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The numbers behind the "Divided We Fail" send a clear message to presidential candidates: Ignore us at your peril.

AARP has 38 million members nationwide. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represents 1.8 million workers and is the country's largest labor union. And Business Roundtable has roughly 160 member companies with a combined workforce of 10 million people and annual revenues of \$4.5 trillion.

Those are the core organizations behind Divided We Fail, an initiative that aims to make health care and long-term financial security (an umbrella covering Social Security) the primary issues in the 2008 presidential campaign. The effort, which was launched earlier this year (and was announced in the Quad Cities last week), will focus initially on four states with early influence on the presidential nominating process: Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina.

Beyond the numbers, the coalition is striking for its ideological diversity. Bruce Koepl, who stepped down as the Iowa state director of AARP to lead its Divided We Fail campaign in the state, said in an interview last week that senior citizens, business leaders, and a labor union joining together serves as an example for Republicans and Democrats: "If we can work together, you all can work together."

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Sara Howard, a spokesperson for the national headquarters of SEIU, said that Divided We Fail is "a recognition that America can't compete in a global economy unless we start figuring out the health-care crisis, figuring out the retirement-security crisis."

Koepl said the coalition came together because the situation has worsened in the past decade. "Business is feeling this more, particularly health care," he said. "They're in a different position today than they were 10 years ago. ... Things are different now."

But the coalition is not as impressive as it first seems. These groups concur on two key *problems*, but they aren't advocating specific remedies.

"There are all kind of policy ideas out there right now," Koepl said. "There's no shortage of that. ... What this is really about is the political will to get it done. ... We're not going to offer up a plan. That's their [the politicians'] job to do that."

"We are hopeful that the strength of our combined 50 million members will effectively engage the American people, elected officials, and the business community to find broad-based, bipartisan solutions to the most compelling domestic issues facing our nation," said Maria Ghazal, director of public policy for Business Roundtable, in an e-mail. "We think the political environment is ripe for the kind of bipartisan action we are urging."

The fundamental common ground is contained in three sentences from the Divided We Fail platform: "All Americans should have access to affordable health care, including prescription drugs, and these costs should not burden future generations. ...

"Our children and grandchildren should have an adequate quality of life when they retire. Social Security must be strengthened without burdening future generations."

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But the diverse nature of the coalition makes it difficult for it to be more specific about solutions or even guiding principles. "When we get into Congress in 2009, we'll hammer out the details," Koepl said.

"It's just a matter of buckling down and trying to have these tough conversations," Howard said. "The first step is recognizing that we have to sit down and have these conversations."

The premise is that as presidential candidates spend these early months of the campaign concentrating on those four states, they will continually be faced with questions about health care and Social Security, and they'll be forced to develop detailed plans. That's the way that Divided We Fail hopes to frame the debate.

The campaign, Koepl said, is "really a platform for us. ... Everywhere they go, they're going to be faced with this."

Koepl said that Divided We Fail will be hosting between 30 and 40 town-hall meetings in Iowa in the coming months. He said these meetings will gather together citizens, and "we're going to have a conversation around these issues."

He added that candidates are welcome, but they'll be asked to sit in the circle along with everybody else. "It doesn't become a candidates' event, if you will," he said. "They're there as part of that community listening and hearing and offering ideas and solutions."

Koepl said the coalition will also host "opinion-leader lunches," in which candidates will be brought in one at a time to talk about these problems.

He conceded that these issues are not new, and that they've been endlessly debated. "I can't tell you how many meetings that I've been in around health care where we just talk," he said. "What we're doing now is different, because we are debating action. We are debating answers."

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Well, not really. What is maddening about Divided We Fail is the blinders it seems to wear about the philosophical differences between its key organizations. The coalition only works to the extent that it *doesn't* consider solutions, because an in-depth policy discussion would inevitably reveal political gulfs in terms of scope, consumer choice, administration, and funding, related either to health care or Social Security.

Yes, they agree that preventative care is going to save health-care expenses in the long run: "It's not that there's not enough money in health care," Koepl said. "It's the way the money's spent." But that's only one piece of the puzzle.

And the groups refuse to acknowledge that health-care and retirement reforms that do "not burden future generations" are likely to be expensive. Koepl acknowledged the importance of "trade-offs" but denied that it would take major tax increases to accomplish the organization's goals.

SEIU's Howard was similarly euphemistic: "We're all going to have to be part of the solution."

And Business Roundtable's Ghazal cited information-technology improvements that she said could save \$165 billion annually in health-care costs but did not answer a question about taxes.

"Ultimately," Howard said, "the real measure [of success] is whether we can accomplish fundamental, not incremental, change that secures our health care and retirement."

For more information on Divided We Fail, visit (<http://www.dividedwefail.org>).

Senior Citizens, Big Business, & a Labor Union Walk Into a Presidential Campaign...: Divided We Fall

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