a universal human right,[110] but more than one-third of Americans do not have Internet in their homes.[111] Roughly 119 million do not have broadband: 19 million Americans live in areas where broadband is not offered, and 100 million have access but are not subscribers.[112] Though the United States has the world's largest economy, in 2011 we ranked only 16th in the world in fixed broadband connectivity (high-speed data-transmission access).[113] The Internet is quickly becoming the tool of the present and the future, and the United States can no longer afford to fall behind.

OBJECTIVE:

The federal and state governments should modernize our virtual infrastructure and increase access to improved broadband Internet.

Why did we choose the objective?

Americans deserve an opportunity to connect to affordable, quality broadband. Expanding Internet access broadens economic opportunity, giving more citizens the ability to educate themselves, search for jobs, and engage more fully in our society. Yet, at the point where roughly one-third of Americans have no access to the Internet in their homes, it is evident that we must strengthen our virtual infrastructure and create new virtual gateways to opportunity. Through designing and implementing policies that modernize our grid and improve access to broadband Internet, we can ensure that the American people have the connectivity to succeed in the modern world.

CLEAN AND AFFORDABLE ENERGY INITIATIVES

What are the facts?

The United States is the world's No. 1 energy consumer and currently uses one-fifth of the world's energy.[114] While consumption of energy has increased, the productivity of the energy we use has increased faster. This means that, since 1973, when accounting for inflation and economic growth, we've cut our energy consumption by 50 percent.[115] In this sense, greater energy efficiency has provided more bang for the buck in growing our economy while using resources responsibly.

In 2011, only 80 percent of energy used in the United States was produced domestically, with the majority of the shortfall being supplied by foreign petroleum imports.[116] However, the profile of our energy usage and production is changing rapidly, largely due to the spread of hydraulic fracturing, used to extract oil and natural gas, but also thanks to renewable technologies. In 2012, U.S. oil production hit a 15-year high, and natural gas output reached an all-time peak.[117] This boom in natural gas and unconventional oil development has led to more than 1.7 million new jobs, the vast majority of which were created in the private sector.[118] These developments mean that more of the energy consumed in the United States is produced in the United States, so our country is more energy independent.

In terms of investing to develop clean energies, the government spends $1.8 billion on renewable energy,[119] $714 million on fossil energy,[120] and $863 million on nuclear energy.[121] The main forms of energy spending are subsidies, loans, and investments in research and development. All of our energy consumption accounts for 5.4 billion tons of carbon dioxide, the second-highest global total.[122]

OBJECTIVE:

We should encourage responsible and efficient energy production and consumption, as well as investment in clean and affordable energy initiatives.

Why did we choose the objective?

The United States uses energy to fuel our economy and to maintain our high standard of living. Developing new sources of domestic energy, while supporting cleaner and more efficient technologies, will increase the security and sustainability of our energy profile. In this sphere, public- and private-sector cooperation has been an effective model for expanding access and lowering price. Energy investments should incentivize the production of higher quantities of affordable and clean energy, as well as sustainable resource usage.

As a nation, we must incentivize the development and commercialization of more energy technologies in order to fuel growth through lower prices and increased access. As the recent natural-gas boom has illustrated, R&D incentives ultimately drive greater production, lower prices, and increased usage. These lower prices benefit consumers through lower living costs and businesses through lower business costs.

National Service

National service is the embodiment of a distinctly American notion: that shared experiences create strong community and national bonds. As our country has seen in the last century, Americans banded together time and time again to defeat Hitler and the rise of fascism, to put a man on the moon, and to respond to the national tragedy of the September 11 attacks. Through civilian, military, and faith-based service, Americans of all backgrounds served together to cultivate a greater sense of purpose and belonging. President John F. Kennedy's call to service echoed from coast to coast: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."[123]

Today, even greater numbers of Americans are attempting to answer the call to service. However, opportunities for public service are shrinking as funds become more limited, meaning that would-be national servants are turned away. For example, Americorps could only accept 14 percent of its applicants.[124] In addition, the Social Innovation Fund could only help develop 201 nonprofits with matching funds from private dollars accounting for $350 million in donations. [125] In addition, less than 1 percent of Americans have served in the military at any point in the last decade, creating a wider disconnect between civilians and the military.[126] Exacerbating the problem further, civics education has fallen through the cracks, and Millennial voting rates hover well below the average of other generations.

FRAMING OBJECTIVE:

We, the Millennials, must invest in our own country through national service—volunteering for civilian, military, faith-based, or nonprofit service, leading our communities through government, learning and teaching civics, and informed voting.

Why did we choose the objective?

To rebuild this country and renew the American promise, we cannot simply ask the government to invest in us—we must also invest in the country ourselves. In 2011, Americans volunteered a total of almost eight billion hours, an estimated economic value of roughly $171 billion.[127] This lends credence to the argument that we, as civically engaged and community-minded Millennials, can add economic value though civilian and military service. In addition, we charge our generation to take leading roles in government, teach civics education, and promote informed voting. As a generation, Millennials have the ability and obligation to better ourselves, our communities, and our country.

SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

What are the facts?

Many Millennials are ready and able to serve their country. However, national-service organizations are underfunded and understaffed, preventing thousands of Millennials from participating in meaningful and necessary service missions that have been shown to benefit the greater good. For example, last year, Americorps received almost 600,000 applicants. However, it was only able to accept 82,000 people. That means more than half a million

would-be national servants were turned away. The recent sequester will only make matters worse; Americorps funding will be slashed by 8 percent in FY2013, a move that will further limit the number of young people able to serve.

Teach for America, a nonprofit service organization that provides service opportunities in the teaching profession, also had to reject too many applicants. Teach for America accepted 15 percent of 48,000 applicants in 2012, meaning roughly 35,000 students were unable to serve their communities.[128] City Year, another nonprofit service organization, which places young people in urban schools, had 2,500 members and 9,000 applicants in the 2012–2013 year.[129]

OBJECTIVE:

Each of us must take responsibility for ourselves, our community, and our nation. Therefore, we should expand national-service opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds—especially returning veterans and youth—by increasing funding for public-service agencies and elevating service of all kinds: civilian, military, faith-based, and nonprofit.

Why did we choose the objective?

We must expand, encourage, and promote national-service opportunities for people of all backgrounds. Every type of service, regardless of affiliation, should be encouraged and valued. This comprehensive plan will promote nation-building at home, teach needed and helpful skills to volunteers, and create a much-needed sense of national unity and common purpose.

Additionally, the lack of service opportunities most threatens access for disadvantaged or economically vulnerable individuals. We must correct the existing disparity between wealthy and less fortunate young Americans, all of whom desire to serve. Additionally, volunteer or service positions serve as effective bridges into the workforce, reinforcing the economic value of service. For example, volunteers without a high school diploma or living in rural areas are 50 percent more likely to be employed post-volunteering than those who do not volunteer.[130]

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

What are the facts?

Millennials are disappointingly uninformed about the process of government. Only 64 percent of 12th graders could correctly identify what a Supreme Court opinion was.[131] Approximately half of young people believe that the federal government spends more on foreign aid than Social Security[132] (it spends approximately 15 times more on Social Security).[133] [134]

Woefully inadequate civics education begins early in life. Fewer than one in three eighth-graders could identify the purpose of the Declaration of Independence,[135] while only 27

percent of fourth-graders could identify the purpose of the Constitution.[136] Lacking any meaningful knowledge about the basic structure and purpose of our nation's founding, it is unsurprising how dismal civic participation rates are. In 2012, for example, there was only 45 percent youth voter participation.[137] The overall consequence of this civic ignorance is that, on aggregate, Millennials are ill-equipped to fight for their priorities.

OBJECTIVE:

We, the Millennials, should provide, support, and emphasize civic engagement amongst our generation to increase democratic participation.

Why did we choose the objective?

For us to provide solutions to the problems that we see in government, we must understand how government works. To accomplish that goal, we must first be knowledgeable citizens ourselves before reaching out to educate our friends and peers. Millennials, particularly CSA members, are in a unique position to teach civic skills and combat the growing disconnect between government and its constituents.

VOTING

What are the facts?

Too few Millennials are registered to vote and fewer still are informed. Only 45 percent of Millennials voted in the 2012 election,[138] and a meager 18 percent followed the presidential election closely.[139] Only 50 percent of people under 30 were registered to vote in 2012, down from 61 percent in 2008.[140]

OBJECTIVE:

We should vote and encourage informed voting amongst our peers.

Why did we choose the objective?

A functional democracy relies on active citizen participation to elect responsible and effective politicians. It is self-destructive for citizens to not vote and, therefore, not have their interests be represented. As voters, we hold hiring and firing power over even our nation's highest elected office—we must wield that power in order to elect politicians who fight for our priorities. We owe it to ourselves to elect a functional democracy.

What's Next?

With facts, objectives, and a charge in hand, Millennials are starting a conversation about generational equity and the gateways of economic opportunity.

The AGE Framework is that charge – a foundation for a greater youth agenda. But it doesn't stop here.

In the fall, student leaders on college campuses across the country are taking the AGE Framework back to their communities and colleges. The Framework provides the blueprint from which campuses will advance generational equity goals and formulate their respective versions of AGE.

Common Sense Action chapters will spend the fall crafting policy proposals that advance the AGE objectives. During the first week of November— election week— chapters will convene student leaders for Campus Congresses where they will debate, deliberate, and design their own campus AGE policies. Of course, depending on a campus' ideological makeup, some campuses will formulate more conservative AGE plans while others will present more liberal versions.

In January, leaders from each CSA chapter that has created an AGE will convene at the AGE Policy Summit. Through debate, disagreement, and accord, young leaders from across the political spectrum will design the national Agenda for Generational Equity, incorporating the ideas of campuses from across the country. This national AGE will be the culmination of each campus-specific AGE, a collaboration between youth voices nationwide.

For this to happen, AGE must be a conversation starter – a charge for young Americans to spearhead a movement about issues so important to our generation that they transcend partisan politics. As Millennials, we have the largest stake in our nation's future; therefore, it is up to us to empower our peers, to ameliorate civic ignorance, and confront political apathy. With the AGE process, Common Sense Action aims to make Millennial public policy issues as relatable to future nurses, teachers, mechanics, truck drivers, fishermen, homemakers, and engineers, among others, as they are to future policymakers.

American youth have demonstrated a care and commitment to our communities and country. We are eager to affect change. We are driven by the belief that we are never too young to stand up for what we believe in, so long as we have the humility to admit our inexperience and admit the things we do not know.

So charge. Collectively, we can create a megaphone that speaks for generational equity and brings youth voices to the policymaking table.

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