



# John Hayden, board member at No Labels Minnesota

## Group promoting new politics of problem-solving

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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### Present

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### Summary

The national No Labels and No Labels Minnesota organizations are nonpartisan groups concentrating on ending government dysfunction, says No Labels Minnesota board member John Hayden. National No Labels began in 2010 in opposition to hyper-polarized politics. The Minnesota organization followed in 2013 as a bipartisan movement dedicated to promoting a new politics of problem-solving, both in Washington, D.C., and in Minnesota.

Hayden says No Labels wants to change the political system so there are no government shutdowns, issues are being addressed, candidates are holding meaningful campaign debates, the discussion is being elevated and people are being educated. He calls the system we have now "just a catfight."

Hayden notes that national No Labels has started the Congressional Problem Solvers Caucus, including 20 House Republicans and 20 House Democrats, and has created two PACs, one supporting Democrats and one supporting Republicans. No Labels tested its PACs in the 2016 election and was successful in running candidates against hyper-partisan candidates in primary elections, Hayden says.

He discusses the impact of tribalism today. There are echo chambers where only certain kinds of information are allowed, whether on social media or in a book club. People's political beliefs are their social identity and people are choosing places to live and colleges to attend that will affirm their beliefs. But, he says, people don't realize how much they have in common. He believes people must build empathy and be exposed to other viewpoints by interfacing with other people.

## Biography

John Hayden is national training lead for Genesys Works, a national nonprofit that seeks to provide job training, internships and impactful mentoring to disadvantaged high school students during their senior year. (See March 20, 2015, [Civic Caucus interview of Hayden and others about Genesys Works](#) .) He is also an Independent candidate for Minneapolis City Council, seeking to represent Ward One (Northeast Minneapolis).

Hayden serves as a board member of No Labels Minnesota, which is a state chapter of the national No Labels organization, located in Washington, D.C. No Labels seeks to end political dysfunction by combatting hyper-partisanship. No Labels Minnesota affirms and supports the strategies of the national No Labels and tries to replicate those strategies and results in Minnesota.

### **About No Labels and No Labels Minnesota.**


[No Labels Minnesota](#) , founded in 2013, is a bipartisan movement of Minnesotans dedicated to promoting a new politics of problem-solving in Washington, D.C., and in Minnesota. The Minnesota organization affirms the values and mission of the [national No Labels organization](#) and strives to bring its ideals and practices to Minnesota.

National No Labels began in 2010 in opposition to hyper-polarized politics. No Labels is a [504\(c\)\(4\) organization](#) , so it may lobby as a means of promoting the social welfare. It created a package of reform ideas to make Congress and the executive branch work together. It founded an active Congressional caucus, called the [Problem Solvers Caucus](#) , which now includes 40 House members from around the country, divided evenly between both parties. Minnesota Members of Congress Erik Paulsen (R) and Rick Nolan (D) are members of the caucus. Co-chairs are Rep. Tom Reed (R-New York) and Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-New Jersey).

No Labels created two PACs (one to support Democratic candidates and one to support Republican candidates) so that members of Congress who vote in the center can get political protection. After two years of work, No Labels recently published *[The Policy Playbook for America's Next President](#)* , with 60 proposals aimed at reaching four goals: creating 25 million new jobs in the next 10 years, securing Social Security and Medicare for the next 75 years, balancing the federal budget by 2030 and making America energy-secure by 2024.

No Labels Minnesota has been recognized as one of the most active state chapters in the country. It is organizing its supporters in Minnesota to recruit and support elected officials at every level of government in our state to change its political culture.

## Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  [Looking Back](#),

**Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process.** The Civic Caucus interviewed No Labels Minnesota Board Member John Hayden to learn about the mission of the organization and its nonpartisan work combating hyper-partisanship.

## Discussion

**No Labels Minnesota Board Member John Hayden first heard of No Labels during the 2012 election, when Jon Huntsman was running for the Republican presidential nomination.** "I was raised in a hyper-conservative home that was very Republican," Hayden said. "I was not even exposed to anything beyond that till the end of college. I was very isolated. I studied biology in college and started to have some friction with my religious upbringing. I started to challenge things a little bit."

Jon Huntsman sought to establish himself as an anti-negative candidate and take the "high road." Hayden said he starting listening to Huntsman and heard things he typically associated with Democrats coming from a Republican. "I was drawn to Huntsman," Hayden said. But after finishing third in the New Hampshire primary, Huntsman announced the end of his campaign on January 16, 2012, endorsing Mitt Romney. Hayden heard about No Labels, a national group with which Huntsman was involved. Hayden noted that Huntsman is still co-chair of No Labels. The other co-chair is former Senator Joe Lieberman (Connecticut), who was a Democrat and is now an independent.

When Hayden moved to Minnesota, he met with Paul Ostrow and Linda Peterson, both of whom were involved with No Labels Minnesota. Paul Ostrow is assistant Anoka County attorney, former Minneapolis City Council member and president, and current chair of the Civic Caucus. Peterson is a former co-chair of No Labels Minnesota. "From then, we've really pushed our effort with No Labels Minnesota," Hayden said.

**The national No Labels focuses on ending government dysfunction.** Hayden described the national and Minnesota organizations as nonpartisan groups concentrating on restoring function to government. The national group started out focusing on the mechanical aspects of government. In 2012, the organization put out a book, *Make America Work: A Time for Strong Leadership*, that laid out a number of proposals for making Congress work, making the presidency work, making government work and making America work.

Lately, Hayden said, national No Labels has shifted to more of a policy focus and has formed No Labels policy groups that are working toward four goals, described in the No Labels publication *The Policy Playbook for America's Next President*: (1) creating 25 million new jobs in the next 10 years; (2) securing Social Security and Medicare for the next 75 years; (3) balancing the federal budget by 2030; and (4) making America energy-secure by 2024. "They're getting policy across," Hayden said of the national group.

**National No Labels has started the Congressional Problem Solvers Caucus.** Hayden said it's the third largest caucus in Congress, behind the Republican and Democratic caucuses. There are 20 House Republicans and 20 House Democrats, including Minnesota U.S. Representatives Erik Paulsen (R) and Rick Nolan (D).

Hayden said the caucus members agreed to vote as a bloc on the budget. "They want to vote on a 'clean' budget, nothing that's going to be a partisan holdup regarding the Mexican wall or Planned

Parenthood or anything like that," he said. "They want to get through what they can. They're trying to balance the more obstructionist strategies that are out there."

Hayden said he was excited by the Problem Solvers Caucus deciding to vote as a bloc. "I'm encouraged by the direction and the momentum we're building," he said.

**National No Labels created two PACs-one supporting Democrats and one supporting Republicans-and tested them in the 2016 election.** Hayden said the group found candidates who were hyper-partisan and ran candidates against them in the primary elections. "It's been successful," he said. There are some backers who are raising \$50 million for the 2018 election. "They're trying to get people to play ball, instead of cause gridlock."

**No Labels Minnesota, though still a small group, is doing its best to have an impact.** The group has put on various events, including having Jon Huntsman and others come to speak to generate interest and support, Hayden said. "In Saint Paul, we're headed down the same road. We're starting to see hyper-partisanship here." The group is trying to use some of the strategies of the national organization. The Minnesota group did a literature drop at the Capitol recently and is exploring a PAC of its own.

"We have a lot of swing districts in the state we'd probably focus on to get people who are more moderate," Hayden said.

**We saw alternative facts play a big role in the last election.** Hayden made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that sometimes people invoke a belief that's contrary to fact, which creates polarization. The interviewer said that's because many people don't know how the world really works.

Hayden said there's a large amount of tribalism today. "You don't need to know anything; you just need to prove your loyalty to the group," he said. There are echo chambers where only certain kinds of information are allowed, whether on social media or in a book club. As a result, he said, when they see something, they're not talking about how to understand things. They're bringing in talking points and ways to undercut their opponents.

An interviewer asked what the goal of tribalism is. "I guess their ultimate object is not to solve a problem," the interviewer said. Hayden responded that the goal is just to be accepted. "Your political beliefs are your social identity," he said, noting that people are now choosing to live in places that will reaffirm their beliefs. He said the same thing is happening when people decide where to go to college. "We've kind of self-selected our camps," he said.

When the interviewer asked how No Labels hopes to get around that, Hayden said people don't realize how much they have in common. "How do you tear down that wall?" he asked. "You have to build empathy. You have to be exposed to other viewpoints. That's why No Labels takes members of Congress bowling. You need to have interface with people to build empathy. You have to understand that people with different viewpoints are not malicious. We might not agree on why a problem exists, but you might agree on how to solve it."

**People who say government isn't working are trying to undermine it.** Hayden gave that response when an interviewer commented that (1) there is a large group of people who don't think government is the solution and, in fact, usually makes things worse; and (2) there is a large group of people who think if we pass the right laws, we'll solve things. Hayden said there is a group on the right who want to let government implode. "But if we start at the top and get people to sit down and work together, it can permeate," he said.

Another interviewer asked how we can get a conversation going on something like affordable housing, when there's such massive ignorance about how the world works. Hayden responded that it's interesting how people who are hurt most by government not meeting their needs are very vulnerable to activism that is not always rooted in solutions that would make the most sense to the people who know the most about it.

"It's still our job to listen and be at the table," he said. The way to educate both sides is to sit down together and build empathy. But first, he said, you must build trust. You have to be able to trust that people won't second-guess what you're trying to do. "We have to consider that maybe the idea we've had for a long time can be tweaked," he said.

**Looking for instant results breeds impatience.** An interviewer made that comment and said people have to be patient and stick with an idea long enough to give it time to work. It's important to report on a consistent basis small steps being made. "When people get in silos, you don't recognize that you're making progress," he said. "People need to be able to claim successes. And we must create more opportunities in more places for people to say what they believe without someone jumping on them."

**Because of technology, millennials have a hard time having meaningful interactions.** Hayden said a few decades ago, there was a lot more human interaction and people saw each other more. "How do we create those interactions in this digital age when people are getting more isolated?" he asked.

An interviewer said Adam Grant, in his new book, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, says if you ask people to explain how a policy works, they tend to be a lot more moderate than they self-identify. It's different if you ask them where they stand on a policy or an issue.

To get a conversation started, the interviewer said, you must reach out in an open-minded and empathetic way to individuals and let them feel their opinions are valued and that you just want to understand where they're coming from. "Once you do that," she said, "you can start to parse out the common ground."

**Don't we just create a third label when we call it No Labels?** An interviewer asked that question and Hayden responded, "No. We're not asking anyone to put aside his or her beliefs. We're not even going to say we're 'independents' or 'moderates,' even though a lot of them are moderates."

He said there are two groups in politics: (1) people who think they're right all the time and don't want to work with the other side and (2) people who are willing to sit down and work with the other side. "I want No Labels to be that second group," Hayden said. He thinks the organization can resonate with what some people are calling the "new center."

**In the national spotlight, people have to play partisan ball.** Hayden made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that there is less evidence at the state level than at the national level of people not working with the other side. The interviewer said an organization trying to come up with good ideas has a better chance of getting those ideas considered and acted upon at the state level than at the national level.

Hayden said there is more "big money" at the national level, along with more people who can't change their minds about things. There's not as much news coverage at the state level, making it easier for people to be less partisan than when they're in the national spotlight.

**No Labels Minnesota is seen now as the gold standard for state organizations.** Hayden said that's true because the Minnesota group has events, a website and good social media interaction. "The national team has used us as petri dish," he said. "They realize they have to build out a state network." He said 1,000 people, representing all 50 states, attended the national No Labels convention in Washington, D.C., in March.

**Is the middle being represented?** An interviewer asked that question and Hayden said he has the same worry. He said No Labels is trying to do something about it. The national organization has been involved in several primary elections and was successful in knocking out two Congressional candidates from the Freedom Caucus. "We must go out and play politics," Hayden said. "We've got to play the game and we need to spend some money on it."

**The national No Labels PACs are going to provide money to people who are more altruistic about their reasons for running for office.** An interviewer asked how to counteract large amounts of "dark money" being poured into far-right organizations and candidates. "You can't just lie down and let that roll all over you," Hayden said. "Until we get some kind of campaign finance reform, you're going to have to come to the table."

He noted that all donors to the No Labels PACs—one supporting Democratic candidates and one supporting Republican candidates—are listed on the organization's website. The Minnesota No Labels group does not have any PACs yet.

**Part of the problem is finding the right people who are willing to run for public office.** An interviewer made that comment and said many people want to run for office because they think they'll have more power. He asked what No Labels wants the political system to look like.

Hayden responded: no government shutdowns, issues being addressed, meaningful campaign debates, the discussion being elevated, people being educated. "What we have now is just a catfight," Hayden said. "Now we have candidates who are very partisan. Who'd be crazy enough to run against that kind of person? People have seen what it's like. You're really putting yourself out there. How do you find someone to run against these big party personalities?"

**Are there organizations or movements in Minnesota that are chiefly interested in understanding how things work before they speak?** An interviewer asked that question and Hayden's first reply was the Civic Caucus. When the interviewer asked him for other examples,

Hayden named *MinnPost*, an online news publisher best known for its coverage of Minnesota policy and politics. (See March 10, 2017, [Civic Caucus interview with the publisher and CEO of \*MinnPost\*, Andy Wallmeyer](#) .)

"*MinnPost* does a good job of educating people," Hayden said. "When I read a *MinnPost* article, I feel like I'm in class. It reports more than 'this is what happened.'"

**There were a lot of racial tensions before the 2016 election.** Hayden made that remark, mentioning events in Dallas as an example. He noted some of the problems we have around racism and how difficult they are to solve. "It's going to be as difficult in a lot of ways to solve the partisanship issue," he said. "I think they're linked in a lot of ways. Racism and people being resistant to change play a part in this."

**Rural counties, which voted overwhelmingly for Trump, have cultural traditions they want to preserve.** An interviewer made that statement and said rural people see changes in the country as diluting the world they believe is important to them. "There's not a sense in some other people of how important these cultural traditions are and how they anchor people in place," the interviewer said.

Hayden responded, "The empathy and the exposure that will help with some of the racism we're dealing with will affect the political things, as well. They play into each other. It's not just racism. It's a culture thing; it's an ethnicity thing."

**No Labels Minnesota is putting effort into bringing the partisanship down.** Hayden made that remark and said that it's not just Trump supporters or people on the right who are contributing to partisanship. "There are things happening on the left that don't make any sense, either," he said.

"We need to be honest and see things from both sides," he continued. "If Donald Trump is making laws, we have to have government that's functional. We must have a government that serves the people who are offended by government, when it comes to basic democracy, being represented, and when it comes to having problems solved on a national and local level. The bridges need to work. We can't get hung up on partisanship or we're done for."

Hayden noted that Ohio Governor John Kasich recently said that the political system as we know it is going to change as this next generation comes up. The partisanship is going to change, too. "I think No Labels can play a big part in that," Hayden said.