



2012 NORC Presidential Election Survey: Americans' Views on the Deficit

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INTRODUCTION

The 2012 NORC Presidential Election Survey was designed to measure public opinion about important issues the country faces—the deficit, economic recovery, and health care costs—in part to provide information to the federal government about the opinions of the American people after the election cycle. This survey intends to determine, among other things, what the priorities of the American people are in dealing with the budget deficit, what expectations they have for their elected representatives, and what the most pressing issues are that they, and not necessarily government officials, see facing the United States today.

The following report, “Americans’ Views on the Deficit,” focuses on the opinions of the American people around specific budgetary concerns and the steps they think should be taken moving forward. “Americans’ Views on the Deficit” is being released in advance of the full survey results from Part II of NORC’s 2012 Election Survey, which will be released in January 2013.

Results suggest that while the budget deficit is of large concern to a majority of Americans, even more respondents are concerned about jobs and unemployment. Just under half of Americans would actually be willing to increase the deficit for the sake of increasing spending on domestic programs. Republicans and Democrats have somewhat different budget priorities, yet a clear majority of Americans want their representatives to work with others to get things done.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Part I of the 2012 NORC Presidential Election Survey was conducted in the weeks prior to the 2012 presidential election and was a nationally representative household survey with 2,136 adults. Part II was conducted in the weeks just after the 2012 presidential election with 1,125 respondents re-contacted from Part I. The survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with the following experts: Mark Hansen, Ph.D., University of Chicago; Andrea Campbell, Ph.D., Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Stephen Ansolabehere, Ph.D., Harvard University; and Benjamin Page, Ph.D., Northwestern University.

Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or other affiliation. Self-identified Republicans and Democrats were then asked if they considered themselves to be a strong or not so strong Republican/Democrat. These questions determined the “strong” and “weak” party variables used in many tables. All self-identified Independents were asked if they thought of themselves as closer to the Republican or Democratic party, which produced the “leaning” Independent variables.

KEY FINDINGS

- The public is not quite so concerned as the leadership in Washington with the federal budget deficit. Although nearly everybody acknowledges that the deficit is an important problem, a solid majority sees job creation as an even more urgent necessity.
- Americans balk at reducing the deficit by raising most people’s taxes or by cutting spending on domestic programs. A majority is willing to cut spending on defense. A substantial majority is willing to raise tax rates on the top income brackets.
- Significant partisan constituencies support policies that will increase the deficit. A majority of Democrats supports higher spending on domestic needs. A considerable fraction of Republicans supports higher spending on national defense. A sizeable majority of Republicans opposes raising the tax rates for high-income earners.
- Republicans are more likely than Democrats to demand allegiance to political principles, and to the policies that those principles require. But most Americans, including Republicans, overwhelmingly prefer that their own representatives work with others and make compromises, even compromises that include policies that they dislike.

THE PUBLIC’S NATIONAL PRIORITIES

The federal budget deficit currently receives much attention in Washington, owing to the “fiscal cliff” discussions. The public acknowledges the importance of the deficit as a problem. Asked in November, 74 percent of our respondents said that the budget deficit is a “very important” problem, another 23 percent said it was a “somewhat important” problem, and only 3 percent said that it was not a very important problem at all. As problems go, the public is more anxious about deficits than it is about inflation; though, even in this time of low inflation, the public is concerned about inflation, with 56 percent thinking that inflation is very important and 37 percent saying it is somewhat important. But, the public sees even more importance in tackling unemployment: 92 percent say that unemployment is a very important problem for the nation; hardly anybody, 0.3 percent, says that it is not.

Table 1: The American Public and Economic Priorities

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important
Budget deficits	74.1%	23.3%	2.6%
Inflation	55.8%	36.6%	7.5%
Unemployment	91.8%	7.9%	0.3%

While the national media and lawmakers in Washington, D.C. seem focused primarily on the deficit, our survey found that Americans rank other issues and other budget objectives higher in their priorities. Pushing deeper into the survey, for instance, the public clearly gives greater weight to the unemployment problem. We asked respondents whether it is more important now to spend money and hold down taxes to try to encourage job creation or to cut down the federal budget deficit. A substantial majority, 59 percent, prefers fostering job growth to reducing the deficit.

Table 2: The Importance of Job Creation Versus Deficit Reduction

What do you think is more important right now: ¹	(% yes)
Having the federal government spend money and hold down taxes to try to encourage job creation, even if it adds to the federal budget deficit	58.5%
Having the federal government cut down the federal budget deficit, even if it means cutting spending or increasing taxes and discouraging job creation	41.5%

Job creation is overwhelmingly the priority over deficit reduction for Democrats, while Republicans tend to favor cutting the deficit, though they are also more divided on the trade-off. Two-thirds of respondents who identify as strong Republicans give precedence to deficit reduction, while three-quarters of self-identified strong Democrats prioritize job creation. Independents who lean toward one party or the other are almost evenly divided.

Table 3: Partisan Priorities Between Job Creation and Deficit Reduction

	Democrat		Independent			Republican	
	Strong	Not so strong	Leans Democratic	Pure (volunteered answer)	Leans Republican	Not so strong	Strong
Prioritize job creation	73.1%	76.6%	52.0%	60.7%	47.5%	54.8%	32.3%
Prioritize deficit reduction	26.9%	23.4%	48.0%	39.3%	52.5%	45.2%	67.7%

The public cares about the federal budget deficit in the abstract, but the public also has other priorities. It is particularly the case when it comes to jobs.

THE PUBLIC AND THE BUDGET DEFICIT

The public also has other budgetary priorities. Rather than assume that the public wishes to reduce the deficit, and ask whether they wish to cut spending or raise taxes to do it, we instead presented respondents with a series of budget tradeoffs. We asked them whether they are willing to increase the taxes paid by ordinary Americans, cut spending on domestic programs like Medicare, education, and highways, or cut spending on national defense in order to reduce the federal budget deficit. The only alternative that wins approval from a majority of respondents—by a narrow margin, at that—is defense cuts, favored by 52 percent. Only about a third (35 percent) are willing to raise taxes. Only about a quarter (29 percent) will agree to cut domestic spending.²

Table 4: Deficit Reduction Tradeoffs

In order to cut the federal budget deficit is it ok to:	(% yes)
Increase taxes	35.1%
Cut spending on domestic programs	28.5%
Cut spending on national defense	51.5%

For deficit reduction, the American public is willing to sacrifice, but only (and barely) on national defense.³

In fact, a sizable portion of the American public, if not quite a majority, at 45 percent, wishes to increase spending on domestic programs—even by adding to the federal budget deficit.⁴ Nearly twice as many respondents are willing to increase the federal deficit to increase domestic spending (39 percent) as are willing to cut domestic spending to cut the federal deficit (22 percent). (Table not shown.) Thirty-three percent prefer the status quo, registering disapproval for increasing the deficit to increase domestic spending or for cutting spending to cut the deficit. Smaller but still significant numbers are willing to add to the deficit in order to cut taxes (28 percent) or to add to the deficit in order to increase defense spending (24 percent).⁵

Table 5: Budget Increase Tradeoffs

Would you favor increasing the federal deficit to:	(% yes)
Cut taxes	28.4%
Increase spending on domestic programs	45.0%
Increase spending on national defense	23.8%

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND BUDGET PRIORITIES

Unsurprisingly, the budget priorities of the public relate to party identification, like the priorities of their elected officials. The sharpest partisan divisions concern spending priorities. Democrats are deficit hawks when it comes to defense spending. Sixty-six percent of Democrats (including Independents who lean Democratic), but only 32 percent of Republicans (including Independents who lean Republican), say they are willing to cut the defense budget to close the deficit. Conversely, 61 percent of Democrats, but only 24 percent of Republicans, want to increase domestic spending even if it widens the deficit. Republicans, likewise, are deficit hawks when it comes to domestic programs. Almost half of Republicans (49 percent), but not even a sixth of Democrats (14 percent), say they are willing to cut spending on domestic programs for the sake of deficit reduction. Republicans, however, are almost twice as likely as Democrats to favor adding to the deficit to fund greater defense spending (33 percent versus 18 percent).

Table 6: Deficit Reduction Tradeoffs by Party Identification

In order to cut the federal deficit is it ok to: (% yes)	Democrat		Independent			Republican	
	Strong	Not so strong	Leans Democratic	Pure (volunteered answer)	Leans Republican	Not so strong	Strong
Increase taxes	38.5%	34.4%	42.6%	20.4%	36.3%	29.6%	27.8%
Cut domestic spending	11.8%	8.3%	21.4%	40.2%	55.2%	47.9%	44.2%
Cut defense spending	66.4%	61.0%	67.9%	39.9%	39.2%	36.5%	23.9%

Table 7: Deficit Increase Tradeoffs by Party Identification

Would you favor increasing the federal deficit to: (% yes)	Democrat		Independent			Republican	
	Strong	Not so strong	Leans Democratic	Pure (volunteered answer)	Leans Republican	Not so strong	Strong
Cut taxes	38.6%	22.2%	34.0%	41.3%	14.9%	21.4%	20.4%
Raise domestic spending	67.9%	53.9%	53.5%	35.3%	22.1%	27.8%	22.7%
Raise defense spending	19.4%	9.4%	22.9%	22.0%	36.2%	29.7%	31.3%

Relative to Republicans, Democrats are slightly more willing (by 7 percentage points) to increase taxes to cut the deficit but significantly more willing (by 15 percentage points) to raise the deficit to reduce taxes, at least the taxes paid by “ordinary Americans.” The partisan divisions are much deeper when the taxes will be paid by high-income earners. Sixty percent of our respondents favor increasing the income tax rates for households with more than \$250,000 in annual income. A scant six percent propose to reduce the top tax rates.⁶ Eighty percent of Democrats (including “leaners”), but just 32 percent of Republicans (including “leaners”), favor raising taxes for the highest earners. On the other hand, 58 percent of Republicans prefer that the top tax rates stay the same, and one Republican in ten advocates that the top tax rates be reduced. The top earners receive much less consideration from Democrats: only 17 percent wish to keep top tax rates the same and only 3 percent want to lower them.

Table 8: Support for Tax Rate Increases on High-Income Earners by Party Identification

(% yes)	Democrat		Independent			Republican	
	Strong	Not so strong	Leans Democratic	Pure (volunteered answer)	Leans Republican	Not so strong	Strong
Increase top rates	85.3%	73.9%	74.6%	45.4%	29.1%	41.5%	29.0%
Keep top rates the same	11.5%	23.8%	22.7%	37.7%	57.3%	56.5%	60.2%
Decrease top rates	3.2%	2.3%	2.7%	16.9%	13.6%	2.0%	10.8%

PRINCIPLES VERSUS COMPROMISES

The survey shows that the public indicates a desire for leaders to get things done. We asked respondents whether they think their representatives in Washington should stand by their political principles, even if little gets done, or instead work with others to get things done, even if the result is a compromise that includes provisions they dislike. The vast majority, 79 percent, said that their representatives should work with others and get things done. Twenty percent said that they should stand by their political principles.

The two parties' supporters differ in their taste for cooperation and compromise. Democrats (including Independents who lean Democratic) are 21 percentage points more likely than Republicans (including Independents who lean Republican) to say that their representatives should work with others to get things done. Although partisans of both sides profess a willingness to accept compromise, nearly three times as many Republicans as Democrats expect their representatives to stand by their principles, which they presumably share, even if nothing gets done. Accordingly, for policy choices on which Republicans part company with Democrats—like domestic spending, defense spending, and top-bracket tax rates—the advocates of the “conservative” position are more likely to insist that their representatives hold the party line. Even so, a large majority of Republicans, like a large majority of Democrats, prefers compromise and progress to gridlock.

Table 9: Political Principles and Compromises by Party Identification

	Democrat		Independent			Republican	
	Strong	Not so strong	Leans Democratic	Pure (volunteered answer)	Leans Republican	Not so strong	Strong
Stand by their principles	5.7%	17.1%	16.9%	30.5%	26.7%	38.3%	27.8%
Work with others to get things done	94.3%	81.5%	83.1%	69.5%	71.8%	56.8%	70.0%
Neither (volunteered answer)		1.3%			1.5%	5.0%	2.2%

SUMMARY

By posing questions that presume the answer, most surveys overestimate the public's concern about the deficit. The amount of attention the budget deficit receives from our political leaders in Washington, D.C. outweighs the public's concern for the issue. Right now, with unemployment having exceeded 5 percent for nearly five years, the public's immediate priority is job creation. Even within the confines of the budget, with its merciless tradeoffs, the public has other interests. The public may see the benefit in cutting defense spending and raising the taxes of the well-to-do to address the deficit, but the public cares more about keeping the taxes of ordinary Americans down and spending on domestic programs up than it cares about the deficit. Indeed, a majority of Democrats and a third of Republicans would be willing to increase the deficit in order to spend more on domestic programs and defense programs, respectively. Of course, the public's preferences may simply indicate that Americans do not understand what is at stake in the federal budget. They may underestimate the long-term damage of budget deficits—or defense cuts or domestic program cuts or tax increases, for that matter. Acting on the public's behalf and in the best interest of the nation is a task for our political leaders which the public, in its acceptance of compromise, seems willing to acknowledge.

ENDNOTES

1. For whatever reason, our respondents are more Democratic in their partisanship than other surveys would suggest. The Pew polls gauged partisan identification in five samples of adults between September and November of 2012. In comparison to our sample, Pew's distribution of partisan identification is:

	Democratic	Independent	Republican	Other/DK
Pew	33%	36%	25%	6%
NORC	41%	32%	23%	4%

Reweighting the sample to the Pew proportions, however, makes very little difference to the results reported here, at most a couple percentage points. For the question of priorities between job creation and deficit reduction, for instance, the breakdown of opinion from our data versus the data reweighted to the Pew party identification proportions is:

	NORC Data	
	Original Weighted	Rewighted
Prioritize job creation	58.5%	56.2%
Prioritize deficit reduction	41.5%	43.8%

In Table 1, likewise, the reweighting to the Pew proportions affects the results even more slightly: with the reweighting, we estimate that 75.4 percent believe that the deficit is a “very important” problem, 56.9 percent believe that inflation is, and 91.1 percent believe that unemployment is. In only three other instances in this report, which will be noted, do the percentages change by more than 2 percentage points.

2. Reweight the data by partisanship consistent with the Pew proportions produces a slightly higher estimate of support for reducing the deficit by cutting domestic programs, 31 percent reweighted versus 28.5 percent not. It also gives a slightly lower estimate of support for reducing the deficit by cutting defense, 50 percent versus 51.5 percent—an even split.
3. The pattern is broadly consistent with the responses to the same questions put to a national sample in 1995, in the midst of the budget showdown between President Bill Clinton and the newly installed Republican majority in the 103rd House of Representatives. Then, as now, narrow majorities were willing to cut defense spending to reduce the deficit. Many fewer were willing to raise taxes or cut domestic spending. In fact, compared to 1995, the 2012 respondents are appreciably more willing to raise taxes (35 percent now versus 24 in 1995) and cut domestic spending (29 percent versus 22 in 1995). See John Mark Hansen, “Individuals, institutions, and public preferences over public finance,” *American Political Science Review* 92 (September 1998): 513–31.
4. Reweight the data by partisanship consistent with the Pew proportions produces a slightly lower estimate of support for increasing domestic spending by increasing the deficit, 42.6 percent reweighted versus 45 percent not.
5. Compared to respondents in 1995, respondents in 2012 are about half again as willing to increase the deficit to cut taxes (28 percent in 2012 versus 17 in 1995), increase domestic spending (45 percent versus 31), and increase defense spending (24 percent versus 15).
6. Reweight the data to the Pew proportions of party identification changes the distribution of opinion toward greater support for the status quo, albeit to a small degree. Using the reweighted data, an estimated 56.6 percent prefer to increase top tax rates (versus 59.5 percent without an adjustment for partisanship), and 36.9 percent prefer to keep top tax rates constant (versus 34.4 percent).

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