D.C. Leaders More Worried, Yet More Optimistic About Solving Nation’s Fiscal Problems

With a shutdown barely averted and another crisis looming on extending the nation’s debt ceiling, the federal deficit and national debt has more than doubled as a concern for “movers and shakers” in Washington, according to a new survey by Public Agenda. But even within the Beltway elite, there are major differences in perceptions on the chances for solving the problem.

While the economy and jobs remain the most important concerns for Beltway influencers, as they are for the rest of America, their specific concerns about the deficit and national debt have increased. The percentage who say the deficit, debt, or the budget and government spending are the most important problems have increased to 25 percent, on a par with the economy.

This is the third round of "The Buck Stops Where? What D.C. Influencers Say About the National Debt," a series of surveys designed by Public Agenda, fielded by Harris Interactive and supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which is committed to informing the American public and policymakers of the fiscal realities facing the country. The research has been conducted at six-month intervals to track how “movers and shakers” in Washington view this vital issue. This latest survey was conducted among 305 Beltway Influencers* between February 28 and March 28, 2011.

The survey was in the field as a new Congress took office and during the run-up to the debate over a possible government shutdown and raising the nation’s debt ceiling. The goal is to provide a running assessment of how those who set the debate and make the decisions in Washington view this problem.

The more than 300 influencers surveyed break 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.

The level of concern among both leaders and elites specifically about the national debt has increased significantly over the year we've been conducting this survey. Taken as a group, the percentage who said the federal deficit, national debt, or the budget/government spending was the most important problem rose 14 points, from 11 percent to 25 percent, while concern about the economy has fallen from 36 percent to 23 percent.

The two groups do show differences, however. In March 2010, 35 percent of leaders and 37 percent of elites cited the economy generally as the most important problem facing the country. This stayed at the same level for leaders but jumped to 43 percent for elites in October. By this April, however, that fell 12 points for leaders to 26 percent and 22 points for elites to 21 percent.
By contrast, the percentage over the past year who said the federal deficit and national debt was the most important problem rose 15 points for leaders, from 13 percent to 28 percent, and 12 points for elites, from 9 percent to 21 percent.

Other surveys show concern about the budget rising among the general public, although the economy remains the public’s primary worry. A Gallup poll in April showed 17 percent citing the budget as the most important problem facing the nation, the highest level since 1996. But that is still behind the economy overall (26 percent) and unemployment (19 percent).

The other major trend is that leaders, the actual decision-makers in the nation’s capital, have grown more optimistic about the chances for solving the problem – but the opinion elites are as skeptical as they ever were.

For example, leaders are notably more likely to report that “elected officials are often factoring in the national debt in their decisions”: 41 percent say this, a 19-point increase from a year ago. Also, while a majority of leaders still believe that “pragmatic solutions to the national debt will be impossible to achieve due to partisan politics,” that number has fallen from 78 percent a year ago to 66 percent now. For elites, the number really hasn’t changed at all (83 percent now vs. 85 percent last year). Yet both groups do believe solutions exist. Over the course of the survey, the number of both leaders and elites who say there are “at least several practical approaches” to solving the nation’s fiscal problems has held fairly stable, at about 8 in 10.

Then again, leaders are more optimistic overall than elites -- and, for that matter, the general public. Nearly half of leaders, 48 percent, say the country is going in the right direction, while 44 percent say it’s “off on the wrong track.” Among Washington elites, 62 percent say the country’s on the wrong track, which is much closer to the general public (70 percent in the April New York Times/CBS News poll).

Finally, the partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats on this issue can be enormous, both in terms of perception and intensity of feeling. For example:

- Nine in 10 Republicans say they “strongly 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.” Only 40 percent of Democrats strongly agree.

- Nine in 10 Republicans (93 percent) say the new health care reform law will increase the national debt over the next 10 years; 58 percent of Democrats say it will decrease the debt.

- Seven in 10 Democrats (68 percent) strongly agree that both cutting spending and raising taxes will be needed to reduce the debt; only 24 percent of Republicans say the same.

- However, strong majorities of both Democrats (90 percent) and Republicans (77 percent) say there are practical approaches available to meet the country’s needs without causing the national debt to significantly rise.

“The actual decision-makers in Washington, both in and out of government, seem to be growing a little more optimistic that they can solve our fiscal problems,” said Scott Bittle, executive vice president and director of public issue analysis at Public Agenda. “But they’re not communicating that optimism to the chorus of Washington onlookers. Making the positive side of the debate clearer might help build an environment where solutions can be found.”

More details on the report, including full survey results, are available at www.publicagenda.org/pages/the-buck-stops-where.

Methodology
This Beltway Influencer survey was conducted by Harris Interactive® on behalf of Public Agenda and the Macarthur Foundation between February 28 and March 28, 2011, among a total of 305 Beltway Influencers, comprised of 150 DC Opinion Elite, and 155 “Leaders,” which consist of 50 Government (Congressional Staffers and Executive Branch), 45 Media, and 60 Thought Leaders from NGO’s, Interest Groups, Foundations and Associations. 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 DC Opinion Elite population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for the D.C. Opinion Elite respondents’ propensity to be online. The Leader group survey was conducted via telephone and was not weighted.

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About Public Agenda
Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda's mission is to improve public problem solving through nonpartisan research, engagement and communications. Our main web site is PublicAgenda.org, and we're also on Facebook and Twitter.

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