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### **D.C. Leaders Believe in Practical Solutions to the Deficit and National Debt, But Doubt They're Politically Possible**

NEW YORK – The "movers and shakers" in Washington are worried about the national debt and believe there are practical solutions for it, but they're just as convinced that partisan politics will block any progress, according to a new survey by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization.

The research, conducted for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the [Choosing Our Fiscal Future](#) initiative, examined how "beltway influencers," those who set the debate and make the decisions in Washington, view the problem. The more than 300 influencers surveyed broke down into two groups:

- "Leaders" included high-level federal government staffers in the executive and legislative branches, as well as media, nonprofit and interest group executives who are key players in crafting and implementing policies.
- "Opinion elites" included politically active citizens in the Washington metro area. This group may not be formally part of the government, but they are educated, affluent and regularly participate in civic activism. They're not decision makers, but they do provide the context in which decision makers operate.

In light of the national debt gaining more attention, with a presidential commission set to make recommendations this December, strong majorities of both leaders (85 percent) and elites (86 percent) believe the rising national debt is a real threat and agree with the statement that "if we do not get the national debt under control, it will overwhelm the federal budget and damage the economy in the long run." But it's not their top priority – only 13 percent of leaders and 9 percent of elites cited the national debt or deficit as the country's most important problem, falling behind the economy (35 percent of leaders and 37 percent of elites) and jobs (19 percent of leaders and 11 percent of elites). A sizeable minority of both groups also worry policymakers are too focused on the issue right now.

Roughly 8 in 10 of the "beltway influencers" surveyed (78 percent of leaders and 83 percent of elites) say there "are at least several practical policy approaches to meet the country's needs without causing the debt to rise." Just as many believe that "there is no realistic way to address the rising national debt by solely cutting spending or solely raising taxes – both cutting spending and raising taxes are required to reduce the debt" (81 percent of leaders and 76 percent of elites say this).

Yet, "Beltway influencers" are highly skeptical that the political system is capable of addressing this issue. Some 78 percent of leaders and 85 percent of elites and say that pragmatic solutions

will be impossible to achieve because of partisan politics. And 99 percent of leaders and 98 percent of elites say that relations in Congress have been a period of partisan conflict, up 15 percentage points since the question was last asked in the summer of 2009.

"The Washington influencers take the nation's financial problems seriously, and they think solutions exist," said Scott Bittle, executive vice president and director of public issue analysis at Public Agenda. "But they're doubtful that the political system can act on this issue – and since this group is part of the political system, that's a troubling perspective."

The survey was conducted by Harris Interactive for Public Agenda between Feb. 10 and March 9, 2010. Full results are available at [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org).

### **About the survey**

The survey was fielded by Harris Interactive® from February 10 and March 9, 2010. Participants included a total of 303 Beltway influencers, comprised of 150 D.C. opinion elites and 153 D.C. leaders including 50 government (congressional staffers and executive branch), 46 media employees and 57 thought leaders from NGOs, interest groups, foundations and associations. The D.C. opinion elite surveys were conducted online and figures were weighted on age, sex, education, race, household income and education where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the D.C. opinion elite population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for the D.C. opinion elite respondents' propensity to be online. Leadership interviews were conducted via telephone and were not weighted.

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### **About Choosing Our Fiscal Future**

The Choosing the Nation's Fiscal Future report is the culmination of two years of effort by the Committee on the Fiscal Future of the United States, organized by the National Research Council and the National Academy of Public Administration with support from the MacArthur Foundation. Comprised of experts who represent a diversity of disciplines, a wealth of experience, and a wide range of political and policy views, the report not only lays out the consequences of inaction, but also shows a variety of paths toward a sustainable fiscal future for America. In addition, it provides a set of practical tests that can be applied to assess the fiscal prudence of federal budget proposals. You can find out more about the report at [www.ourfiscalfuture.org](http://www.ourfiscalfuture.org).

You are invited to join the [National Academy of Public Administration](http://www.napawash.org) and [Public Agenda](http://www.publicagenda.org) for a discussion of "The Buck Stops Where?" and how America can rise above the partisan divide impeding meaningful progress towards setting the national debt back on a sustainable path. The [panel discussion](#) will be on Wednesday, June 30, in the Meeting Level Auditorium of the National Academy of Public Administration, 900 7th Street NW, Washington, D.C., from 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m., with event check-in beginning at 8 a.m. Seating is limited, so please RSVP in advance to [OurFiscalFuture@napawash.org](mailto:OurFiscalFuture@napawash.org).

**About Public Agenda**

For over 30 years, Public Agenda has been providing unbiased and unparalleled research that bridges the gap between American leaders and what the public really thinks about issues ranging from education to foreign policy to immigration to religion and civility in American life. Nonpartisan and nonprofit, Public Agenda was founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1975. Public Agenda's two-fold mission is to help American leaders better understand the public's point of view and help citizens know more about critical policy issues so they can make thoughtful, informed decisions. Visit us at [www.PublicAgenda.org](http://www.PublicAgenda.org), become a fan on Facebook and join the discussion on Twitter.

**About the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation**

The [MacArthur Foundation](http://www.macfound.org) supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In addition to selecting the MacArthur Fellows, the Foundation works to defend human rights, advance global conservation and security, make cities better places, and understand how technology is affecting children and society.

The MacArthur Foundation is on the web at [www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org) and is also on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/macfound).