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## SUMMING UP PUBLIC OPINION ON FEDERAL DEBT AND DEFICITS

### February 2010

The federal budget and the national debt are getting a lot of attention lately, but how does the public see this problem? Public Agenda has compiled recent survey data from other organizations that sheds light on how worried the public is about federal finances, how well they understand the issue and potential solutions, and whether they trust the government to address it.

Public Agenda ([www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)), is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization devoted to public opinion and citizen engagement. For more of Public Agenda’s work on the federal deficit and national debt, please visit Our Fiscal Future on Facebook, @FiscalFuture on Twitter, or [www.ourfiscalfuture.org](http://www.ourfiscalfuture.org).

**Concern about deficits and debt:**

**The public has rated the federal budget deficit and the national debt as an important issue consistently over the past year, and there is evidence that concerns are rising (at least since 2008). Most are also pessimistic that the government will reduce the deficit in the coming years.**

- (How important are the following issues to you personally...not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important or extremely important?) How about...the federal budget deficit?

	Apr, 2009	Jul, 2009	Sep, 2009	Oct, 2009	Nov, 2009	Dec, 2009	Jan, 2010
Extremely important	38%	40%	40%	38%	38%	35%	39%
Very important	33%	38%	34%	35%	34%	37%	35%
Moderately important	20%	14%	14%	17%	17%	19%	16%
Slightly important	6%	5%	7%	7%	5%	6%	6%
Not at all important	2%	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%	2%
Don't know	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%

*Associated Press/Gfk Poll*

- How worried are you that increasing federal debt will harm the financial future of your children and grandchildren?...Very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, not at all worried.

	Sep, 2008	Nov, 2008	Jan, 2009	Apr, 2009	Jul, 2009	Sep, 2009	Jan, 2010
Very worried	42%	38%	45%	49%	46%	47%	50%
Somewhat worried	37%	39%	34%	30%	34%	33%	31%
Not too worried	11%	13%	13%	12%	11%	11%	11%
Not at all worried	8%	9%	7%	9%	8%	9%	8%
Does not apply (Vol.)	2%		1%	1%	1%	1%	*
Don't know		1%	1%	*	*	*	*

*Associated Press/Gfk Poll*

- Please tell me if each of the following is something that makes you angry, something that bothers you but doesn't make you angry, or is this something that does not bother you. Does...the growing federal budget deficit make you angry, bother you but not make you angry, or does this not bother you?

37%	Angry
48%	Bothers, but not angry
13%	Doesn't bother
2%	Don't know/Refused

*Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, Feb, 2010*

- (For each of the following, please tell me if you are mostly optimistic or mostly pessimistic.)...That the government will reduce the deficit in the years ahead.

37%	Mostly optimistic
61%	Mostly pessimistic
2%	Not sure

*Bloomberg Poll, Dec, 2009*

**Priority among other issues:**

**While concern about the budget deficit is high, the issue isn't the top priority for most people. Not surprisingly, the greatest emphasis is on the economy and jobs, but terrorism, Social Security, education and Medicare all rank ahead of the deficit. And when asked directly what is more important, paying for health care and paying for education comes on top of reducing the deficit.**

- I'd like to ask you some questions about priorities for President Obama and Congress this year. As I read from a list, tell me if you think the item that I read should be a top priority, important but lower priority, not too important or should it not be done.

<b>Top Domestic Priorities for Obama and Congress</b>											
<i>Percent considering each as a "top priority"</i>	Jan 2001	Jan 2002	Jan 2003	Jan 2004	Jan 2005	Jan 2006	Jan 2007	Jan 2008	Jan 2009	Jan 2010	09-10 change
Strengthening nation's economy	81	71	73	79	75	66	68	75	85	<b>83</b>	-2
Improving the job situation	60	67	62	67	68	65	57	61	82	<b>81</b>	-1
Defending US against terrorism	--	83	81	78	75	80	80	74	76	<b>80</b>	+4
Securing Social Security	74	62	59	65	70	64	64	64	63	<b>66</b>	+3
Improving educational system	78	66	62	71	70	67	69	66	61	<b>65</b>	+4
Securing Medicare	71	55	56	62	67	62	63	60	60	<b>63</b>	+3
Reducing budget deficit	--	35	40	51	56	55	53	58	53	<b>60</b>	+7
Reducing health care costs	--	--	--	--	--	--	68	69	59	<b>57</b>	-2
Dealing with problems of poor	63	44	48	50	59	55	55	51	50	<b>53</b>	+3
Strengthening the military	48	52	48	48	52	42	46	42	44	<b>49</b>	+5
Dealing with US energy problem	--	42	40	46	47	58	57	59	60	<b>49</b>	<b>-11</b>
Providing health ins. to uninsured	61	43	45	54	60	59	56	54	52	<b>49</b>	-3
Reducing crime	76	53	47	53	53	62	62	54	46	<b>49</b>	+3
Dealing with moral breakdown	51	45	39	45	41	47	47	43	45	<b>45</b>	0
Stricter rules for financial institutions	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	<b>45</b>	--
Protecting the environment	63	44	39	49	49	57	57	56	41	<b>44</b>	+3
Reducing middle class taxes	66	43	--	44	48	51	48	46	43	<b>42</b>	-1
Dealing with illegal immigration	--	--	--	--	--	--	55	51	41	<b>40</b>	-1
Reducing influence of lobbyists	--	--	--	--	--	--	35	39	36	<b>36</b>	0
Dealing with global trade	37	25	--	32	32	30	34	37	31	<b>32</b>	+1
Dealing with global warming	--	--	--	--	--	--	38	35	30	<b>28</b>	-2

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*Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, January, 2010*

- Let me list some issues that have been proposed for the federal government to address. Please tell me which one of these items you think should be the top priority for the federal government....Job creation and economic growth, national security and terrorism, the deficit and government spending, health care, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, energy and the cost of gas, social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage...(If More than one, ask:) Well, if you had to choose just one, which do you think should be the top priority?

38%	Job creation and economic growth
17%	National security and terrorism
13%	The deficit and government spending
12%	Health care
10%	The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
4%	Energy and cost of gas
3%	Social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage
3%	All equally (Vol.)

*NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, Jan, 2010*

- If you were setting priorities these days, would you place a higher priority on spending more to [INSERT], or reducing the budget deficit?

	Spending More	Reducing Deficit	Unsure
Make health care more accessible and affordable	59%	35%	6%
Improve the education system	58%	38%	4%
Develop new energy technology	49%	45%	6%

*Pew Research Center Poll, March 31-April 6, 2009.*

**Lack of trust in the government to address the problem:**

**Most Americans think the government can reduce unnecessary spending. At the same time, majorities think that the government is wasteful and don't trust it to manage its finances.**

- Do you think the federal government has reduced unnecessary spending as much as it can, or do you think the government could spend less and save more if it tried harder?

9%	Reduced as much as possible
87%	Could spend less and save more
4%	Don't know

*FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, May, 2009*

- (Now I am going to read you a series of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. For each statement, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it or completely disagree with it.)...When something is run by the government, it is usually inefficient and wasteful.

25%	Completely agree
32%	Mostly agree
32%	Mostly disagree
7%	Completely disagree
4%	Don't know/Refused

*Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Survey, Mar, 2009*

- How confident are you that the federal government has put in place adequate controls to avoid waste and fraud in the use of federal money in the economic recovery effort? Are you very confident, somewhat confident, not so confident or not confident at all?

7%	Very confident
39%	Somewhat confident
21%	Not so confident
32%	Not at all confident
1%	No opinion

*ABC News/Washington Post Poll, Apr, 2009*

- How much do you trust the United States government to manage its finances responsibly?

12/08	3/09	7/09	10/09	1/10	
5	8	4	7	5	A great deal
29	32	28	28	25	Some
43	35	40	35	40	Not very much
23	25	28	31	30	Not at all
					<b>Collapsed</b>
34	40	32	34	30	A great deal/Some
66	60	68	66	70	Not very much/not at all

*Public Trust Monitor, Jan, 2010*

**Understanding of the problem:**

**Most Americans are aware of the debate around the federal budget deficit. They have a relatively good idea of what our biggest expenditures are, but they have some misconceptions about key facts. For instance, they overestimate the amount of wasteful spending and foreign aid, and underestimate spending on entitlement programs like Medicare.**

- As you may know, the budget deficit is the shortfall when the amount of money the government spends is more than the amount of money it takes in. How much have you heard or read about the federal government's current budget deficit –a lot, some, not much or nothing at all?

42%	A lot
34%	Some
20%	Not much
3%	Nothing at all
1%	Don't know/No answer

*CBS News/New York Times Poll, Feb, 2010*

- On another subject, out of every dollar the federal government collects in taxes, how many cents do you think are wasted?

Average (cents)	
53	2/8/10
51	4/9/06
47	4/14/02
46	4/16/00
56	1/7/98
51	1/29/95
47	8/8/93
46	2/28/93
49	10/21/91
44	9/30/90
46	5/21/90
43	7/29/85

*Washington Post-ABC News poll Feb 4-8 2010*

- How many cents of each tax dollar that goes to [INSERT] would you say are wasted?

	Your local government	The government of this state	The federal government in Washington, DC
None	4%	2%	2%
10 cents or less	16%	11%	7%
11-25 cents	19%	17%	12%
26-50 cents	32%	36%	35%
51-75 cents	9%	14%	19%
76 cents or more	8%	9%	16%
No opinion	11%	10%	10%

*Gallup Poll, Aug, 2009*

- Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?

3%	0 to 1 percent
16%	2 to 5 percent
9%	6 to 10 percent
13%	11 to 20 percent
9%	21 to 30 percent
4%	31 to 40 percent
7%	41 to 50 percent
8%	More than 50 percent
31%	Don't know/Refused

*Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, US Role in Global Health Survey, Jan, 2009*

**Attitudes towards solutions:**

**When thinking about ways to reduce the debt or deficit, majorities support cutting discretionary federal programs, but they also support increasing taxes on the wealthiest individuals. A significant minority also favors tax cuts to help stimulate the economy over reducing the deficit.**

- I'm going to mention some things the government could do to cut the budget deficit. For each, please tell me if you think this should or should not be a main part of any government approach to the deficit—just answer yes or no....Raise income taxes on the wealthy--individuals making \$500,000 or more and households making \$1 million or more, cut discretionary federal programs and services by 5% across the board, raise taxes on the middle-class as well as the wealthy, cut the growth of spending on entitlement programs such as Social Security benefits, create a new federal consumption tax, which would be like a federal sales tax that would be on top of any state and local sales tax

66%	Raise income taxes on the wealthy--individuals making \$500,000 or more and households making \$1 million or more
57%	Cut discretionary federal programs and services by 5% across the board
26%	Raise taxes on the middle-class as well as the wealthy
23%	Cut the growth of spending on entitlement programs such as Social Security benefits
20%	Create a new federal consumption tax, which would be like a federal sales tax that would be on top of any state and local sales tax
5%	None of these (Vol.)/Not sure

*Bloomberg Poll, Dec, 2009*

- (I'm going to mention some specific government programs that add significantly to the federal deficit. For each, please tell me if the spending is justified and should be continued, was justified but should be cut dramatically, or is not justified at all.)...

	Justified and keep	Justified but cut	Not justified	Not sure
Tax cuts for the very wealthy	27%	12%	60%	1%
Government assistance to the banking industry	11%	28%	58%	3%
Government assistance to the auto industry	17%	27%	55%	1%
The stimulus package passed earlier this year (2009)	33%	23%	39%	5%
The war in Iraq	32%	30%	36%	2%
The war in Afghanistan	45%	26%	26%	3%
The Medicare drug program	71%	11%	12%	6%

*Bloomberg Poll, Dec, 2009*

## Understanding trade-offs:

Because the economy and jobs are their top priorities, it is not surprising that the public is divided as to whether the government should spend money to stimulate the economy or create jobs even if it means increasing the budget deficit. They are also not willing to cut spending in specific categories – health care, education or military spending – in order to reduce the deficit.

- If you were setting priorities for the government these days, would you place a higher priority on...spending more to help the economy recover, or a higher priority on reducing the budget deficit?

47%	Spending more to help the economy recover
47%	Reducing the budget deficit
6%	Don't know/Refused

*Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, Feb, 2010*

- Which comes closer to your own view? The federal government should spend money to create jobs, even if it means increasing the budget deficit. The federal government should not spend money to create jobs and should instead focus on reducing the budget deficit.

47%	Create jobs
45%	Reduce budget deficit
8%	Don't know/No answer

*CBS News/New York Times Poll, Feb, 2010*

- In order to reduce the federal budget deficit, would you be willing or not willing for the government to decrease spending in areas such as health care or education?

30%	Willing
62%	Not willing
5%	Some, but not others (Vol.)
3%	Don't know/No answer

*CBS News/New York Times Poll, Feb, 2010*

- In order to reduce the federal budget deficit, would you be willing or not willing to decrease military spending?

45%	Willing
51%	Not willing
2%	Some, but not others (Vol.)
2%	Don't know/No answer

*CBS News/New York Times Poll, Feb, 2010*

**Support for Tea Party movement:**

The new Tea Party movement is associated with a few different issues, particularly around the issue of government spending and taxation. The public is more likely to have positive feelings towards the tea party movement if it is noted that its members are protesting over government spending and taxation.

- (Now I'm going to read you the names of several public figures and groups, and I'd like you to rate your feelings toward each one as either very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. If you don't know the name, please just say so.)...The Tea Party movement.

	Dec 2009	Jan 2010
Very positive	20%	14%
Somewhat positive	21%	14%
Neutral	21%	20%
Somewhat negative	10%	6%
Very negative	13%	15%
Don't know name, not sure	15%	31%

*NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, Jan, 2010*



Nonpartisan and nonprofit, Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues.

Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials of both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning web site offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recognized by Library Journal as one of the Web's best resources, we provide comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

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