

# The Buck Stops Where?

NOVEMBER 2010 UPDATE:  
WHAT D.C. INFLUENCERS AND THE  
PUBLIC SAY ABOUT THE NATIONAL DEBT

Research and analysis prepared  
for the John D. and Catherine T.  
MacArthur Foundation's Our  
Fiscal Future initiative

By Scott Bittle and Jon Rochkind  
with Samantha DuPont

 PUBLIC AGENDA



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WHAT BELTWAY INFLUENCERS AND THE PUBLIC SAY ABOUT THE NATIONAL DEBT

## Research Goals

- How do beltway influencers, the “movers and shakers” in Washington, see the growing national debt?
- Are they concerned? Do they think it is a solvable problem?
- How do they see the political atmosphere? Are partisan politics getting in the way of pragmatic solutions?
- How have views changed over time? How does an election season affect things?
- Are influencers ahead or behind of the public on this issue?

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## The Survey

- Public Agenda asked 24 questions on the “Beltway Influencers Omnibus,” fielded by Harris Interactive in February/March 2010
- Replayed 12 questions with Harris in September/October 2010
- In addition 4 questions to gauge public concern were fielded in an omnibus survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates International in the week of October 28
- Replay of the entire Influencer survey will commence February 2011

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## The Survey

- “Influencers” consist of:
  - 150 “Leaders,” defined as congressional and executive senior staff, heads of NGOs, foundations, interest groups and senior media executives
  - 150 “Elites,” defined as affluent, educated Washington, D.C. residents who follow public issues closely and engage in leadership behaviors
- 1003 interviews conducted with the general public for the omnibus survey
- Replay and GP interviews were completed prior to the general election and before the chairmen of President Obama’s fiscal commission issued preliminary recommendations
- Margin of error for the Influencer survey is +- 11 points. Margin of error for the general public survey is +- 4 points. Margin of error between the two surveys is +- 8 points.

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## Summary of Findings

- Influencers continue to say the budget is on an unsustainable path, and worry about the long-term implications
- There's a significant urgency gap between Republicans and Democrats on the national debt, both in Washington and the general public
- There may be a widening gap between leaders' and elites' outlook on the prospects for pragmatic solutions

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## Many things stayed the same in March and October interviews

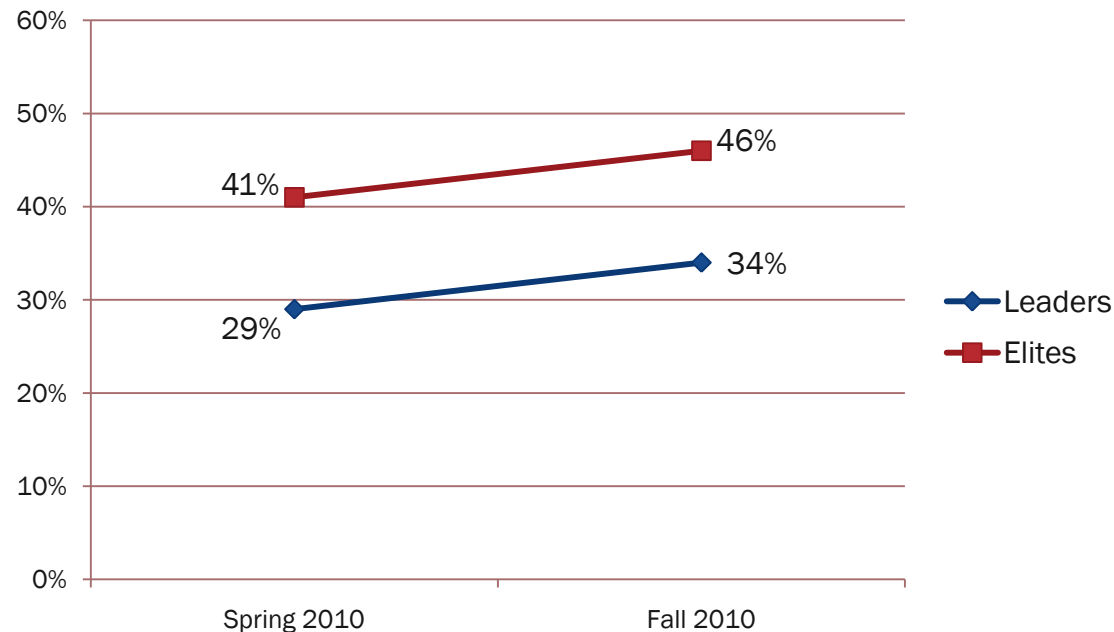
- High majorities of both leaders and elites agree that if nothing is done about the debt, it will damage the economy in the long run
- But only about 1 in 10 name the debt as the most important problem facing the country today.
- Nearly half of elites say they rarely or never advocate on this issue
- And two-thirds of leaders say they rarely or never do this as well.

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But while elites are still more likely to say that practical approaches exist to solving the problem...

Percent who strongly agree that "there are at least several practical policy approaches to meet the country's needs without causing the national debt to significantly rise:"

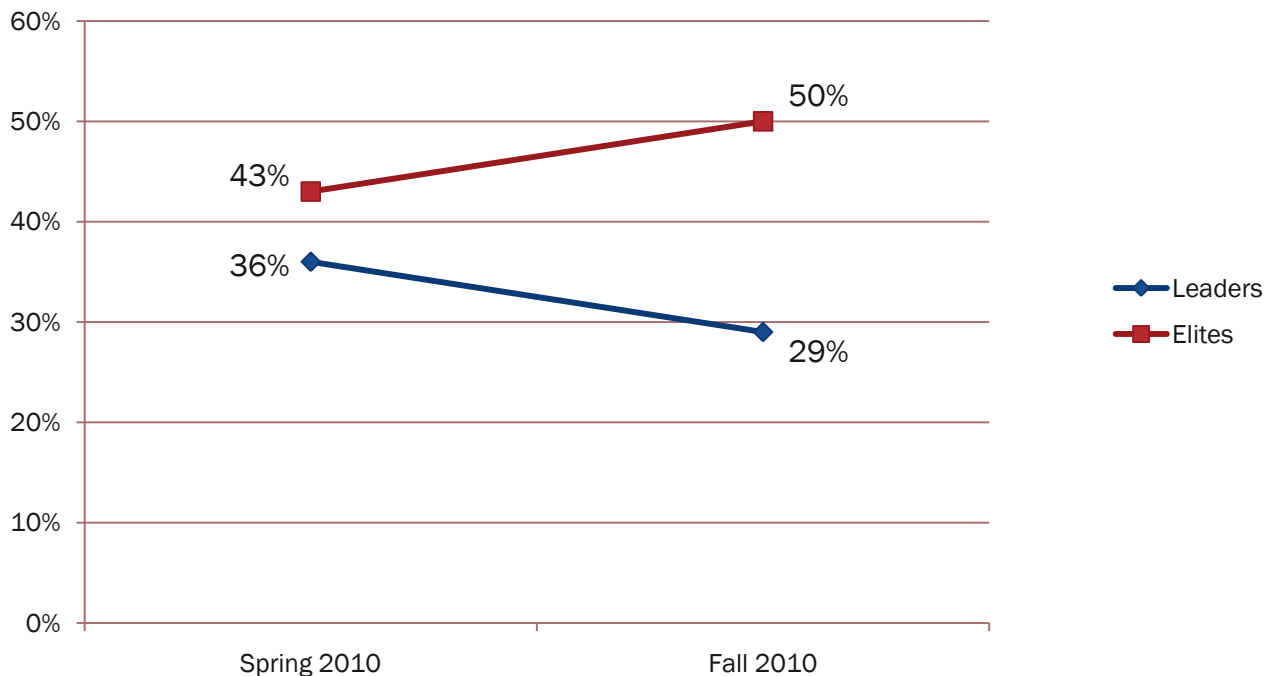


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...there is a growing gap questioning whether solutions are politically possible

Percent who “strongly agree” that “pragmatic solutions to the national debt will be impossible to achieve due to partisan politics:”



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## WHAT BELTWAY INFLUENCERS AND THE PUBLIC SAY ABOUT THE NATIONAL DEBT

Republican influencers are more concerned about the national debt but also more likely to say it can be addressed without both raising taxes and cutting spending

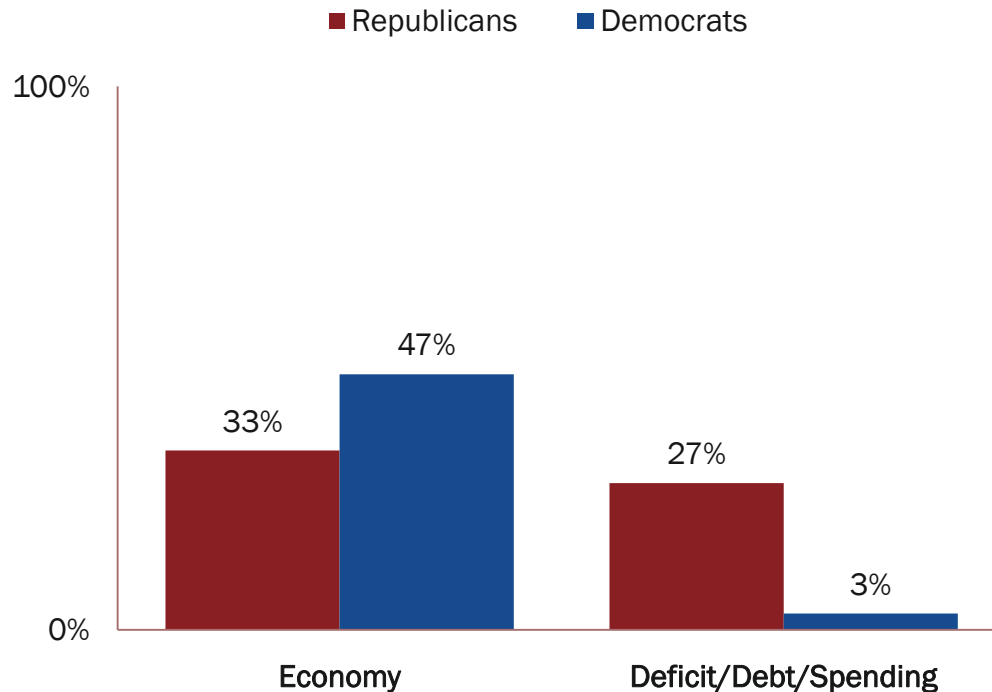
Percent of Republicans and Democrats who:	Republicans	Democrats	Difference
Say it is very important to consider the federal budget when making policy decisions	80%	28%	52%
Strongly agree that if we do not get the debt under control, it will damage the economy in the long run	82%	37%	45%
Are very worried that China and other countries hold too much of the national debt	43%	11%	32%
Say they “sometimes” or “often” advocate policies around reducing the debt	62%	31%	31%
Strongly agree that there are several policy approaches that will help the country and not cause the debt to significantly rise	67%	30%	37%
Disagree that both cutting spending and raising taxes are necessary to reduce the debt	50%	12%	38%

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Republican influencers rank national debt as second most important problem facing the country

Percent who say the most important problem facing the country is...

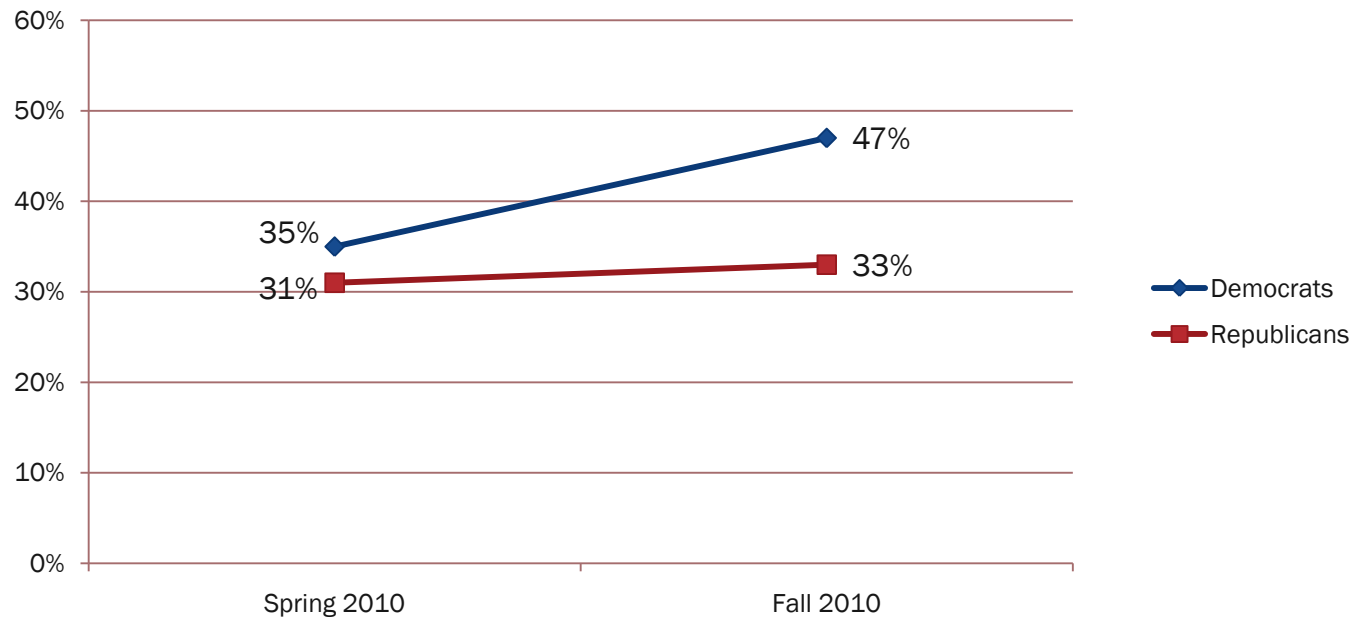


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Both parties say economy is the most important problem but Democrats are more likely to cite this...

Percent who say the economy is the most important problem facing the country:

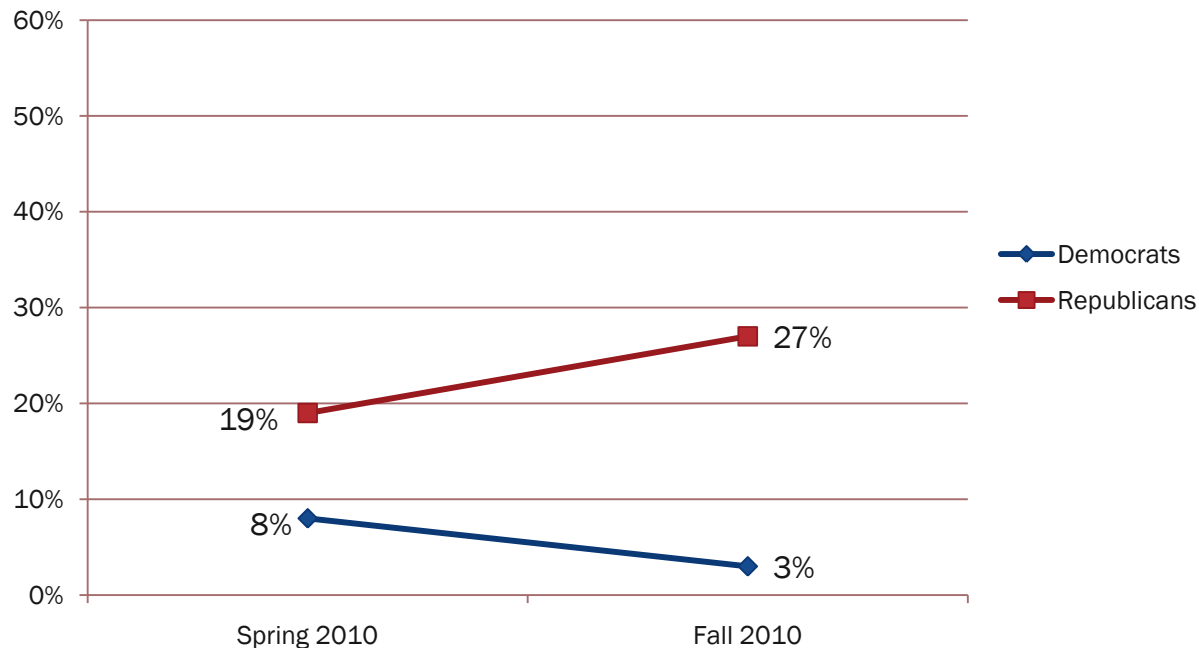


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...While the partisan gap on the national debt as a priority grows more pronounced

Percent who say deficit/debt/spending is the most important problem facing the country:



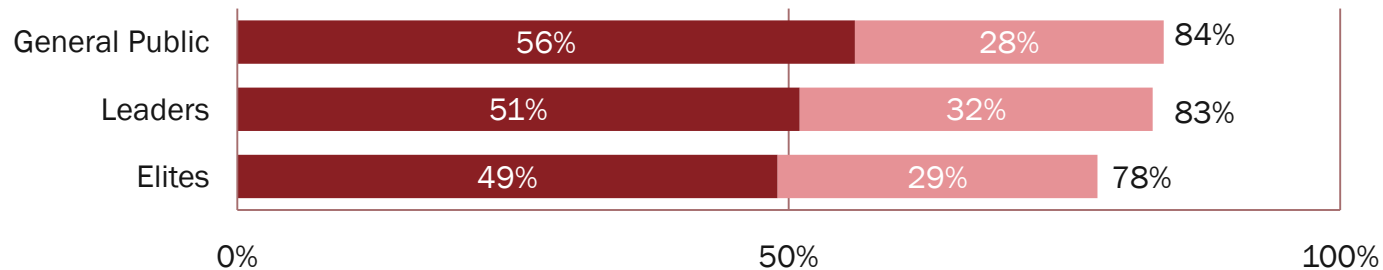
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## Public shares influencers' concerns on the debt

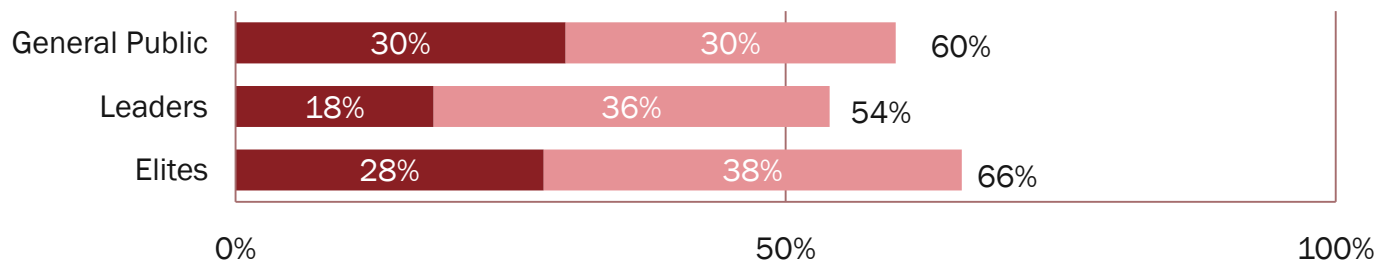
Percent who agree that "if we do not act to get the national debt under control, it will overwhelm the federal budget and damage the economy in the long run:"

■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree



Percent who worry "China and other countries that hold much of the national debt will start to lose confidence in the United States economy and stop buying American bonds:"

■ Very Worried ■ Somewhat Worried

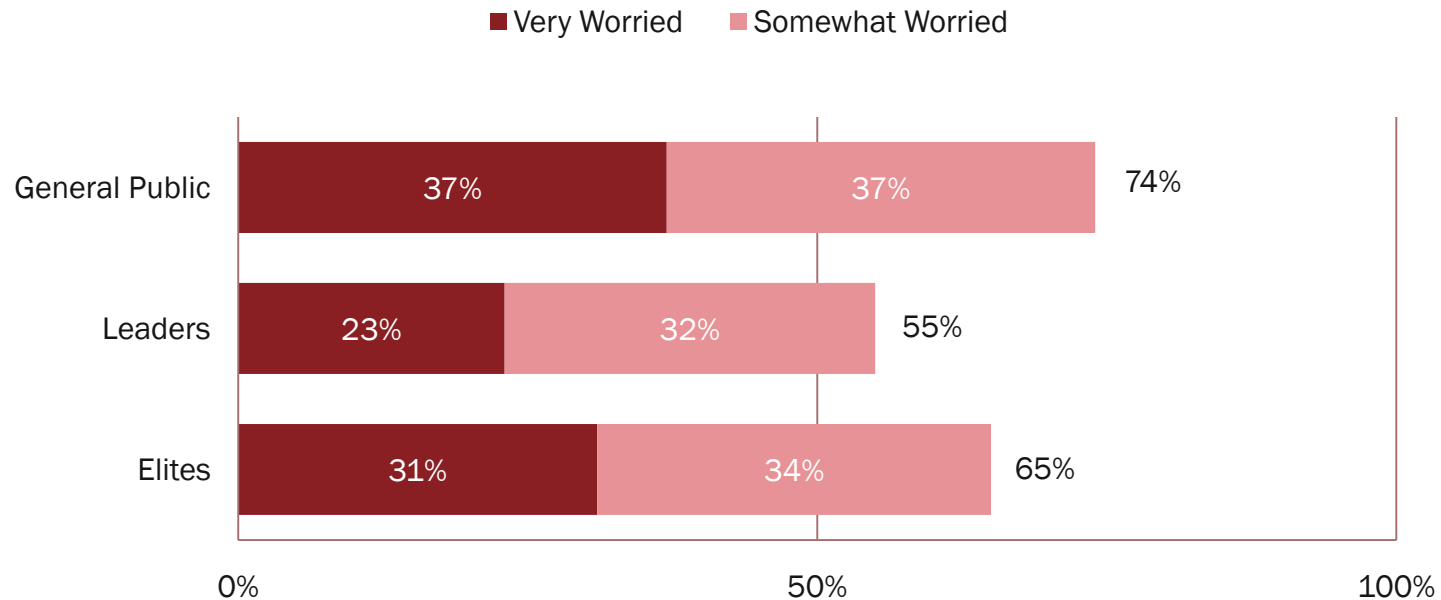


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And they are even more worried that other Americans don't care enough

Percent who worry "the American people in general do not care enough about the growing national debt:"



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## Partisan split extends to the general public

Percent of Republicans and Democrats who:	Republicans	Democrats	Difference
Are “very concerned” about the size of the debt	65%	47%	18%
Strongly agree that if we do not get the debt under control, it will damage the economy in the long run	71%	42%	29%
Are worried that China and other countries hold too much of the national debt	72%	56%	16%
Are very worried that the American people do not care enough about the debt	50%	33%	17%

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## Where is the Opportunity to Move Forward?

- What 's driving the potentially widening gap between opinion elites and leaders on the prospects for pragmatic solutions? Do leaders have a more optimistic view of divided government?
- While they both see the national debt as a problem, the urgency gap between Republicans and Democrats is significant. How does this affect the chances for change?

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For complete survey details, visit Public Agenda at [publicagenda.org](http://publicagenda.org) or Choosing Our Fiscal Future at [ourfiscalfuture.org](http://ourfiscalfuture.org) and join the discussion on Facebook and Twitter (@FiscalFuture).

For questions, contact Amber Ott at [aott@publicagenda.org](mailto:aott@publicagenda.org) or 212.686.6610 ext. 15.

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## About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

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