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REPORT TO CONGRESS CHRONICLES PUBLIC PRIORITIES ON NATIONAL DEBT FROM UNPRECEDENTED NATIONAL TOWN MEETING

“Find the political will to use this input as if it were coming from a powerful lobbying group – because we are.”

Diverse Group of Americans Support Reductions in Spending and Tax Increases After Day-Long National Deliberation

WASHINGTON, DC – New findings will be reported to Congressional leaders this week from an unprecedented National Town Meeting on the nation’s long-term deficits that engaged 3,500 Americans across nearly 60 sites around the country linked together by live satellite and webcast. The [report](#), produced by the nonprofit organization *AmericaSpeaks*, indicates that a large, diverse group of Americans were willing to work across political differences in order to reduce the deficit in 2025 by \$1.2 trillion.

The new report provides additional insight into how the views of participants on spending and revenue options broke down by ideology and geography. It describes the preferences of diverse table groups that developed packages to reach the long-term deficit reduction goal and corrects errors in preliminary voting results reported during and immediately upon the conclusion of the meeting.

Key Findings

- **Defense Spending:** Reducing national defense spending was one of the most popular options for cutting the national deficit. 85% of participants at the 19 primary town meeting sites supported at least a 5% cut, and 51% of participants supporting a 15% cut.
 - A cut of at least 5% in defense spending was supported by 60% of “conservative” participants and 83% of those who identified themselves as “somewhat conservative.”
- **Health Care and Other Spending:** While participants expressed moderate support for increased government action to boost the economy in the short term, participants also expressed long-term support for reductions in health care and “all other non-defense” spending to reduce the deficit to a sustainable level over the next 15 years. 62% of participants supported at least a 5% reduction in the former and 68% supported at least a 5% reduction in the latter.
 - 36% of liberal participants and 58% of those describing themselves as “somewhat liberal” expressed support for a 5% reduction in health care spending. 44% of liberal participants supported at least a 5% reduction in “all other non-defense” spending.
- **Income Taxes:** A majority of participants supported raising some taxes to reduce our long-term deficits, specifically on those in higher tax brackets. For example, 54% supported an extra 5% tax on those earning more than \$1 million a year.
- **Carbon and Securities Taxes:** 54% of participants also expressed support for a carbon tax and 50% supported a securities transaction tax. In developing their deficit reduction packages, one-third of participants who described themselves as “somewhat conservative” expressed support for a carbon tax and securities transaction tax.
- **Retirement Age and VAT Tax:** Two reform options that have received significant attention from the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform – raising the retirement age for receiving Social Security benefits and creating a Value Added Tax – failed to achieve support from a majority of participants. Only 39% of participants supported raising the age for receiving full benefits to 69 and only 24% supported the creation of 5% Value Added Tax.

- Two reforms not included in the presentation to participants but which received strong support from many table groups were reforming the health care delivery system through the creation of a single-payer system and the simplification of the tax code through the creation of a flat or fair tax.

“Thousands of Americans came together and demonstrated it is possible for the public to find common ground on tough policy challenges. Despite predictions from the left and the right, participants from across the political spectrum displayed civility and a willingness to listen to each other’s ideas,” said Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, president and founder of *AmericaSpeaks*. “Together, we are asking our elected officials to listen to their constituents and make tough choices to get our nation’s fiscal house in order.”

The nonpartisan discussion, called *AmericaSpeaks: Our Budget, Our Economy*, was made possible by support from a diverse group of private foundations with a shared commitment to informing the American public and policymakers of the fiscal realities facing the country, including the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. It originated in Philadelphia and linked 19 meeting sites and an additional 38 volunteer-led community conversations across the country. In addition to Philadelphia, other major sites included Albuquerque, NM; Augusta, ME; Casper, WY; Chicago, IL; Columbia, SC; Dallas, TX; Des Moines, IA; Detroit, MI; Grand Forks, ND; Jackson, MS; Overland Park, KS; Pasadena, CA; Louisville, KY; Missoula, MT; Portland, OR; Portsmouth, NH; Richmond, VA and Silicon Valley, CA.

Using keypad polling devices and networked computers, participants identified and prioritized the messages that were used to create a report for Congressional leaders and the President’s National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. Participants used a set of 42 reform options developed in conjunction with *AmericaSpeaks*’ ideologically diverse National Advisory Committee.

The unique meeting seated participants together from across the political spectrum, creating an opportunity for participants to influence each other and find common ground. At the end of the day-long meeting, 60% of participants said they were influenced by the views of others “a great deal” or “somewhat.” Many results of the deliberations challenged the media’s portrayal of the public by demonstrating a willingness to learn from one another and make tough choices.

Dr. Lukensmeyer presented preliminary findings from the discussion to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform on June 30th in Washington, DC. Lukensmeyer is now briefing Congressional leaders on the results released this week. The National Town Meeting was hosted by the nonprofit, nonpartisan *AmericaSpeaks*, which accesses the collective wisdom of the American people on local, regional and national decision-making on the most challenging public issues of the day.

The results being shared with Congress this week includes corrections to some preliminary numbers that were caused by errors in the keypad voting software used during the meeting. The corrections reduced the percentage support for reforms reflected in four categories of reform options: Social Security, raising tax rates, reducing deductions and credits, and establishing new taxes.

A copy of the full report, information on the options presented and a list of National Advisory Committee members can be found at www.usabudgetdiscussion.org.

Resources

REPORT OF FINDINGS: <http://usabudgetdiscussion.org/national-town-meeting-results/>

B-ROLL VIDEO: <http://transfer.fc-tv.com/ftp/fcb/fcvideo/americaspeaks/as-wmv-edit1.wmv>

NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE: <http://usabudgetdiscussion.org/about-2/national-advisory-committee/>

LOCAL OUTREACH PARTNERS: http://usabudgetdiscussion.org/local_partners/

FEDERAL BUDGET 101 GUIDE: <http://usabudgetdiscussion.org/release-of-federal-budget-101-guide/>

BUDGET OPTIONS WORKBOOK: <http://usabudgetdiscussion.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Budget-Options-Workbook-Final.pdf>

About AmericaSpeaks

AmericaSpeaks is a nonprofit organization that provides citizens with a voice on the most important decisions that impact their lives. The nonpartisan organization has convened more than 150,000 people to shape policy making. For more information, visit www.americaspeaks.org.

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About the Peter G. Peterson Foundation

Founded by Peter G. Peterson with a commitment of \$1 billion, the Foundation is dedicated to increasing public awareness of the nature and urgency of key fiscal challenges threatening America's future and to accelerating action on them. To address these challenges successfully, we work to bring Americans together to find sensible, long-term solutions that transcend age, party lines and ideological divides in order to achieve real results. For more information, see www.PGPF.org.

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About the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The MacArthur Foundation 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. Visit www.macfound.org for additional information.

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About the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, established in 1930, supports children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society. Grants are concentrated in the United States, southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Visit www.wkkf.org for more information.

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