

## [Rep. Schakowsky: 'We have not had what I've wanted from Day 1'](#)

By Ezra Klein November 17, 2010; 9:30 AM ET

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) is co-chairman of the House Progressive Caucus and a member of the fiscal commission. But she's not particularly happy with how the commission is playing out. In fact, participating in their process and products spurred her to release her own [deficit reduction plan](#)

-- a plan, she says, that brings the budget into primary balance by 2015 with money leftover for stimulus and with policies that protect the poor and middle class. We spoke yesterday by phone, and a lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

**Ezra Klein: You've released your own plan to bring the budget into balance using more progressive means. What's the aim here?**

Jan Schakowsky: I'm concerned that the people who haven't shared in the opportunities in the last few years or in the Bush years are now the ones being asked to sacrifice. My proposal is aimed at achieving deficit reduction by 2015. That means the goal is \$250 billion in cuts by 2015, which achieves primary balance (which is balance without interest on the debt), and my goal was to offer a proposal able to do it without taking from the middle class and lower-income people. And we managed to reach not only that number, but to actually raise \$427 billion, with the idea that some of that money would be spent in 2011 and 2012 on more economic stimulus. I also make a recommendation for the solvency of Social Security, which in both my proposal and the Bowles-Simpson proposal is kept separate from the broader deficit, and I do it without cutting benefits.

**EK: Tell me a bit more about the stimulus component. How do you use that money?**

JS: I think the stimulus plan was too small to begin with, and one of the principles of Simpson-Bowles was to avoid doing anything to hurt a fragile economy, and I think they do: They start their cuts in 2012 without any acknowledgment that we may still be in a tough economy then. My plan includes money and makes suggestions for more stimulus in the next two years. We could implement the plan that George Miller introduced to send more money to states and local governments. It's called the Local Jobs for America Act, and it funds education and infrastructure and food stamps and unemployment insurance and much more, and does it through local governments.

**EK: I'm interested in your inclusion of stimulus as one of my frustrations with the deficit commission has been its narrow focus. It would seem to make more sense to have a panel focused on recovery and growth, of which one component would be short-term growth, and another would be deficit reduction, and a third would be longer-term growth.**

JS: That's the point I want to make here, which is that one can expect that these investments can help reduce the deficit, as putting more people to work brings the deficit down. There's no real recognition of that in Simpson-Bowles.

**EK: You've got a number of specific changes you want to make to the health-care system. The Simpson-Bowles plan has been criticized for offering relatively few of those. As you're involved in those meetings, what's your sense of health care's role in the discussion? Are people just too exhausted to get back into it?**

JS: That is being discussed at the meeting today, that exact observation. I think that there will be more focus on health care, though that actually worries me in this context, as I worry they'll make cuts that will mean less access to health care for people. They could make cuts that will really hurt people and don't leave enough time for the reform law to go into effect.

**EK: Your plan also relies more on revenues than the Simpson-Bowles plan. I imagine you're not a great fan of their spending cuts?**

JS: For example, half of the cuts in the non-defense discretionary section have to do with cuts in the federal workforce. So I pointed out that over 500,000 federal employees make less than \$50,000 a year. A three-year freeze on their income is a real problem for them. And then this 10 percent cut in the workforce and a major cut in contractors -- and I'm not a fan of contractors -- at the same time that they're adding to the responsibilities of, for instance, the Social Security system, could cause pretty severe disruptions in the delivery of services. Then there are these caps on spending. I think these kind of meat ax approaches are bound to hurt things like Pell grants and food stamps and the Older Americans Act and other bills that hurt ordinary people.

**EK: Your plan exists to push some of these more progressive options into the debate, but given that you're a member of the commission, why aren't they there already? The Bowles-Simpson report wasn't a plan so much as various options the committee could choose from, so why weren't the items you favor included?**

JS: Having just introduced it today, we're definitely going to be working with the staff to see which of the options I've suggested can be placed into the bill. But in my view, there's a big difference in philosophy: We have not had what I've wanted from Day 1, which is a distributional analysis of the proposals that are being made so we would know who benefits and who pays. And it looks to me like the balance is in the wrong direction, because most of it is made of spending cuts and only a quarter is increases in revenue. And I think that's the wrong balance to start with.

If you approach this whole exercise with green eyeshades and just look at it as a bean counter, it's easy to make cuts. But if you really think about who gets hurt, and I do, it gets harder. I'm just not going to take this out of the hide of Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security.