NEW YORK – On the eve of the presidential deficit commission's report, the nation's movers and shakers remain convinced that practical solutions to the nation's fiscal problems are out there – but there's a partisan gap on how urgent the problem is, and an increasing gap in views on the prospects for actually getting those solutions in place.

This is the second round of "The Buck Stops Where? What D.C. Influencers Say About the National Debt," a series of surveys conducted by Public Agenda 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.

In this round of the research, we examine how Beltway insiders viewed the debt and the deficit during a grueling midterm election largely focused on this issue. The goal is to provide a running assessment of how those who set the debate and make the decisions in Washington view this problem. Their views are all the more critical as the fiscal commission prepares to release its report on Wednesday. The more than 300 influencers surveyed by Harris Interactive 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.

While leaders and elites continue to hold similar views on the national debt overall, there's a growing gap between the two groups in how strongly they feel about it. For example, majorities of both elites (86 percent) and leaders (77 percent) continue to agree that “there are at least several practical policy approaches to meet the country's needs without causing the national debt to significantly rise.” Yet as in March, more elites (46 percent) “strongly agree” with this statement than do leaders (34 percent).

One significant change since the spring is a widening difference in depth of feeling between elites and leaders on another question, namely whether "pragmatic solutions to the national debt will be impossible to achieve due to partisan politics." Half of the elites we surveyed "strongly agree" with this pessimistic view, up 7 percentage
points from March, while only 3 in 10 leaders (29%) strongly agree. That's down 7 percentage points, suggesting greater optimism about progress.

We also asked the general public several similar questions, and found that in many ways, they mirrored the Washington debate. In particular, partisan differences between Republicans and Democrats are mirrored in both the general public and Beltway surveys.

- Republican influencers are more likely than Democratic influencers to be concerned about the debt and have a more optimistic outlook when it comes to solutions. Although majorities of both groups agree that if we do not get debt under control, it will damage the economy in the long run, Republicans are much more likely to agree strongly with this statement: 82 percent of Republican influencers strongly agree, compared to only 37 percent of Democrat influencers.

- Even more striking is that there's an increasing gap between Republican and Democratic influencers on the importance of the problem. A third (33 percent) of Republican influencers say the economy is the number one issue, and the national debt trails closely behind, at 27 percent. In fact, the number of Republicans who say the debt is the most important problem facing the country is now almost as great as the number who cite the economy. Conversely, the economy has risen in importance for Democratic influencers, with nearly half – 47 percent – now saying that it is the most important problem facing the country. Only 3 percent of Democratic influencers say the national debt is the most important issue. That's a 24 percentage-point difference between the parties.

- Among the general public, there's also a gap in concern about the debt according to party affiliation, but it's smaller than the divide between Republican and Democrat influencers. Nearly two-thirds of Republican citizens (65 percent) are “very concerned” about the size of the debt, compared to under half of Democrats (47 percent). And 71 percent of Republican citizens “strongly agree” that if we do not get the national debt under control, it could damage the economy, compared to just 42 percent of Democrats.

"The movers and shakers in Washington seem to agree that we have a fiscal problem, but there's a growing divide in how strongly they feel about it," said Ruth Wooden, president of Public Agenda. "The leaders in government, the media and the NGOs seem more optimistic that solutions can be found, even as the opinion makers around them seem to be growing more skeptical. These widening gaps between leadership groups on the prospects for solutions and even the urgency of the problem could have serious implications for our fiscal problems."

About the survey:

The Beltway Influencer survey was conducted by Harris Interactive® between September 23 and October 28, 2010 among a total of 302 Beltway Influencers comprised of 150 DC Opinion Elite, and 152 “Leaders,” which consist of 50 Government (Congressional Staffers and Executive Branch), 46 Media, and 56 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. All other groups were conducted via telephone and were not weighted.
The general population responses come from telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,003 adults living in the continental United States. Telephone interviews were conducted by landline (672) and cell phone (331, including 134 without a landline phone). The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) as part of their October survey omnibus conducted October 28-November 1, 2010. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies.

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The Choosing the Nation's Fiscal Future report (available at http://www.ourfiscalfuture.org/thereport) 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 (http://sites.nationalacademies.org/NRC/index.htm) and the National Academy of Public Administration (http://www.napawash.org) with support from the John D. and Catherine T. 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 OurFiscalFuture.org.