

Voters' Attitudes about America's Growing Budget Deficit and National Debt

Findings from a nationwide survey among registered voters, conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies

Methodology

From February 18-23, 2009, Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies interviewed a representative national cross section of 1,008 registered voters. This current quantitative effort was preceded by significant qualitative work, including both traditional focus groups and an interactive response session, to inform the development of the survey instrument. The margin of error for the national survey findings is ± 3.1 percentage points.

Key Findings

Amidst the current economic crisis and Washington's efforts to stabilize markets and key economic indicators, American voters also are intently focused on the country's long-term fiscal health and place a strong priority on dealing with the country's growing budget deficit and national debt. In fact, voters see these long-term economic trends—specifically, the country's growing budget deficit and national debt—as very serious and significant threats to the nation and its future. Further, a wide majority of voters say that leaders in Washington are not paying enough attention to these issues.

This survey's findings indicate firm consensus about the fundamental importance of fiscal health, and the data reveal both opportunities and challenges in advancing a policy agenda and building the requisite political will to address these deep, structural challenges in a comprehensive and sustained manner. For example, voters are divided about whether now is the right time to undertake significant fiscal reforms to deal with the deficit, given the current state of the economy. Similarly, there is a nearly even split between those who believe that major structural reforms will be required to address this situation, and those who say that simply cutting fraud, waste, and abuse along with reducing funding for the Iraq War will adequately address the country's long-term budget problems.

Yet while there is a lack of consensus around some of the specific policy initiatives to address the deficit and debt, a majority of Americans support the proposal to create a special bipartisan commission that would be charged with recommending solutions that Congress could either accept or reject, rather than addressing these challenges through the regular congressional process.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Voters view America’s growing budget deficit and national debt as a major threat to our future and as cause for significant concern—both for the nation and (albeit to a lesser extent) personally, for their families. Many voters rank addressing our budget problems as a top priority for the Obama Administration, right behind the preeminent urgency of getting the economy back on track and getting Americans back to work.

- An overwhelming majority of voters characterize our budget problems as a very (66%) or fairly (19%) big threat to the nation’s future. More voters identify these budget problems as a very big threat than a number of other serious threats, including a country that is not friendly to the United States developing nuclear weapons capabilities (58% very big threat), manufacturing jobs continuing to move overseas (57%), America’s schools not adequately preparing our young people to compete in the global economy (51%), and global climate change (24%).
 - Nearly three in four Republicans (73%) and independents (72%) rate our growing budget deficit and national debt as a very big threat, while 58% of Democrats do.
 - Voters also see the nation’s federal budget problems as a personal concern that affects their families. Three in four voters report that our federal budget problems are cause for very (47%) or fairly (26%) serious concern when they think about the problems in the context of themselves and their families.
- Two in five (42%) voters identify dealing with our budget problems as one of the top two most important goals for the new Obama Administration, behind getting the economy back on track (78%), but ahead of other prominent issues such as dealing with the war in Iraq and other international issues (29%), passing health care reform (24%), and cutting taxes for the middle class (20%).

Top Two Priorities for the Obama Administration

	<u>All Voters</u> %	<u>Democrats</u> %	<u>Independents</u> %	<u>Republicans</u> %
Getting the economy back on track and people back to work	78	89	75	66
Getting our financial house in order by dealing with our growing budget deficit and national debt	42	30	40	57
Dealing with the war in Iraq and other international challenges we face	29	31	27	27
Passing health care reform so that health care is more affordable and accessible	24	32	31	10
Cutting taxes for the middle class	20	13	19	30

- A strong majority (56%) of voters say that leaders in Washington are not paying enough attention to our federal budget problems; just 33% say that leaders are paying the right amount of attention (5% say they are paying too much attention).

While voters express fairly strong agreement that our growing deficit and national debt pose a serious threat to the future of our country, and most think that our leaders in Washington are not paying enough attention to these issues, at this point, voters lack strong or clear consensus on when and how to address these problems.

- Voters are divided on whether now is the time to begin addressing these issues, with 47% saying we must act now and 43% saying we should wait until the economy improves. Notably, only 8% say we do not need to do anything.
- Voters also are divided on what they think must be done to address our budget problems. When asked where we should focus in order to get our nation's financial situation in order, 25% say we should spend less on programs such as education, defense, and law enforcement; about the same proportion (22%) say we should increase taxes; and 40% say we should make major reforms to entitlement programs.
 - The misconception that we can in fact get our budget situation in order by simply ferreting out waste, fraud, and abuse and cutting spending on the Iraq War is fairly firmly rooted, with 44% of voters believing this will get the job done. Approximately the same proportion (45%) understand that we must also make major structural changes to entitlement programs.
 - Those more likely to think we can get the job done by only cutting waste, fraud, abuse, and spending on the war in Iraq include Democrats (58%), African Americans (55%), and Obama voters (55%).
 - Those more likely to think we also need major structural changes to entitlement programs include Republicans (57%), college-educated men (52%), and McCain voters (52%).

Voters were presented with 15 policy proposals pertaining to four of the most difficult entitlement program and budget challenges—Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and changes to the federal tax system. If enacted, these proposals would help sustain these programs and begin to get the federal budget in order. While support outweighs opposition for a majority of the proposals tested, significant challenges lie ahead in garnering voters' support for major structural reforms to important entitlement programs and our federal tax system.

- Voters are more willing to express support for proposals that they perceive to have fewer negative consequences for them personally, or proposals for which the tradeoffs may not be clear, such as capping Medicare payments to physicians, hospitals, and other providers at the rate of growth of the overall economy (73% support, 24% oppose), and lowering the federal share of Medicaid payments to states and turning over more responsibility for Medicaid to the states (63% support, 31% oppose).

- Opposition outweighs support for several proposals that voters can easily relate to their own personal situation, such as gradually increasing the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 to 70 (41% support, 57% oppose), decreasing the annual Social Security cost of living adjustment (38% support, 59% oppose), and limiting the amount of employer-paid health care coverage that employees can receive tax free and taxing any coverage over the limit (34% support, 61% oppose).

By a significant margin (56% to 30%), voters prefer a special bipartisan commission over the regular congressional process as the best means by which to begin tackling our growing budget deficit and national debt.

- By two to one (61% to 33%), voters feel that the best composition of this bipartisan commission is one made up of outside economic and policy experts in addition to members of Congress from both parties and Obama Administration officials, as opposed to limiting the commission to just policymakers from Congress and the Administration.