

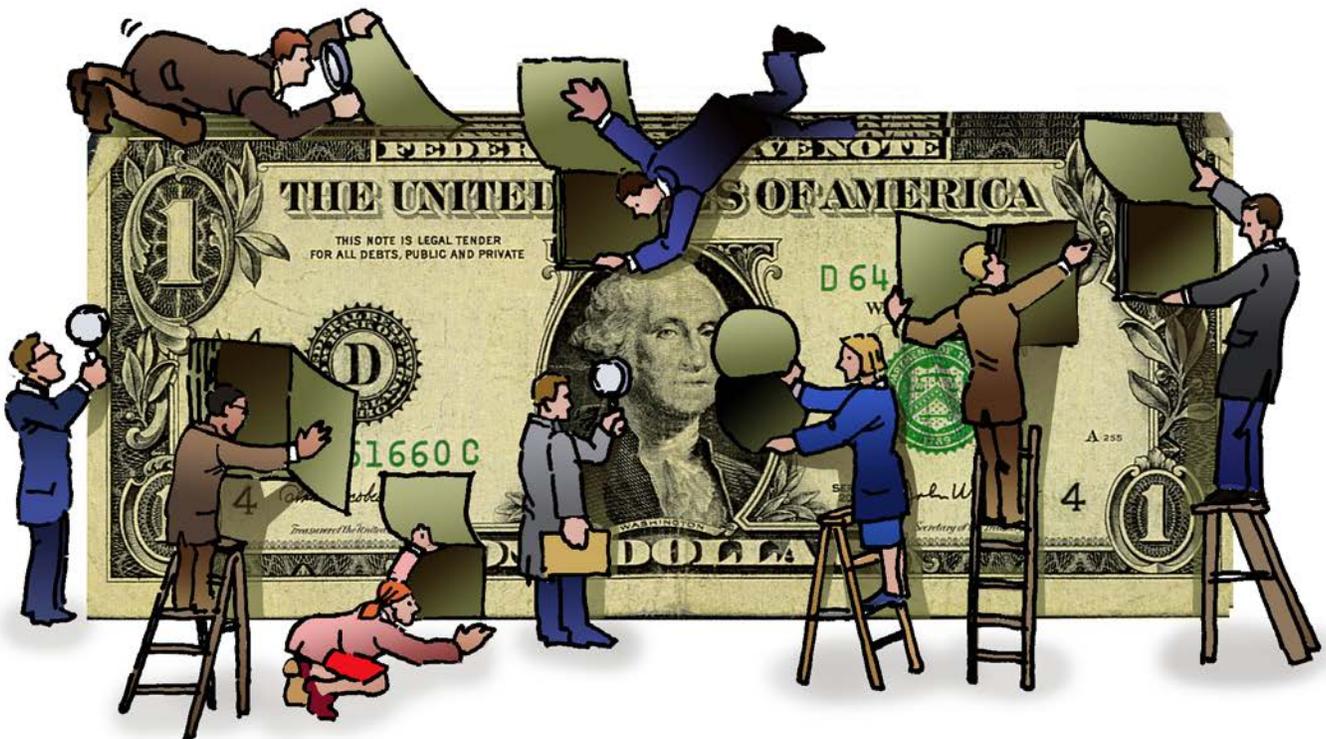
NO EASY WAY OUT:

Citizens Talk About Tackling

The Debt

Insights from Nonpartisan Citizen Deliberations Held in Communities Nationwide

Citizen deliberations across the nation suggest several paths to common ground, but deep cynicism about Washington makes many Americans question whether elected officials would act—even if there were broad public support for tough measures to tackle the debt.



A Public Agenda report on the 2011-12 National Issues Forums deliberations

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By Jean Johnson

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation chartered in 1927.

The foundation is not a grantmaker but rather engages in joint research with others. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should?

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CITIZENS IN SEARCH OF SOLUTIONS

IN AN ERA rife with divisive issues, the country's mounting debt and routine deficit spending could be the most divisive of all. Democrats and Republicans are bitterly divided about nearly every aspect of the budget. Even though experts and bipartisan commissions have suggested multiple alternative roadmaps, lawmakers have repeatedly failed to reach agreements.

Yet this is an issue where solutions are possible. In fact, there are a wide variety of remedies that could be implemented immediately and over time. But the political system is frozen, and lack of understanding and mixed signals from the public itself seem to be contributing to the impasse. We address two questions in this report. First, what happens when typical citizens begin to wrestle seriously with the tough choices and trade-offs this issue presents? And second, what kinds of values and concerns do people bring to this issue when they deliberate about it?

Based on deliberative dialogues convened nationwide by organizations in the nonpartisan National Issues Forums (NIF) network, the answers are promising. In dozens of forums held over the past year, typical citizens were focused, open minded, and realistic as they looked at alternative paths for stabilizing the debt and weighed a wide range of proposals that might be enacted. Nearly all of the forum participants were receptive to multiple ideas for needed change. At the same time, most had questions, doubts, and stipulations that leaders need to understand and address.

The National Issues Forums is a nationwide network of locally sponsored, public meetings that has gathered citizens to talk about pressing policy problems for more than 30 years. These forums on the debt took place between fall 2011 and summer 2012 in 24 states and the District of Columbia, and nearly 50 different venues. What is distinctive and intriguing about these meetings is that citizens from all walks of life—younger and older, liberal and conservative, from the North, South, East, and West—talked at length about how to rein in the

debt. They considered background information on the seriousness of the problem, weighed a number of distinctive options for addressing the issue, and looked at the benefits and trade-offs of a dozen specific policy actions. (See page 8 for more on how the forums were conducted.)

Will Entrenched Politics Trump Common Sense?

This report, *No Easy Way Out*, summarizes the forum participants' views and their implications for policymakers. In many respects, this report contains good news for leaders hoping to forge a consensus on this supremely divisive issue. Many Americans are looking for solutions and most aren't expecting easy answers. Very few came to the forums—or left them—with hardened opinions or non-negotiable items on their agenda. The deliberations were civil and thoughtful, and people seemed eager to learn more, appearing to search for reasonable, fair-minded, compromise solutions.

But there was an overriding fear among the participants—one that should prompt leaders to take a closer look at their own role in the current impasse. Participants in forums repeatedly questioned whether elected officials in Washington shared their sense of urgency and their willingness to make concessions in order to make progress. Many clearly believed that some lawmakers are too entrenched in politics and ideology to negotiate in good faith. Some feared that leaders' intransigence will place the United States and its future in jeopardy.

No Easy Way Out draws on several sources to capture the viewpoints and insights of those who participated in the 2011-2012 NIF forums, including more than 1,200 questionnaires returned by participants after they completed the forums. NIF also gathered reports from moderators nationwide and convened several conference calls with forum organizers to collect their feedback on what they heard in the forums. This report also draws on in-person or videotaped observations of selected forums in Maryland, Wisconsin, Mississippi, and Kansas.



Observations in Brief

THE NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS ON THE DEBT

THE VIEWS OF THOSE who participated in the National Issues Forums deliberations are not a scientific sample of public opinion. Instead, they represent the thinking of a diverse and concerned group of citizens—individuals who have had a chance to consider a number of different options for, and ideas about, tackling the debt. The questions participants raised, the doubts they voiced, and the criteria they discussed suggest what may be needed to develop stronger public will for meaningful action on this historic national challenge.

Key Takeaways from the National Issues Forums

- In circumstances that promote thoughtfulness and deliberation, typical citizens from different walks of life have civil, focused dialogues on how to stabilize the debt.
- Most forum participants recognized that the problem is tough and not easily addressed.
- There was little evidence of generational war between older and younger Americans. Older participants repeatedly voiced their concerns about how the debt would affect their children and future generations.
- Very few brought nonnegotiable items to the table. Most seemed to accept that moving forward will require some changes that they may not like personally.
- Giving people some basic facts and figures is useful, but asking them to look at choices and talk with others about the need for change appears to be even more helpful.
- The forums contain a warning for the country's leadership: The long, bitter tug-of-war over the debt—and leaders' inability to compromise to address it—is fueling citizens' distrust of Washington and their aversion to the political process.

Two Key Challenges for Lawmakers and the Media

- Most forum participants saw shared sacrifice as the best basis for tackling the debt, but most also wanted assurances that people who have suffered economi-

cally in recent years won't now be asked to share "equally." For most participants, the arithmetic of shared sacrifice should include protections for people in precarious circumstances. Most were also cautious about endorsing changes that might harm their communities and middle-class families (such as eliminating tax deductions for mortgages).

- Many forum participants were bewildered by the "austerity versus stimulus" question. On the one hand, they often saw *any* new spending or *any* type of tax cut as adding to the debt, and this worried them. At the same time, most were concerned that large, across-the-board cuts in federal spending would damage the economy, both nationally and in their own communities and states.

Important Questions for Leaders and the Media Emerging from the Forums

- The forums show that people can talk seriously about the debt in nonpartisan, deliberative settings. But there are not many settings like this in today's public arena. Are there ways to provide more of them? Are there trusted, neutral voices—or at least authentically bipartisan ones—to frame and guide such exchanges?
- Many forum participants worried that stabilizing the debt and strengthening the economy were incompatible goals, and that the nation might have to choose one over the other. How can leaders address this dilemma? Would it help to put more emphasis on "phased-in" solutions that attempt to balance these two goals?
- Many participants were looking for guarantees that shared sacrifice will be distributed in ways that protect the most vulnerable members of society. What reassurances can leaders provide on that score?
- Distrust in the country's political leadership is palpable, undercutting the nation's ability to solve the debt problem as well as other problems. What can leaders do to address this fault line in the country's body politic?

National Issues Forums across the Country: Fall 2011–Summer 2012

Alaska

Noel Wien Public Library, Fairbanks | Nov 2011
University of Alaska, Fairbanks | Dec 2011

Connecticut

Manchester Community College, Manchester | Jul 2012

District of Columbia

Nov 2011 | Dec 2011

Florida

Claude Pepper Library, Tallahassee | Jan 2012

Georgia

Georgia College, Milledgeville | Dec 2011
Russell Library, University of Georgia, Athens | Jan 2012

Indiana

Indiana University Library, Bloomington | Dec 2011

Iowa

Des Moines Public Library, Des Moines | Oct 2011
University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls | Apr 2012

Kansas

Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene | Oct 2011
Abilene High School, Abilene | Oct 2011
Kansas State University, Manhattan | Aug 2012

Kentucky

University of Kentucky, Jackson | May 2012
Hopkinsville | Jun 2012
Kentucky State University, Frankfort | Jun 2012

Massachusetts

Suffolk University, Boston | Oct 2011
UMASS, Boston | Dec 2011 | Jan 2012
Emerson College, Boston | Mar 2012

Michigan

Flint | Nov 2011
Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant | May 2012

Mississippi

Mississippi State University | Nov 2011

Nebraska

Wayne State College, Wayne | Oct 2011 | Nov 2011

New Jersey

Monmouth University, West Long Branch | Mar 2012

New Mexico

Santa Fe | Feb 2012
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque | May 2012
Las Cruces | Aug 2012

New York

Hofstra University, Hempstead | Apr 2012

Ohio

Oberlin | Sept 2011 | Oct 2011
Columbus | Nov 2011 | Dec 2011
Worthington | Dec 2011
Dayton | Jul 2012

Oklahoma

University of Oklahoma, Norman | Nov 2011

South Carolina

University of South Carolina, Columbia | Nov 2011

Texas

W.R. Poage Legislative Library, Baylor University, Waco | Feb 2012

Utah

Orem | Jul 2012 | Jul 2012

Virginia

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg | Oct 2011 | Jan 2012
University of Virginia, Charlottesville | Dec 2011
Alexandria | Apr 2012
Richmond | June 2012
Meyera E. Oberndorf Central Library,
Virginia Beach | Jun 2012

Washington

Ruckelshaus Center, Washington State University,
Seattle | Jan 2012
Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington,
Seattle | Jan 2012

West Virginia

Shepherd University, Shepherdstown | Nov 2011
Greenbrier County Courthouse, Lewisburg | Jun 2012

Wisconsin

University of Wisconsin, Madison | Sept 2011
Fond Du Lac | Dec 2011
Washington County | Dec 2011
Madison | Dec 2011
Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy, Wausau | Feb 2012

The Context for the Forums

RECENT OPINION POLLING ON AMERICANS' VIEWS ON THE DEBT

IN THE NIF FORUMS, participants have an opportunity to reflect on issues at length and to exchange views with other citizens. Consequently, their outlook is often different from what emerges in public opinion polling. Before reviewing the outcomes of the forums, it may be helpful to recap briefly what polling on the debt currently shows.

According to surveys, most Americans say the debt is a crucial issue,ⁱ and 76 percent consider it a major threat to the economic well-being of the United States.ⁱⁱ But polls offer mixed signals on whether most Americans truly see the debt as a national priority and whether, as a group, they will endorse the changes and compromises that will almost surely be required to stabilize it.

On the one hand, Americans lambast elected officials who have been unable to reach agreements on the debt and deficit spending. By a margin of 82 percent to 14 percent, Americans say that the 2011 debate over the debt ceiling was “mostly about gaining political advantage” rather than “doing what was best for the country”;ⁱⁱⁱ 85 percent also said the dispute was “mostly about political gain” as opposed to “honest disagreements over economic policy” (8 percent).^{iv} And polls do seem to indicate that most Americans, though certainly not all, want to reduce government spending as one way to rein in deficits. When surveys offer respondents the choice between raising taxes to balance the budget or cutting government programs, most people favor spending cuts, by a 56 percent to 31 percent margin.^v Similarly, just over half of Americans (52 percent) say they prefer a smaller government with fewer services, compared with the 39 percent who want a bigger government with more services.^{vi}

But when surveys turn to specifics, a very different picture emerges. Strong majorities of Americans reject any cuts at all to Social Security

(76 percent), Medicare (80 percent), or Medicaid (65 percent). About half say food stamps and low-income housing programs should not be cut at all (51 percent). There is broader support for cutting defense, but only 1 in 5 Americans would cut defense spending by a lot, 42 percent say “some,” and 35 percent would not cut it at all.^{vii} Earlier surveys have also shown that most Americans reject spending cuts for government employee pensions (68 percent), farm subsidies (66 percent), and funding for National Public Radio (52 percent).^{viii}

There is a vibrant and important debate among experts about whether the United States would be better off moving quickly to stabilize the debt or whether focusing on jobs and improving economic growth should take precedence, especially when the economy is still weak after the Great Recession. Some economists argue that focusing on the debt now is less important than spurring economic growth and reducing unemployment.^{ix} Even so, relatively few experts believe the country can routinely spend significantly more than it takes in for years on end—something we have done for 31 out of the last 35 years. Surveys suggest that most Americans agree in principle, but the question is whether public attitudes are consistent and realistic enough for the country to develop and sustain a broadly supported plan to address the problem.

The Forums: Gathering Diverse Points of View

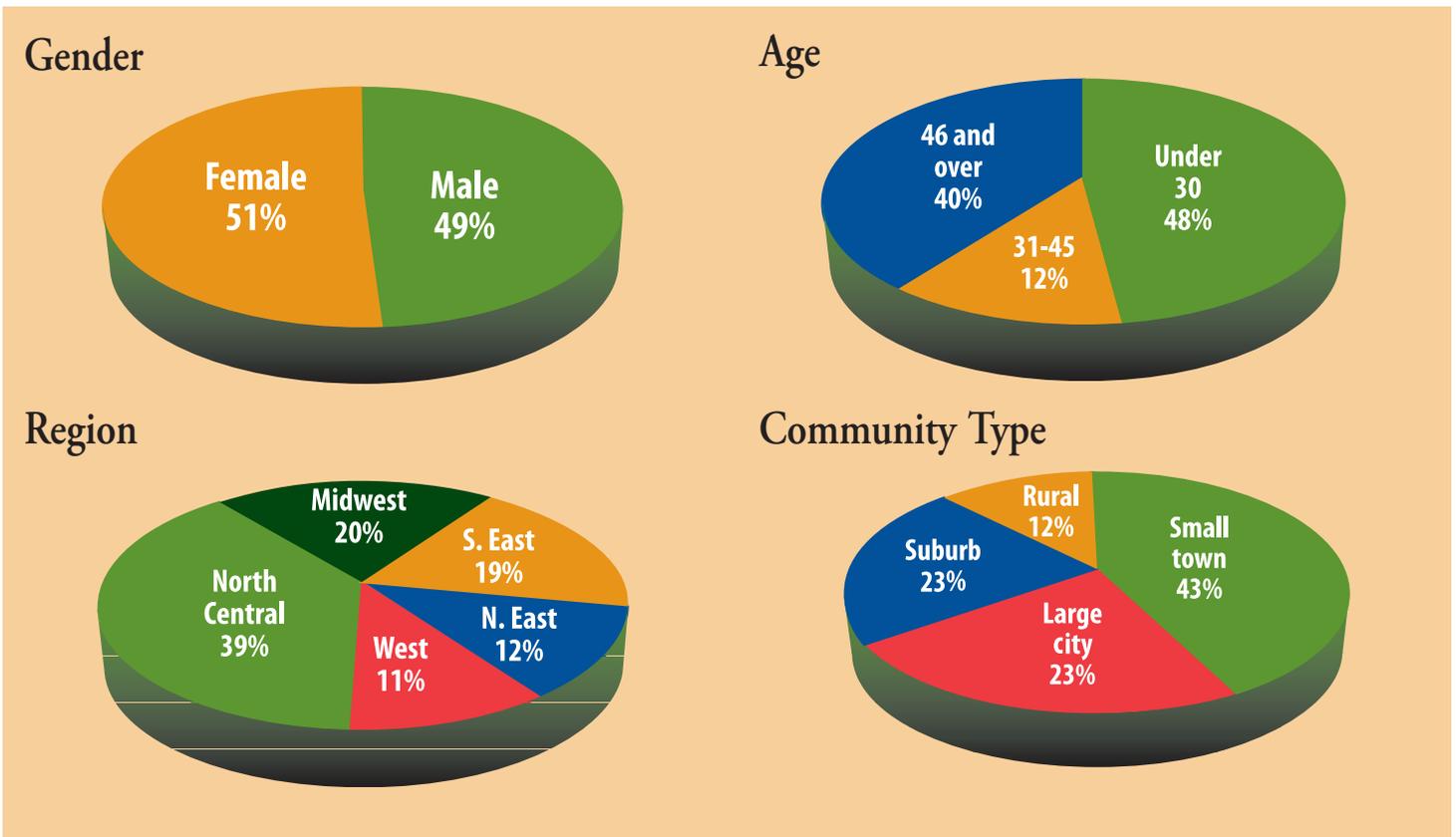
No Easy Way Out should not be read as a public opinion poll—it offers a different type of insight. Because National Issues Forums are open to any and all who want to talk about an issue, the participants do not constitute a statistically representative sample of the American public. At the same time, however, the forums do not attract a narrow, like-minded group of people.

Forums are held in diverse communities and venues around the country, and they attract people from across demographic and political boundaries. About half of the participants came from small towns and rural areas, while the other half came from cities and suburbs. About 15 percent of the participants identified themselves as minority group members. Men and women attended in roughly equal numbers.

Perhaps the participants' most notable characteristic is a specific and expressed desire to learn more about the debt—presumably most wouldn't attend a session on the subject if it didn't interest and concern them. These are individuals who have specifically sought out an opportunity to hear what others have to say. As one said: "My main interest [in attending a forum] is that I want to be able [to] contribute my opinion. I also want to hear other people's opinions as a learning

experience." Although the NIF participants are demographically and socioeconomically diverse, they may well be more interested in national affairs and more curious and open minded than the public at large.

What's more, forum participants were invited to consider the advantages and trade-offs of three options for stabilizing the debt, along with some of the specific actions that would be needed to pursue each strategy. These ranged from reducing defense spending to passing a balanced budget amendment, to cutting business taxes, to investing in research to spur the economy. It is important to point out that participants were not asked to endorse one of the options "as is." Rather, the options are points of departure that allow participants to reflect on their own priorities and to listen to the thoughts and ideas of others.



More about the National Issues Forums

THE NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS chooses several pressing public issues each year as topics for locally organized conversations. Forums on the debt began in fall 2011 and continued into early August 2012, in locations as diverse and far-flung as Abilene, Kansas; Blacksburg, Virginia; Seattle, Washington; Boston, Massachusetts; and Flint, Michigan.

Deliberative NIF Forums: The Basics

The NIF meetings feature a number of distinctive elements that have been developed over its 31-year history to enhance discussion and encourage deliberation:

- Each is led by a trained, neutral moderator.
- Participants use a printed issue guide; accompanying video materials serve as the jumping-off point.
- The guides are designed to promote “choice work.” They describe three or four alternative options to an issue. They detail some of the concrete actions or proposals the country or a community would need to pursue to act on each choice. The guides also point to specific trade-offs for each of the choices, and moderators are trained to emphasize the costs, risks, and trade-offs of each option along with its benefits.

- The content is designed specifically to reflect a broad spectrum of ideas and to be understood by nonexperts.
- Forum participants work through the issue, exchanging views about which options and proposals appeal to them or concern them. Much of the deliberation is devoted to examining the costs, consequences, and trade-offs of various options.
- At the conclusion of the meetings, participants complete a questionnaire that reflects their thinking on the issue after deliberating with other forum participants.

Reporting on What Citizens Have to Say

Each year, NIF prepares a report, capturing the insights of the participants, and conducts briefings for elected officials and other leaders. In many cases, regional convening organizations also prepare reports on the forums in their area. These reports differ from surveys because they reflect the views of people who have received information and several options and had a chance wrestle with the choices and trade-offs each presents. They have also had the opportunity to talk with others who have different experiences and perspectives.

A Nation in Debt

How Can We Pay the Bills?

FOR THIS ROUND of NIF forums, participants across the country saw an introductory videotape describing the topic and used a printed issue guide, entitled *A Nation in Debt: How Can We Pay the Bills?* as a basis for their discussions.

These materials laid out some basic facts about the budget and the debt, such as how much of the budget goes to different programs, the growth in entitlement spending, and the various sources of federal revenue. They also presented three alternative paths to addressing the debt as a means to promote deliberation. These were:

1. Agree to make sacrifices now by compromising on our differences—this is the only responsible way to get a handle on the debt. This choice includes ideas like raising taxes on wealthy households, reducing the home mortgage deduction, and cutting military spending.

▶ *Among the trade-offs considered by forum participants were the ideas that higher taxes could harm the economy and the risk that cutting defense spending would threaten the nation's security.*

2. Strengthen checks and balances by passing laws to compel lawmakers to be fiscally responsible. This choice includes ideas like passing a balanced budget amendment, establishing “sunset dates” for programs and agencies, and banning all earmarks.

▶ *Among the trade-offs considered by forum participants were the ideas that these laws and policies are too inflexible and that lawmakers would easily find ways to “get around” them.*

3. Invest in growth first by balancing the need for fiscal responsibility with the need for job creation and investment in the future. This choice includes ideas like reducing the corporate tax rate, reducing payroll taxes on new businesses, and investing in research and development designed to spur competitiveness.

▶ *Among the trade-offs considered by forum participants were that tax cuts would add to our debt and might not spur the economy and that spending intended to help the economy might not work and would increase the debt.*

What Do the 2011-2012 Debt Forums Tell Us?

WHAT CAN LAWMAKERS and other leaders learn from the NIF debt forums? Why are these deliberations important? One answer is that they demonstrate very powerfully that there is a group of Americans—a diverse and sizeable group of Americans—who are looking for action on the debt and don't expect the path to be easy. This group supports robust, pragmatic solutions, and its voice is often muted amid the din of partisan and special-interest politics. It is possible for leaders to reach out to this group, speak to it, and perhaps broaden it.

Secondly, the forums suggest what the views of the broader public might be if typical citizens had more opportunity to wrestle with some of the choices and trade-offs involved. The questions participants raised, the doubts they voiced, and the criteria they discussed suggest what may be needed to develop a larger and stronger constituency for needed change.

Finally, these forums contain a serious warning for lawmakers about how they are conducting themselves with respect to this issue—at least as typical citizens understand it. The prevailing view among participants, even after they themselves confronted some of the complexities involved in stabilizing the debt, is that lawmakers are putting politics, special interests, and short-term considerations ahead of the good of the American people—ahead of protecting the future of our country.

The United States faces a long march in tackling its debt and deficit-spending problems. Controversies about how to stabilize the debt and reduce deficit spending will likely continue for a decade or more. Proposals for change will include some ideas that are not broadly popular and perhaps others that are deeply unpopular, including some ideas for raising taxes, reforming entitlements, and cutting spending. To make such changes, leaders need to build a broader understanding of the scope of the problems and how alternative solutions would

work. They also need to strengthen the American people's confidence that they are acting for the public good. This is where the insights captured in *No Easy Way Out* may be helpful. They don't offer a prescription for action, but they do suggest the components for building the public's support and trust.

Below are highlights from the forum deliberations, organized into a set of seven observations. Although these are not "findings" like those that emerge from random sample polling, they do represent the prevailing views of a diverse group of Americans, individuals who are arguably more concerned about the debt and whose support may be more crucial than that of the public at large.

Observation Number 1: Many Americans are ready for civil, serious talks about the debt.

The raucous, disorderly public meetings held during the debate on The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act raised questions about whether Americans are capable of having civil, purposeful exchanges on divisive issues. The National Issues Forums experience over the last year offers considerable hope on this score. Even when talking about the conflict-ridden topic of the debt, nearly every participant in the NIF forums behaved courteously and treated other participants with respect. One man in a Mississippi forum commented on the difference between the forum and the general tenor of politics and public life in the country: "Nothing was said about parties, politics, or names. I thought this was extremely healthy and civil. Our country needs to have the type of dialogue that we've enjoyed tonight. We'd be a better place." Some participants saw the NIF deliberation process as a model for addressing public problems more broadly: "This is the way the United States of America is supposed to work through civil issues," another Mississippi participant commented.

At the start of the forums, moderators typically suggested simple ground rules designed to maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for exchanging ideas and to encourage participants to listen carefully to one another. One moderator, for example, cautioned his group to avoid being like the character in the Paul Simon song “The Boxer”—someone “who hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.”^x None of the moderators reported disruptions in the meetings, and forum participants were overwhelmingly respectful of the views of others. Most seemed to have a sincere desire to hear what others have to say.

Most participants were also open-minded and eager to learn more about the problem and the various avenues for addressing it. Relatively few seemed to enter the deliberations with an agenda or hard-set ideas. Many seemed to leave with new considerations and implications to mull over. In the questionnaires returned by more than 1,200 forum participants, more than half (53 percent) reported talking about aspects of the budget issue that they “hadn’t considered before.”

Observation Number 2: Almost no one thinks solving the problem will be easy.

The federal government routinely engages in some level of deficit spending, and forum participants often blamed Congress and Presidents Bush and Obama for decisions that increased the deficit and the debt. Passing popular tax cuts without cutting spending to match, conducting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without raising taxes to cover the cost, and spending money to “stimulate” the economy during the 2008-2009 economic crisis were examples some people cited. One moderator reported that in her group, people’s concerns about the debt were “mixed with frustration and anger stemming from beliefs that current and previous generations had failed to use resources wisely.” This was a common theme in a number of the forums.

But even though participants often blamed leaders in Washington for getting the country into this bind, most also accepted that the problem is not an easy one to solve. One man in Kansas put it this way: “It is an enormously complex issue, and I don’t think that there are very simple answers

to it. . . . That is the one reason why I think that citizens have to get in and begin talking about the issue, becoming informed, learning about the issue, and trying to problem solve as best they can.” In Washington, DC, a man spoke of the complexity of this debt:

The whole deficit—the recession we’re in—it’s a multifaceted issue. It’s . . . going to take more than one approach to fix it.

Most forum participants acknowledged the broader public’s role in creating the problem. In the postforum questionnaires, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of the participants agreed that “Americans demand more benefits from the federal government than the country can afford,” with 4 in 10 agreeing strongly with that statement. Similarly, most (64 percent) accepted the premise that “the only realistic way to deal with our budget problems is by raising taxes and cutting spending.” Some participants talked about the need to consider the timing of these steps very carefully, echoing the views of experts like Paul Krugman who argue that cutting government spending or raising middle-class taxes during a deep, painful economic downturn is counterproductive and unwise. But nearly all of the participants accepted that at some point Americans would have to accept some tough decisions and trade-offs.

Some forum participants seemed initially drawn to the easy answers sometimes tossed out in the media and online—just eliminate foreign aid, just raise taxes on millionaires, just tell the Treasury to print enough money to cover the deficit, or just don’t pay the Chinese back. In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, one participant asked what currency actually represents, while another interjected a complicated comment about accounting procedures that explain how the debt would appear in an accounting ledger. These kinds of comments can sometimes serve as avoidance mechanisms. In this case, the moderator suggested returning to those issues later and asked participants to turn their attention, for the moment, to the options and specific actions in the issue guide. Some 45 minutes later, the group was involved in a more detailed and subtle discussion of how to reform the tax system so it would still be progressive, but wouldn’t include a whole raft of deductions.

This kind of focus and concentration was typical in the forums, and the lion's share of talk revolved around choices with tough consequences. Most participants accepted that quick and easy answers won't be enough and that some may not help at all. In fact, some said it was time, in effect, for citizens to give leaders permission to make unpopular decisions. In DC, a woman said:

We, as citizens, have to support those choices. We have to, you know, give some backbone to the people across the street—to let them know it's okay to do tough things.

Observation Number 3: People need additional opportunities to grapple with this issue in nonpartisan, nonadvocacy settings. Ninety minutes only gets you so far.

Because leaders and experts have been debating the country's budget problems for years—and because the 2011 congressional “Super Committee” failed to agree even though that was their specific charge—it may not be reasonable to expect forum participants to knock out a plan to solve the budget crisis in the space of 90 minutes to 2 hours of deliberative dialogue.* Nor is that the goal of the forums. They are designed to help people think more seriously about issues and hear the views of others—there is no expectation that forum participants will “make up their minds” about an issue as a result of the discussion or that diverse groups of people will reach a consensus on what should be done. Instead, the deliberations are intended to open and expand people's thinking on an issue and to help them understand the perspectives other citizens bring to the table.

In most forums, participants saw a short video introducing the issue and/or received handouts summarizing the different options and possible actions to prepare them for participating in a more structured exchange of views. Even so, moderators often reported that participants had trouble “getting their hands around the problem.” In many cases, they wanted more information to help them weigh the various options put forward.

Despite participants' initial uncertainty, however, the questionnaires they completed after the forums suggest perhaps a surprising number of areas of potential agreement. For example, broad majorities of the participants were open to ideas like raising taxes on the wealthiest households (73 percent), investing in research and development to spur competitiveness (66 percent), establishing sunset dates for all programs and agencies (63 percent), and cutting military spending (63 percent). At the same time, it was also apparent that many of the participants were still thinking about these ideas and hadn't fully resolved their own questions and doubts about them.

The responses to the questionnaire tell part of the story. For example, while most participants (64 percent) agreed that combining higher taxes with spending cuts is the only way to make headway on the issue, only about 1 in 5 supported this idea strongly. Similarly, while two-thirds of the participants (66 percent) agreed that investing in research and development to spur competitiveness in global markets was a good idea, fewer than a quarter supported this action strongly. On both questions, a sizeable majority leaned in a given direction, but far fewer expressed solid, immovable convictions about them.

Moderators often observed that participants struggled with the trade-offs that accompany various courses of action. These were clearly spelled out in the materials, and moderators emphasized and revisited them throughout the meetings. One moderator at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University noted that her group “identified some ideas that they would like to pursue in the future, but not actions.” A moderator in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, reported that participants in his group, divided about issues like Social Security, Medicare, and defense spending, simply “agreed to disagree,” but that they “did so in a respectful fashion.” A moderator from the University of Virginia in Martinsville admitted that her group struggled with the issue, feeling it was simply “too big to discuss in two hours.”

* NIF forums typically run for two hours or more, but some of the time is spent on introductions, showing a video, handing out and collecting questionnaires, and other tasks.

And as we discuss in the following pages, sometimes forum participants were conflicted in their own minds about which of two competing goals is the most important—if we can't do everything we want, what should we give up? This ambivalence was especially strong when forum participants struggled with the tension between enacting proposals that might improve the economy in the near term—some kinds of tax cuts and government spending, for example—and their equally urgent interest in getting the debt under control and not leaving the nation in tatters for the next generation.

Overall, the forums revealed a hunger for information and dialogue, along with a willingness to consider a number of proposals coming from across the political spectrum. Support for some of the most difficult choices wasn't uniformly rock-solid, but relatively few participants seemed to rule these ideas out entirely. In fact, only a handful of ideas—the balanced budget amendment, reducing corporate taxes, and reducing the home mortgage deduction—attracted significant opposition.

Observation Number 4: Despite worries that too many older Americans are looking out for “number one” and won't give an inch to help the country solve its debt problem, the NIF forums were filled with seniors who spoke ardently about their fears for the younger generation.

One prediction often voiced by experts and the media is that differences on the debt will foment intergenerational warfare. “‘Generational War’ Seen as U.S. Debt Panel May Target Children's Programs” is how a *Bloomberg News* headline put this common worry.^{xi} It's not unusual to hear children's advocates and others worry about the influence of groups like the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) in Congress. Many also voice some concern that younger Americans are less likely to vote and are less involved in traditional politics.

It would certainly be tragic for the country if widespread, bitter intergenerational conflict over the budget were to surface, but the NIF forums suggest this isn't inevitable. In fact, older forum participants were often worried about the impact of the debt on coming generations, and many cited their concerns

about grandchildren or the younger generation as their main reason for coming to the meetings.

In a DC-area forum, one man pointed out that how the United States resolves this problem will “set the course for this country for generations to come. So we really need to fix it now—and not put it off like it has been.” A woman in the same group said she was interested in learning more about the debt because she feared the future would be more limited for her grandchildren. A Mississippi man put it this way:

I have children and . . . grandchildren. My father was in the greatest generation that fought in World War II. I'm part of a generation that seems to be handing an unsustainable amount of debt to my grandchildren. I'm embarrassed. I'm angry. It is not fair.

The vast majority of forum participants, including older citizens, appeared to accept that changes in entitlement programs like Social Security have to be on the table. This recognition contrasts sharply with what surfaces in recent surveys of older Americans. According to a 2011 study by Lake Research Partners, 74 percent of Americans over 50 oppose changes to Social Security to address the deficit, a number that rises to 8 in 10 for those over 65.^{xii} Former US House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O'Neill famously called Social Security the “third rail” of politics—it's like the electrified third rail of a subway system, bringing political death to all who touch it.

In the forums, most participants seemed to value Social Security, and very few relished the idea of trimming it back. But the prevailing sentiment was that it needs to be reformed and adjusted so that it doesn't burden future generations. For example, more than 7 in 10 forum participants agreed that “elected officials lack the political will to help balance the budget by tackling the unsustainable growth” of programs like Social Security and Medicare, and 36 percent said they agreed with this statement “strongly.” The even more significant insight, though, is that older participants were just as likely to endorse this idea as younger ones: nearly 4 in 10 (38 percent) participants over 45 strongly agreed with this idea

DO PEOPLE REALLY KNOW ENOUGH TO MAKE UP THEIR MINDS?

BUDGET EXPERTS UNDERSTAND all too well what a complicated issue this is. The federal budget itself is complex. What's more, different solutions work differently depending on the economy—how many people are working and paying taxes, whether their incomes are rising, and whether businesses are growing and prosperous. These factors increase revenues and change the mathematics of the problem. Even among leadership groups, very few people have full command of all the facts, figures, and alternative projections, so it would be highly unrealistic to expect typical citizens to develop that level of knowledge.

compared with 34 percent of those 30 and under. Even among participants over 65, about the same percentage (37 percent) strongly supported this idea.

The view that entitlement programs cannot be sustained in their current form and have to be part of the debt discussion was widely acknowledged and accepted. In Kansas, one participant was frank about how his own family had benefitted from Social Security in ways that may not be sustainable. “Social Security is the third rail of politics,” he said, “and nobody wants to touch it, but it has got to be looked at. . . . There was a recent article [explaining how] people [who] are drawing it now paid in much less than what they are going to get. . . . My mother drew one whale of a lot more money out of it than my father and her paid into it, so at some point, that has got to get recognized.”

And in a Washington, DC, forum, one older man said this:

But is knowing all the details really what we expect of citizens? How much do citizens really have to know?

Clearly, if citizens don't understand some of this basic arithmetic, they will latch onto simple answers that simply won't work. One goal of the forum materials was to give participants a crash course in basic budget math and to address common public misconceptions and gaps in knowledge. For example, the introductory video includes an animated calculation, showing that eliminating a number of cabinet-level departments entirely would make only a small dent in the country's annual budget deficits. Still, many experts are surprised (and daunted) by how few hard facts typical citizens bring to the table and how little they absorb even when fact-filled presentations are provided. Public opinion analyst and social scientist Daniel Yankelovich believes that some of that concern is misplaced. The far more important factor, according to Yankelovich, is whether people are emotionally and psychologically prepared to consider the difficult choices the issue presents.

Based on decades of analyzing public opinion, Yankelovich describes three stages people typically move through when they struggle with a difficult issue:

I am a member of the American Association of Retired Persons. They have taken a very strong position that entitlements cannot be touched. . . . That isn't my personal belief. I think they have to be, because of the percentage of the national budget that they represent. And I'm certainly willing to share in that effort.

In the same group, an older woman talked about changes to entitlements as part of a compromise where different groups accepted difficult choices:

Everyone must see that every group is making a sacrifice. . . . Everyone must be seen to be giving up something. So when I think of it, I think, “you know, you have to include Social Security. You have to include the entitlements.” But you also have to include tax exemptions for major industries. . . . I sort of liken it to World War II. Everybody gave something.

- 1) **Consciousness-raising**, when people first learn about an issue and decide that it's important.
- 2) **Resistance and wishful thinking**, when people begin to struggle with how difficult it will be to address an issue.
- 3) **Resolution**, when people decide that decisions must be made and acknowledge the trade-offs of those decisions. Basically, people begin to accept change and adapt to it.

On the debt issue, the American public has been stalled at the resistance stage for years. Part of the problem has been a lack of understanding of basic budget arithmetic, but increasing public knowledge of the facts is only part of the challenge. Yankelovich points out that there are also crucial emotional and psychological components. "As observers of human psychology know well," he wrote in *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, "all change is difficult. People caught in cross pressures must overcome the temptation to fall back on denial and wishful thinking. . . . They must face and resolve the conflicts, ambivalences, and defenses the issues arouse. Rarely does the course of change proceed smoothly."

Such comments, of course, reflect the views of older Americans who chose to attend a debt forum and who have wrestled with at least some of the tough choices the issue presents. Their views may or may not be typical. On the other hand, their comments raise the question of what would happen if more seniors (and younger citizens) had the chance to deliberate about this issue in diverse, civil, nonpartisan settings.

Observation Number 5: Most participants believe in the principle of "shared sacrifice," but many have doubts about whether it can be implemented fairly or whether an approach like this is even possible in the current political climate.

After completing their forums, NIF moderators are asked, among other things, to report on the

These cross pressures are powerful when people confront the budget issue. Even when people say they are concerned about the debt, they often display compartmentalized thinking—supporting both tax cuts and increased spending and somehow believing it won't come back to bite us. This is avoidance and wishful thinking—not primarily a lack of factual information. Many people are angry at leadership for putting us in this situation. Many fear losing services they or someone they love relies on. Many don't know whom to trust. These aren't issues that can be addressed simply by upping people's command of the facts. These kinds of obstacles require time, deliberation, and development of trust.

By giving participants some time—not enough time, surely, but more than is typical—along with the chance to deliberate with others, the forums offer a distinctly different approach to helping people move through the stage of resistance. And the responses to the questionnaires suggest that while the work in this area is not finished, it certainly has begun. In terms of helping people wrestle with the need for change and acknowledge that the path will not be easy, the forums show enormous promise and even some early results.

values and principles that seemed to be most important to the participants. Based on the moderator reports, the concepts of shared sacrifice and fairness emerged repeatedly. As noted above, the idea surfaced in discussions about changes to Social Security, but it also appeared in a number of other contexts.

A woman who participated in a Mississippi forum described her conception of shared sacrifice this way:

I think we are going to have to sacrifice now, and [do] a little bit of each one. . . . Yes, raise taxes. Yes, cut spending. Yes, implement a national sales tax, if research shows that that can help, and I think it does. Share sacrifices. Mortgage interest—maybe [we shouldn't] get the write-off on our income taxes that we get now. Also with the 401K—[and maybe] we shouldn't get the

write-off that we get for having children. I think a little bit of all of it.

Based on the forum deliberations, there is a fly in the ointment, and it may not be the one cynics expect. The conventional wisdom among the political class is that people are all for “sacrifice” as long as it doesn’t hit them in their pocketbooks. But the forums often revealed a different concern. The much more common theme was that, although people believed in shared sacrifice, many also worried about more vulnerable members of the society—especially after the Great Recession. Forum participants often questioned how the concept of shared sacrifice would work given that some people have prospered over the last decade, while others have seen their livelihoods and prospects slip away.

A Washington, DC, woman talked about the different ways shared sacrifice could affect people:

[For me,] I might think that it would mean that I can’t buy as much. Other people, if you put that same burden on them, they can’t eat—like the working poor. They’re running to two or three jobs now just trying to exist. So we talk about putting a heavier burden on a person like that to share the sacrifice, how are they going to do it?

Concerns about how sacrifices would affect people in the wake of the Great Recession was a strong and prevailing concern, and participants often worried about the economic blows many Americans have sustained in recent years. A DC woman said:

Some people lost a lot. They lost a lot of their IRA money. They lost money they were going to use to send their kids to school. They lost just money that they could have used, and so I think that here, when you talk about any program that’s going to involve shared sacrifice or change in regulations or new regulations, that has got to be addressed.

A moderator in Georgia noted a similar theme in her forum:

From their perspective, it seems difficult or impossible for many Americans stuck in a long-term cycle of poverty, facing long-term

disabilities, or those hit hard by the recent economic downturn to make any additional sacrifices to improve their situation and reduce the national debt. One person commented, “There are no extra second jobs to get. For many there aren’t any first jobs to get!”

And many in the forums worried that even if shared sacrifice were possible in theory, it is unlikely to be adopted in a nation as divided as the United States is today. A man in Abilene, Kansas, voiced a typical view:

I think that this—what I’d call the shared sacrifices—is probably the only method of the three [approaches discussed in the forums] that has enough workable parts to it to maybe put something together. Unfortunately, I think it is also the least likely to become a fact, and I don’t know how you deal with that.

In DC, another man was similarly pessimistic:

The political posturing is at a state now where there’s nothing that’s going to happen especially with the point of shared sacrifice. It’s just not going to happen.

Another woman seemed frustrated that the political process couldn’t produce what she considered an obvious, practical, and down-to-earth solution:

In our families, we’ve had to learn the sacrifices. You don’t get everything you want, and you might have to give up this to get that. If our families can do it, why can’t we do it—you know?

These concerns and doubts emerged across the country. There was a widespread fear that the country’s political and social climate stands in the way of its ability to pursue the best and fairest solutions. “I think . . . the air that’s permeating the country now stops us from sharing anything,” one participant commented.

And how we can get past that, I don’t know. . . . The partisanship—it’s so strong. The negativity is so strong. Nobody wants anybody to have something that they don’t have. And I don’t know how we can get rid of it.

Observation Number 6: People are deeply anxious about the economy but are confused about how to strengthen it. In the forums, many seemed entirely bewildered and frustrated by the “stimulus versus austerity” question.

The third option in the issue guide set out the proposition that the best way to tackle the country’s long-term debt, at least in the near term, is to focus on getting the economy growing again. Participants were eager to talk about the economy, and the issue of the country’s poor economic health over the last few years generally emerged spontaneously well before moderators introduced the theme. Like the public overall, most forum participants were anxious about the country’s economic prospects. A moderator who led a forum with university students reported that “there was general concern that . . . the American dream may no longer be available for everyone, particularly their age group.”

Despite deep concerns about the economy, however, there was considerable uncertainty over what to do to fix it. Perhaps the chief source of confusion was the tension posed by the “austerity versus stimulus” question. For example, most participants appeared to believe that government spending needs to be reined in, and many believed that while tough choices had to be on the table, there was still plenty of “waste, fraud, and abuse” for government to cut. A Mississippi woman voiced a fairly common concern:

I think one of the things that is needed desperately within our government is to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse. I do not see anywhere in here the diligence on the part of our government to make sure that every tax dollar counts for something.

For some, the idea of living with a smaller government was part and parcel of the concept of shared sacrifice. “I’m not opposed maybe to raising taxes,” one man said, “but I am opposed until I see what kind of cuts are going to be made. The growth of the federal government has been significant in the last 20 years, and I’d rather see some of that get pared back first. I’d like to see the federal government make sacrifices first before taxes come up.”

At the same time, more than 6 in 10 of the forum participants said they worried that “deep, across-the-board spending cuts would threaten the nation’s economic recovery.” What’s more, although proposals described as ideas to spur economic competitiveness attracted fairly broad support in the postforum questionnaires, the support was not especially strong.

In the deliberations, participants often struggled with the tension between investments that might have an economic pay-off down the line and the strong sense that deficit-spending by the government simply can’t continue: “You’ve got to have money to invest,” said one Mississippi participant, [but] “money—where do you get money? You borrow money. We don’t have any money. . . . Borrowing money to throw at a problem? . . . It’s crazy.”

In another forum, the group went through a menu of ideas to get the economy on the move again—more grants for students pursuing science and engineering, green jobs, improving K-12 education, and others. Even so, the group didn’t seem to coalesce around any of the strategies, and most participants didn’t seem to regard them as especially promising. One man said:

You know, it just doesn’t make sense to me. . . . OK . . . we need to reduce the deficit. So we’re going to spend more money and get into a deficit to spend on things that we’re not sure will even work.

It would be easy to interpret these doubts and uncertainties as mere policy disagreements, but to most forum participants, the “austerity versus stimulus” question involves tension between two equally compelling values—reviving the economy to help their families, friends, and neighbors now and acting quickly to avoid leaving the next generation with massive debts and a shattered future.

Observation Number 7: Above all, cynicism about government and leadership reigns.

Nearly all of the forum moderators reported strong feelings of disappointment, cynicism, and suspicion about elected officials in Washington. In this respect, the views of forum participants are virtually indistinguishable from what emerges

routinely in polling—a deep and broad belief that lawmakers too often place partisan political interests above the country’s interests and that political leaders have lost the practical art of political compromise.

A moderator in Georgia summarized the disappointment and weariness she saw in her forum:

[We] have lived through the impasse over the debt ceiling . . . and the failure of the Super Committee to reach a reasonable solution to the debt problem. Increasingly, many citizens appear to be frustrated by the lack of flexibility among lawmakers to achieve meaningful change. In the debt forum we held at the University of Georgia, we heard resounding support among participants for the value of compromise.

The profound dissatisfaction with political leadership that this moderator observed in Georgia was confirmed and reiterated in forums across the country.

Given the participants’ general lack of confidence in elected officials, it is probably not surprising that there was broad interest in the idea of establishing “laws and procedures that compel legislators to balance the budget.” In the postforum questionnaires, most participants supported this general principle, and about a third supported it strongly. At the same time, however, there was far less agreement on exactly how to “compel” lawmakers to act. The forum materials posed three possible actions—passing a balanced budget amendment, establishing sunset dates for federal programs and agencies, and banning earmarks—as a means to prompt broader discussion.

Among these, the most popular was the idea of having sunset dates for federal programs and agencies. More than 6 in 10 of the participants said this was a good idea, although only about 20 percent supported it strongly. In Mississippi, one woman explained why she thought the proposal had merit:

I like the idea of the sunset dates—taking a second look—not just once—but with certain terms, because things change. We aren’t the way we were 30 years ago, obviously, and 30 years from now, it will be much different.”

A Kansas man was also drawn to this idea, but recognized that instituting it might not be easy:

I could kind of go for . . . a sunset date, although there is going to be an awful lot of fussing and fretting and fuming about, “Well, my program doesn’t deserve to die. We need to extend it.”

Doubts about the other possible ways for citizens to force budgetary discipline on lawmakers were even more pronounced. Only about 4 in 10 forum participants favored amending the Constitution to require a balanced budget, with only 14 percent supporting it strongly. The reluctance to embrace these ideas seemed to stem from several sources. For some, the concern was that an amendment would be too inflexible, preventing any kind of deficit spending even when it could help the country. In Kansas, one man suggested that the idea could backfire:

What happens when the nation goes into a crisis? Yeah, and we have a 2008, and the economy is going over a cliff and we have 15 percent unemployment. What happens?

For others, the hesitation seemed to arise from a profound distrust of lawmakers, a feeling that no matter what the rules were, legislators would find ways to circumvent them, so the idea just wouldn’t work. As one man put it:

What prevents [elected officials] from changing the structure? They do all of the time anyway. I can’t go with this balanced budget the federal way. It doesn’t work.

Forum participants were also divided about a proposal to ban congressional earmarks. Public opinion polls have shown mixed views on this idea, with 46 percent of the public supporting a ban and 36 percent opposed.^{xiii} In this instance, the views of forum participants were quite similar, with 48 percent supporting the ban and 36 percent opposing it. Among the forum participants, however, this split decision comes after viewing an informational video on the debt and talking about a wide range of options for addressing it.

In the forum deliberations, many participants seemed influenced by the trade-off highlighted in the materials—that banning earmarks would reduce

or eliminate “funding for thousands of badly needed local projects.” Others focused on the difficulty of determining what actually counts as a worthy investment. As one man put it: “One man’s pork is another one’s deserved project.”

These last two results—the broad rejection of a balanced budget amendment and tepid support for banning earmarks—might lead some lawmakers to breathe a sigh of relief and assume that public distrust of leadership has been exaggerated. But this would be a dangerous misinterpretation of what took place in the forums. Across the country, participants repeatedly questioned the ability of leaders to act in the public interest. Few voiced confidence that these systemic reforms could change the way Washington works. Instead, what emerged over and over again was an almost visceral loathing of DC politics and an overriding wariness about elected officials’ sense of responsibility and motives.

One moderator described what she characterized as the issue behind the issue, calling it “a lack of trust—a betrayal of trust.” In Mississippi, one man charged elected officials with putting ambition and partisanship ahead of country:

Right now, our representatives have loyalty to self first; loyalty to party second; and loyalty to country third. They need to reverse it. The loyalty needs to be to the country first [with loyalty] to the party [and] self some place way down the line.

In Kansas, another participant summed up a perception that seemed quite common:

Never in my 57 years have I seen our government so dysfunctional. . . . Everyone seems to just be pointing fingers and calling each other names and not working together to compromise.

Perhaps the most stunning indictment of politics-as-usual came from an older woman who had been consistently gracious and positive throughout the two-hour meeting. In a closing segment, the moderator asked the participants how the conversation in the forum compared with what they typically saw on television or on Capitol Hill. “We’re trying to save the country,” she said, referring to the people in the forum around her. “They

[elected officials and other leaders] are destroying it.” Of all the obstacles blocking resolution of the debt issue, the public’s lack of trust in policymakers, and the strong sense of betrayal of trust, could be the most daunting.



What's Next?

The NIF debt forums, nationwide, suggest that deliberative dialogues focusing on choices and trade-offs could nurture the public's openness to the need for difficult choices and compromise solutions. Forums and meetings like these could also help clear the way to several paths to common ground for action. At least among this diverse group of Americans who took a more in-depth look at the issue, there are points of broad agreement. Just as important, the NIF deliberations demonstrate that there are many Americans who want to understand more about the budget issue, think it through for themselves, and hear what others have to say when they wrestle with the choices involved.

The Benefits of Democratic Doubt

THE 2011-2012 NIF forum deliberations were thoughtful and in many ways remarkable, but the results also show that there is more to do. More Americans need the chance to reflect on this issue and to talk with fellow citizens about the country's options. Some aspects, such as the tensions between improving the economy and tackling the debt, seem especially confusing and troubling to large numbers of participants. The role of government as distinct from the responsibilities we assign to individuals and communities, and the need to protect society's most vulnerable, presented dilemmas that troubled people, and were areas of uncertainty that saw a lack of resolution. Relatively few participants left the meetings with firm conclusions about how to solve the country's budget problems. Many were still wrestling with the tensions among the choices and asking questions about how specific proposals would work.

But this lack of conclusiveness may not be the obstacle lawmakers and other leaders sometimes suppose. In many respects, the NIF forum participants' lack of resolution represents a distinct advance over what surfaces in public opinion polls—an absence of realism about the debt and deficit spending, inconsistent thinking, unreasonable expectations, a belief in easy answers that don't work. The participants' uncertainties generally stemmed from their recognition that the solutions will not be quick and easy; that all have risks and trade-offs.

And there are advantages to uncertainty. The recognition that a problem is not easily solved opens people to communication, compromise, and the development of pragmatic solutions. At a fundamental level, doubt opens people up to the viewpoints of others. So this may be exactly where more of the American public needs to be, if the country is to make progress.

Regardless of how policymakers respond to the “fiscal cliff,” the United States faces a decade of decision making in addressing the debt, stabilizing rising health-care costs, reforming an impenetrable and unpopular tax system, and in getting our sluggish economy on the move again. It is in all of our interests to ensure that Americans approach those questions with more than initial top-of-the-head responses. To solve the country's debt problems, we need a thoughtful, prudent, and open-minded electorate.

Yet these the forums also reveal a bedeviling barrier to public policymaking that extends far beyond the debt issue. As these forums show—and as polling repeatedly confirms—most Americans don't trust their elected officials, and many lack trust in each other. Although the NIF experience shows that large numbers of Americans do hunger for more civil, constructive exchanges on difficult issues, it also suggests that, until the country begins to repair this fissure of trust in the body politic, solving problems like the deficit and the debt will be a protracted and uphill struggle.

Full Questionnaire Results

THE FOLLOWING RESULTS are based on questionnaires returned by 1,203 participants who attended NIF forums that took place beginning in fall 2011 and concluding in summer 2012. We report the overall results and then present tables showing the results by age and by geographic region.

These results are not based on a random sample of the public. Rather they reflect the ideas and preferences of individuals who chose to attend NIF

forums to discuss the deficit and the debt and to complete and return their questionnaires. Moreover, as our discussion of the forum exchanges suggests, these results should not be seen as definitive or “final” conclusions. Many forum participants left their meetings still pondering and deliberating on these ideas and others. The results here are best seen as suggesting areas of potential consensus and areas of broad concern. Tables do not reflect responses of “not sure” or questions not answered.

OVERALL RESULTS

Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
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I. GENERAL INSIGHTS

Investing in the research and development of innovative new technologies would spur growth and produce more tax revenues in the long term.					
79%	28%	51%	15%	12%	3%
Americans demand more benefits from the federal government than the country can afford.					
74%	42%	32%	23%	16%	8%
Elected officials lack the political will to help balance the budget by tackling the unsustainable growth of popular entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare.					
72%	36%	36%	18%	13%	5%
We need laws and procedures that compel legislators to balance the budget.					
69%	33%	36%	27%	14%	13%
The only realistic way to deal with our budget problems is by raising taxes and cutting spending.					
64%	21%	43%	32%	17%	15%
Deep, across-the-board spending cuts would threaten the nation's economic recovery.					
63%	29%	34%	32%	24%	8%

II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS

We could raise tax rates for the wealthiest families, EVEN IF this would lead to less investment in enterprises that create much needed jobs.					
73%	40%	33%	20%	12%	8%
We could invest in research and development to spur competitiveness in global markets, EVEN IF many economists believe such investment would be more efficient if it came from the private sector instead of government.					
66%	24%	43%	22%	17%	5%
Federal and state governments should establish sunset dates requiring periodic review of all programs and agencies, EVEN IF this means that those who run them would spend more time justifying their existence and less time doing their jobs.					
63%	20%	43%	28%	19%	9%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS...CONTINUED					
We should cut military spending, EVEN IF this would make us less capable of responding to threats in an increasingly volatile world.					
63%	30%	33%	32%	17%	15%
Congress could reduce payroll taxes for new businesses for two years, EVEN IF that adds to the deficit in the short run.					
53%	13%	41%	36%	23%	12%
Legislators should ban all earmarks, EVEN IF this reduces or eliminates funding for thousands of badly needed local projects.					
48%	19%	29%	36%	28%	9%
We should increase tariffs on imported goods to protect US jobs, EVEN IF this invites retaliation and could, in the end, start a trade war or cost jobs.					
40%	12%	29%	48%	30%	18%
We should amend the Constitution to require a balanced federal budget, EVEN IF most economists agree that running a deficit is sometimes what the country needs.					
38%	14%	25%	55%	23%	32%
We should reduce corporate tax rates, EVEN IF this would reduce federal government revenues.					
35%	10%	25%	55%	24%	31%
We should reduce the tax deduction for mortgage interest and health-care expenses, EVEN IF that would increase taxes on already hard-pressed middle-class families.					
33%	7%	26%	57%	30%	26%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

RESULTS BY AGE OF PARTICIPANT

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I. GENERAL INSIGHTS						
Investing in the research and development of innovative new technologies would spur growth and produce more tax revenues in the long term.						
All ages	79%	28%	51%	15%	12%	3%
30 and under	74%	22%	52%	19%	16%	4%
31-45	83%	30%	53%	13%	13%	0%
46 and over	85%	35%	50%	11%	7%	4%
Americans demand more benefits from the federal government than the country can afford.						
All ages	74%	42%	32%	23%	16%	8%
30 and under	79%	46%	33%	18%	11%	7%
31-45	73%	43%	30%	24%	17%	7%
46 and over	69%	36%	33%	28%	20%	9%
Elected officials lack the political will to help balance the budget by tackling the unsustainable growth of popular entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare.						
All ages	72%	36%	36%	18%	13%	5%
30 and under	73%	34%	39%	17%	14%	3%
31-45	80%	45%	35%	14%	11%	3%
46 and over	70%	38%	32%	21%	13%	9%
We need laws and procedures that compel legislators to balance the budget.						
All ages	69%	33%	36%	27%	14%	13%
30 and under	82%	39%	43%	14%	9%	5%
31-45	73%	34%	39%	22%	11%	11%
46 and over	53%	27%	26%	44%	22%	23%
The only realistic way to deal with our budget problems is by raising taxes and cutting spending.						
All ages	64%	21%	43%	32%	17%	15%
30 and under	64%	13%	51%	33%	20%	13%
31-45	62%	24%	38%	35%	21%	14%
46 and over	67%	31%	36%	28%	13%	15%
Deep, across-the-board spending cuts would threaten the nation's economic recovery.						
All ages	63%	29%	34%	32%	24%	8%
30 and under	54%	18%	36%	39%	30%	9%
31-45	64%	32%	32%	32%	23%	9%
46 and over	73%	41%	33%	23%	16%	7%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

Total agree Strongly agree Somewhat agree **Total disagree** Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS

We could raise tax rates for the wealthiest families, EVEN IF this would lead to less investment in enterprises that create much needed jobs.

All ages	73%	40%	33%	20%	12%	8%
30 and under	68%	31%	36%	26%	17%	10%
31-45	78%	44%	33%	19%	12%	7%
46 and over	82%	52%	30%	14%	7%	7%

We could invest in research and development to spur competitiveness in global markets, EVEN IF many economists believe such investment would be more efficient if it came from the private sector instead of government.

All ages	66%	24%	43%	22%	17%	5%
30 and under	65%	21%	44%	25%	20%	6%
31-45	64%	23%	41%	27%	20%	6%
46 and over	72%	28%	44%	19%	14%	5%

Federal and state governments should establish sunset dates requiring periodic review of all programs and agencies, EVEN IF this means that those who run them would spend more time justifying their existence and less time doing their jobs.

All ages	63%	20%	43%	28%	19%	9%
30 and under	61%	19%	42%	28%	20%	8%
31-45	56%	16%	41%	35%	25%	11%
46 and over	69%	23%	46%	25%	17%	9%

We should cut military spending, EVEN IF this would make us less capable of responding to threats in an increasingly volatile world.

All ages	63%	30%	33%	32%	17%	15%
30 and under	57%	28%	30%	40%	21%	19%
31-45	66%	30%	37%	30%	16%	14%
46 and over	72%	35%	37%	25%	13%	11%

Congress could reduce payroll taxes for new businesses for two years, EVEN IF that adds to the deficit in the short run.

All ages	53%	13%	41%	36%	23%	12%
30 and under	54%	15%	39%	33%	24%	9%
31-45	53%	12%	41%	36%	25%	11%
46 and over	54%	10%	44%	38%	22%	16%

Legislators should ban all earmarks, EVEN IF this reduces or eliminates funding for thousands of badly needed local projects.

All ages	48%	19%	29%	36%	28%	9%
30 and under	40%	13%	27%	39%	29%	11%
31-45	49%	19%	30%	40%	32%	8%
46 and over	60%	27%	33%	33%	27%	7%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS ... (CONTINUED)						
We should increase tariffs on imported goods to protect US jobs, EVEN IF this invites retaliation and could, in the end, start a trade war or costs jobs.						
All ages	40%	12%	29%	48%	30%	18%
30 and under	43%	13%	30%	46%	31%	15%
31-45	42%	13%	28%	46%	32%	14%
46 and over	37%	10%	27%	52%	31%	21%
We should amend the Constitution to require a balanced federal budget, EVEN IF most economists agree that running a deficit is sometimes what the country needs.						
All ages	38%	14%	25%	55%	23%	32%
30 and under	45%	16%	29%	47%	28%	18%
31-45	35%	11%	24%	60%	21%	39%
46 and over	30%	11%	19%	65%	18%	47%
We should reduce corporate tax rates, EVEN IF this would reduce federal government revenues.						
All ages	35%	10%	25%	55%	24%	31%
30 and under	44%	12%	31%	48%	24%	24%
31-45	31%	9%	22%	60%	24%	36%
46 and over	26%	7%	19%	66%	25%	41%
We should reduce the tax deduction for mortgage interest and health-care expenses, EVEN IF that would increase taxes on already hard-pressed middle-class families.						
All ages	33%	7%	26%	57%	30%	26%
30 and under	30%	5%	25%	57%	36%	21%
31-45	34%	9%	25%	57%	29%	28%
46 and over	37%	8%	29%	55%	23%	32%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

RESULTS BY FORUM REGION

Total agree Strongly agree Somewhat agree **Total disagree** Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

I. GENERAL INSIGHTS

Investing in the research and development of innovative new technologies would spur growth and produce more tax revenues in the long term.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
All regions	79%	28%	51%	15%	12%	3%
Northeast	78%	31%	47%	18%	15%	3%
North Central	85%	31%	55%	9%	7%	2%
Midwest	73%	22%	52%	22%	18%	4%
Southeast	74%	30%	44%	18%	13%	5%
West	79%	27%	52%	16%	12%	4%

Americans demand more benefits from the federal government than the country can afford.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
All regions	74%	42%	32%	23%	16%	8%
Northeast	62%	34%	28%	31%	17%	14%
North Central	71%	37%	34%	26%	19%	8%
Midwest	82%	48%	34%	16%	10%	6%
Southeast	82%	48%	34%	17%	13%	4%
West	70%	43%	27%	28%	20%	8%

Elected officials lack the political will to help balance the budget by tackling the unsustainable growth of popular entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
All regions	72%	36%	36%	18%	13%	5%
Northeast	71%	37%	35%	20%	13%	8%
North Central	70%	35%	35%	21%	14%	7%
Midwest	73%	34%	39%	15%	13%	2%
Southeast	79%	41%	38%	15%	11%	4%
West	69%	40%	29%	20%	14%	6%

We need laws and procedures that compel legislators to balance the budget.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
All regions	69%	33%	36%	27%	14%	13%
Northeast	75%	32%	44%	19%	10%	9%
North Central	62%	26%	36%	32%	17%	15%
Midwest	78%	40%	38%	19%	11%	8%
Southeast	67%	38%	30%	30%	15%	15%
West	75%	39%	36%	24%	12%	12%

The only realistic way to deal with our budget problems is by raising taxes and cutting spending.

	Total agree	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
All regions	64%	21%	43%	32%	17%	15%
Northeast	66%	21%	44%	32%	11%	20%
North Central	65%	25%	40%	31%	17%	14%
Midwest	70%	16%	54%	27%	17%	10%
Southeast	58%	19%	39%	37%	20%	17%
West	60%	21%	38%	35%	22%	13%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

Total agree Strongly agree Somewhat agree **Total disagree** Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

I. GENERAL INSIGHTS ... (CONTINUED)

Deep, across-the-board spending cuts would threaten the nation's economic recovery.

All regions	63%	29%	34%	32%	24%	8%
Northeast	62%	26%	36%	32%	23%	9%
North Central	68%	35%	34%	27%	21%	6%
Midwest	54%	20%	34%	38%	31%	7%
Southeast	63%	28%	35%	31%	18%	13%
West	58%	28%	30%	37%	28%	10%

II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS

We could raise tax rates for the wealthiest families, EVEN IF this would lead to less investment in enterprises that create much needed jobs.

All regions	73%	40%	33%	20%	12%	8%
Northeast	79%	51%	28%	16%	9%	7%
North Central	76%	46%	30%	15%	9%	6%
Midwest	70%	28%	42%	23%	13%	9%
Southeast	66%	34%	32%	28%	18%	11%
West	75%	44%	31%	23%	13%	10%

We could invest in research and development to spur competitiveness in global markets, EVEN IF many economists believe such investment would be more efficient if it came from the private sector instead of government.

All regions	66%	24%	43%	22%	17%	5%
Northeast	68%	26%	42%	23%	17%	6%
North Central	68%	26%	43%	18%	14%	4%
Midwest	63%	17%	47%	23%	18%	5%
Southeast	63%	26%	37%	28%	21%	7%
West	66%	23%	43%	27%	20%	7%

Federal and state governments should establish sunset dates requiring periodic review of all programs and agencies, EVEN IF this means that those who run them would spend more time justifying their existence and less time doing their jobs.

All regions	63%	20%	43%	28%	19%	9%
Northeast	59%	20%	39%	30%	21%	9%
North Central	62%	18%	44%	29%	19%	10%
Midwest	65%	20%	45%	27%	17%	10%
Southeast	66%	21%	45%	23%	19%	4%
West	64%	26%	37%	32%	22%	10%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

Total agree Strongly agree Somewhat agree **Total disagree** Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS ... (CONTINUED)

We should cut military spending, EVEN IF this would make us less capable of responding to threats in an increasingly volatile world.

All regions	63%	30%	33%	32%	17%	15%
Northeast	66%	35%	31%	30%	15%	15%
North Central	69%	35%	34%	25%	13%	12%
Midwest	51%	20%	31%	46%	24%	22%
Southeast	59%	24%	35%	37%	18%	19%
West	69%	39%	30%	26%	16%	10%

Congress could reduce payroll taxes for new businesses for two years, EVEN IF that adds to the deficit in the short run.

All regions	53%	13%	41%	36%	23%	12%
Northeast	58%	20%	38%	36%	24%	12%
North Central	53%	12%	41%	35%	22%	13%
Midwest	49%	8%	41%	36%	26%	10%
Southeast	54%	12%	42%	37%	23%	14%
West	56%	14%	42%	34%	23%	11%

Legislators should ban all earmarks, EVEN IF this reduces or eliminates funding for thousands of badly needed local projects.

All regions	48%	19%	29%	36%	28%	9%
Northeast	45%	20%	25%	41%	30%	11%
North Central	49%	18%	32%	36%	27%	9%
Midwest	40%	15%	25%	38%	29%	9%
Southeast	53%	24%	29%	33%	26%	8%
West	52%	21%	32%	37%	29%	8%

We should increase tariffs on imported goods to protect US jobs, EVEN IF this invites retaliation and could, in the end, start a trade war or costs jobs.

All regions	40%	12%	29%	48%	30%	18%
Northeast	47%	15%	32%	44%	26%	18%
North Central	38%	13%	25%	47%	30%	17%
Midwest	44%	9%	35%	45%	31%	14%
Southeast	32%	6%	26%	59%	33%	26%
West	47%	18%	29%	43%	31%	12%

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation.

Total agree Strongly agree Somewhat agree **Total disagree** Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS ... (CONTINUED)

We should amend the Constitution to require a balanced federal budget, EVEN IF most economists agree that running a deficit is sometimes what the country needs.

All regions	38%	14%	25%	55%	23%	32%
Northeast	35%	10%	25%	56%	29%	27%
North Central	31%	11%	20%	61%	22%	39%
Midwest	48%	18%	30%	46%	25%	21%
Southeast	42%	15%	27%	54%	23%	31%
West	44%	17%	27%	49%	18%	2%

We should reduce corporate tax rates, EVEN IF this would reduce federal government revenues.

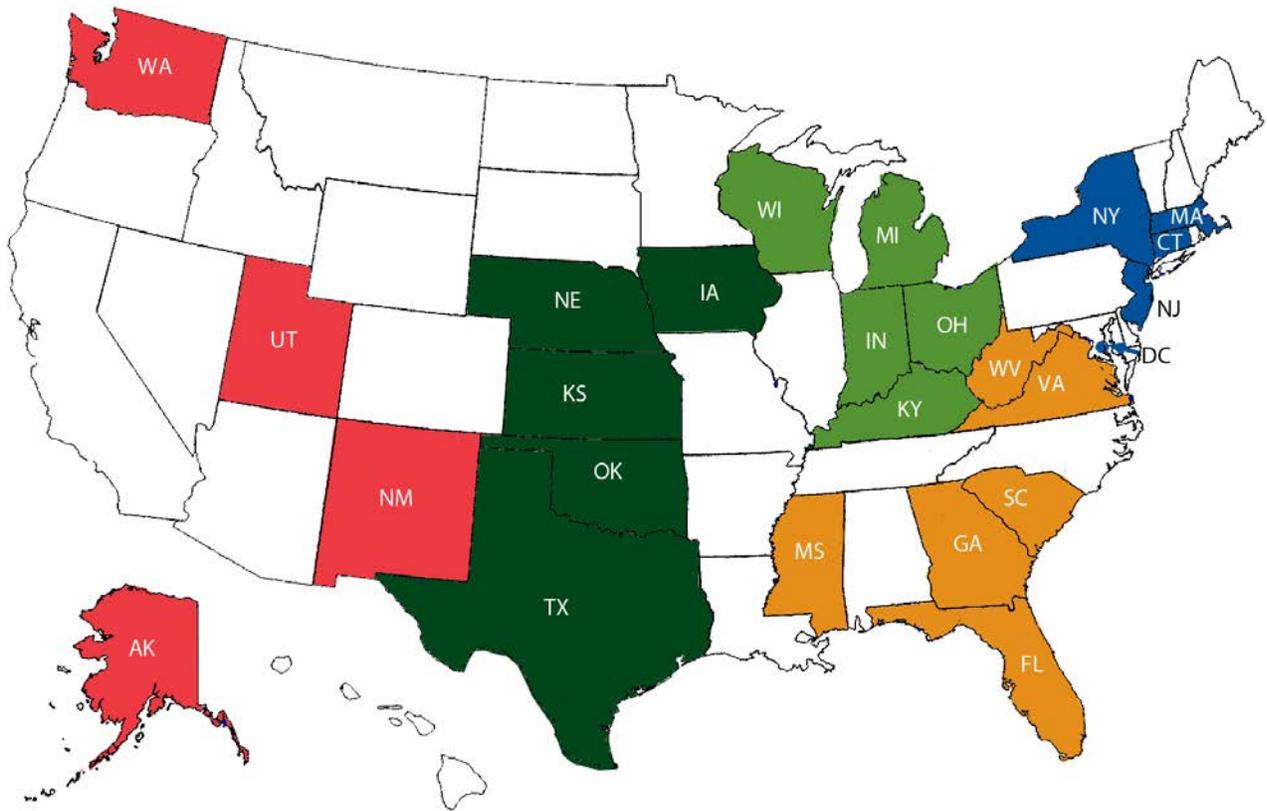
All regions	35%	10%	25%	55%	24%	31%
Northeast	37%	11%	25%	56%	24%	32%
North Central	28%	8%	19%	61%	24%	37%
Midwest	40%	9%	31%	52%	29%	23%
Southeast	43%	13%	30%	48%	20%	28%
West	33%	9%	24%	56%	23%	33%

We should reduce the tax deduction for mortgage interest and health-care expenses, EVEN IF that would increase taxes on already hard-pressed middle-class families.

All regions	33%	7%	26%	57%	30%	26%
Northeast	27%	4%	23%	64%	29%	35%
North Central	34%	6%	28%	57%	28%	28%
Midwest	32%	5%	27%	56%	36%	20%
Southeast	40%	12%	29%	50%	30%	20%
West	28%	10%	18%	62%	29%	33%

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Forums by Regions



States in which forums were held:

NORTHEAST

Connecticut
 District of Columbia
 Massachusetts
 New Jersey
 New York

SOUTHEAST

Florida
 Georgia
 Mississippi
 South Carolina
 Virginia
 West Virginia

NORTH CENTRAL

Indiana
 Kentucky
 Michigan
 Ohio
 Wisconsin

MIDWEST

Iowa
 Kansas
 Nebraska
 Oklahoma
 Texas

WEST

Alaska
 New Mexico
 Utah
 Washington

Endnotes

ⁱ May 2012: According to a Gallup/*USA Today* poll, 41 percent of national adults say the “federal budget deficit and debt” are “extremely important” “economic issues facing the country today”; 41 percent say this is a “very important” issue; 14 percent say it is a “somewhat important” issue; and 3 percent say it is “not important.” (Gallup/*USA Today* Poll, May 2012. Retrieved August 22, 2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.)

ⁱⁱ December 2011: According to a Pew Research poll, 76 percent of national adults say “the size of the national debt poses a major threat ... to the economic well being of the US”; 16 percent say it is a “minor threat” and 4 percent say it is “no threat.” (Pew Research Center for the People, December 2011. Retrieved September 12, 2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.)

ⁱⁱⁱ CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, August 2-3, 2011.

^{iv} CBS News Poll, June 3-7, 2011.

^v Associated Press/Gfk Poll, February 2012.

^{vi} Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Methodology Survey, January 4-8, 2012.

^{vii} United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, February 2012.

^{viii} CNN/ORC Poll, July 18-20, 2011, and Quinnipiac University Poll, March 22-28, 2011.

^{ix} See for example, Paul Krugman at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/opinion/02krugman.html?_r=0 and Robert Reich at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-reich/may-jobs-stall_b_1562394.html.

^x http://www.lyricsfreak.com/p/paul+simon/the+boxer_20105976.html.

^{xi} <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-31/-generational-war-seen-as-u-s-debt-panel-may-target-children-s-programs.html>.

^{xii} <http://socialsecurity-works.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/SSWElectionPoll.pdf>.

^{xiii} <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145130/Support-Repealing-Dont-Ask-Dont-Tell.aspx>.

About Public Agenda



PUBLIC AGENDA is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and improving people's lives. Through research and public engagement, we give divided

citizens and leaders the means to build common ground and make progress on critical issues, including education reform, the environment and health care. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion expert Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and is based in New York City.

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About the Author

Jean Johnson is a senior fellow at Public Agenda and a member of the National Issues Forums Institute. She is the author, with Scott Bittle, of *Where Does the Money Go? Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis* (HarperCollins, 2011) and *Where Did the Jobs Go—and How Do We Get Them Back?* (HarperCollins, 2012). Christopher DiStasi at Public Agenda assisted in the preparation of this report.

About National Issues Forums



NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS is a nonpartisan, nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums for the consideration of public policy issues. It is rooted in the simple notion that people need to come together to reason and talk—to deliberate about common problems.

Indeed, democracy requires an ongoing deliberative public dialogue.

These forums, organized by a variety of organizations, groups, and individuals, bring people together to talk about public issues. They range from small- or large-group gatherings similar to town-hall meetings, to study circles held in public places or in people's homes on an ongoing basis.

Forums focus on an issue like health care, immigration, American democracy, Social Security, or ethnic and racial tensions. The forums provide a way for people with diverse views and experiences to seek a shared understanding of the problem and to search for common ground for action. Forums are led by trained, neutral moderators, and use a discussion guide that frames the issue by presenting the overall problem and then three or four broad options to approaching the problem. Forum participants work through the issue by considering each option, examining what appeals to them or concerns them, and what the costs, consequences, and trade-offs may be that would be incurred in following that option.

More information is available at www.nifi.org.

About the Kettering Foundation

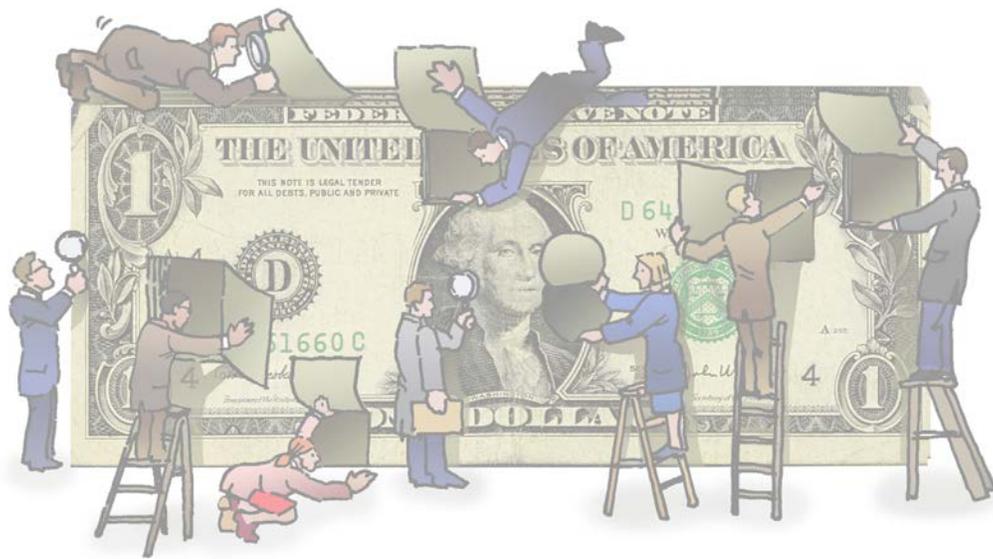
*Kettering
Foundation*

The KETTERING FOUNDATION is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what

does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions.

Guiding Kettering's research are three hypotheses. Kettering's research suggests that democracy requires: responsible citizens who can make sound choices about their future; communities of citizens acting together to address common problems; and institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but that engages in joint research with others.





Kettering
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