You Can’t Get There From Here: Talking to the Public on the Deficit and National Debt

Presentation at The Human Side of the Fiscal Crisis Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget

10 March 2011
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What is Public Agenda?

• A nonpartisan, nonprofit organization devoted to public opinion and public engagement
• Founded in 1975 by social scientist Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance
The Problem on the Budget

• Inside the Beltway
  – Most say practical solutions to the budget exist
  – Most also say partisanship will keep us from achieving them

• Outside the Beltway:
  – Increased public concern
  – Knowledge levels are low
  – Few solutions have clear support in surveys

• This can’t go on, but how does D.C. get “permission to act?”
The Problem

• Much of the current debate is too wonky to work
  – In D.C., focused on details, bargaining positions, brokering a deal
  – The public is only partially paying attention; have busy lives, and are more concerned with the values and consequences than the tactical maneuvering
  – More info doesn’t necessarily make for better decisions; it’s all about context
The Public’s Learning Curve

Potential barriers:
- Lack of urgency
- Deliberate confusion
- Lack of practical choices
- Lack of understanding
- Wishful thinking/denial
- Mistrust

Consciousness raising

Working through
Requires facts, choices, time

Resolution
What the Public Needs

• The Strategic Facts:
  – A sense of proportion: the spending pie chart
  – Tax rates historically low
  – What’s driving the long-term problem (health and demographics)

• Focus on Priorities:
  – People understand the government can’t do everything, so what should it do? What can it afford to do?
  – Not the same as bargaining positions

• A sense of options
  – What are the real choices, and implications?
Resources

Public Agenda
www.publicagenda.org

Choosing Our Fiscal Future
www.ourfiscalfuture.org

Where Does the Money Go?
www.wheredoesthemoneygo.com

For more information, visit PublicAgenda.org
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