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Deep Divisions over Debt Reduction Proposals

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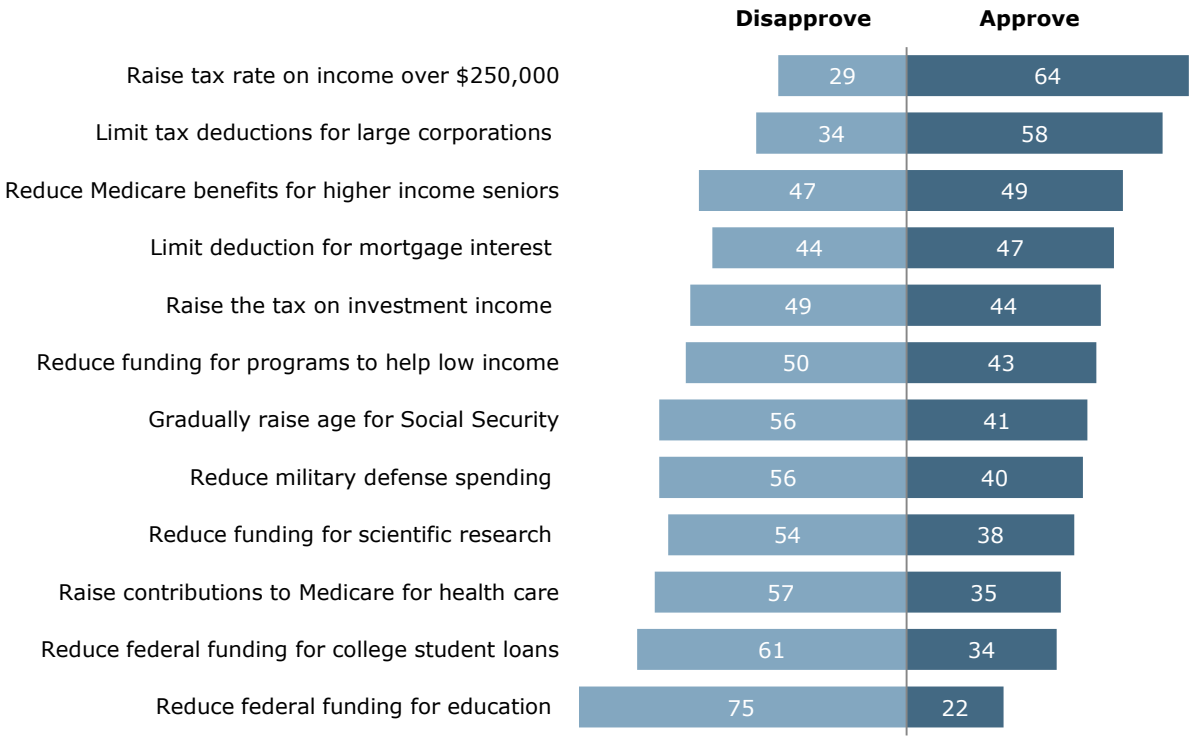
Deep Divisions over Debt Reduction Proposals

Public concern over the debt and deficit, already extensive, is only likely to increase as the so-called "fiscal cliff" approaches at the end of the year. Yet among a dozen specific options for reducing the debt and deficit, only two win majority approval from the public – raising taxes on annual incomes over $250,000 (64% approve) and limiting corporate tax deductions (58%).

A new national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, conducted Oct. 4-7, among 1,511 adults, including 1,201 registered voters, finds that cuts in education spending are particularly unpopular. Fully 75% disapprove of reducing federal education funding and 61% oppose cuts in funding for student loans.

Majorities Oppose Cuts in Spending for Education, Science, Defense



PEW RESEARCH CENTER Oct. 4-7, 2012. Based on general public.

Majorities also oppose reducing military defense spending (56%) and funding for scientific research (54%). Opinion is divided over reducing funding to help low-income Americans (50% disapprove vs. 43% approve).

There also is resistance to making changes in Social Security and Medicare to reduce the debt and deficit: 57% oppose raising the amount Medicare recipients contribute to their health care, while 56% disapprove of gradually raising the Social Security retirement age. About as many disapprove (47%) as approve (49%) of reducing Medicare benefits for higher-income seniors.

And the public is split over limiting tax deductions for mortgage interest as a way to reduce the national debt: 47% approve and 44% disapprove of this proposal.

Obama, Romney Voters Far Apart

The political divide over most of these proposals is substantial. The biggest differences between voters who favor Barack Obama and those who support Mitt Romney are over raising taxes on incomes over $250,000 and reducing military defense spending. Fully 84% of registered voters who support Obama approve of raising taxes on annual incomes above $250,000, compared with 41% of Romney voters.

Most Obama voters (58%) favor cutting military defense spending to reduce the debt and deficit; an even higher percentage of Romney voters (82%) oppose defense cuts.

While 62% of Obama supporters approve of raising taxes on investment income to reduce the debt and deficit, an identical percentage of Romney voters (62%) disapprove of increasing investment taxes.

Huge Gaps Between Obama, Romney Voters over Taxes, Cuts in Defense, Aid to the Poor

In order to reduce the deficit and national debt…		Obama Voters %	Romney Voters %	Diff
Wide differences				
Raise income tax on income over $250,000	Approve	84	41	**O+43**
	Disapprove	12	50	
Reduce military defense spending	Approve	58	16	**O+42**
	Disapprove	37	82	
Raise tax rate on investment income	Approve	62	32	**O+30**
	Disapprove	34	62	
Reduce funding to help lower-income Americans	Approve	29	58	**R+29**
	Disapprove	68	36	
Significant differences				
Reduce funding for college student loans	Approve	24	45	**R+21**
	Disapprove	75	50	
Reduce federal funding for scientific research	Approve	28	43	**R+15**
	Disapprove	69	46	
Reduce federal funding for education	Approve	16	31	**R+15**
	Disapprove	83	64	
Limit tax deductions for large corporations	Approve	69	57	**O+12**
	Disapprove	26	35	
Modest/No differences				
Limit home mortgage interest deduction	Approve	52	43	O+9
	Disapprove	43	49	
Gradually raise Social Security retirement age	Approve	43	50	R+7
	Disapprove	54	47	
Reduce Medicare for higher income seniors	Approve	50	53	R+3
	Disapprove	48	44	
Raise people's Medicare health care contributions	Approve	35	38	R+3
	Disapprove	60	55	

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Oct 4-7, 2012. Q35. Based on registered voters. Significant differences in **bold**.

Similarly, while 58% of Romney supporters favor cuts in federal programs that aid lower-income Americans, 68% of Obama voters oppose reductions in programs that aid the poor.

Among the 12 items tested, there is only one – limiting tax deductions for large corporations – that wins support from majorities of both Obama voters (69%) and Romney voters (57%).

About the Survey

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted October 4-7, 2012, among a national sample of 1,511 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (906 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 605 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 291 who had no landline telephone). Data collection was managed by Princeton Survey Research Associates International and conducted by interviewers at Princeton Data Source. A combination of landline and cell phone random digit dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older. For detailed information about our survey methodology, see http://people-press.org/methodology/

The combined landline and cell phone sample are weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity and region to parameters from the March 2011 Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and population density to parameters from the 2010 Decennial Census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status and relative usage of landline and cell phones (for those with both), based on extrapolations from the 2011 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cell phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus...
Total	1,511	2.9 percentage points
Form 1	762	4.1 percentage points
Form 2	749	4.2 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Sample Composition Analysis

The following table shows the profile of all adults interviewed, compared with population parameters from government surveys, as well as the profile of registered and likely voters interviewed.

		October 4-7, 2012 Political Weighted	
Group	**Population Parameter**	**General Public**	**Registered Voters**
Gender	%	%	%
Men	49	50	47
Women	51	50	53
Age			
18-24	13	13	10
25-34	18	17	13
35-44	17	17	17
45-54	19	19	20
55-64	16	16	19
65+	17	17	20
Education			
College grad +	28	30	36
Some college	28	28	30
High school or less	44	41	34
Race/Ethnicity			
White non-Hispanic	68	67	74
Black non-Hispanic	12	11	11
Hispanic	14	13	8
Other non-Hispanic	7	7	5
Region			
Northeast	18	19	18
Midwest	22	22	24
South	37	37	36
West	23	23	21
Phone use			
Landline only	7	7	6
Dual – landline and cell	58	59	65
Cell phone only	35	33	29
Unweighted N	--	1,511	1,201

Population parameters for all adults from the March 2011 Current Population Survey except phoneuse, which is based on projections from the 2011 National Health Interview Survey. All figures are based on weighted data. Don't know responses for the current survey are not shown. Whites, blacks and other race are non-Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

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PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE & THE PRESS
EARLY OCTOBER 2012 POLITICAL SURVEY
TOPLINE
October 4-7, 2012
N=1,511

NO QUESTIONS 1-4, 6, 9-14, 16-19, 23-25, 29-33, 36-38, 41, 44-51, 53-55

QUESTIONS 5, 7-8, 15a-d, 20-22, 26-28, 34, 64-69 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

QUESTIONS 39-40, 42-43, 52, 56-63 HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE

ASK ALL:
Q.35 Thinking about ways to reduce the deficit and size of the national debt, please tell me if you would approve or disapprove of each of the following. First, **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE; OBSERVE FORM SPLITS]** Would you approve or disapprove of this as a way to reduce the size of the national debt? What about **[NEXT ITEM]**? **[IF NECESSARY:** Would you approve or disapprove of this as a way to reduce the size of the national debt?**]** [1]

		Approve	Disapprove	(VOL.) DK/Ref
ASK FORM 1 ONLY [N=762]:				
a.F1	Reduce federal funding for programs that help lower income Americans			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	43	50	6
	Sep 22-25, 2011	41	55	4
	May 25-30, 2011	40	54	6
b.F1	Gradually raise the age at which people can begin receiving Social Security benefits			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	41	56	3
	May 25-30, 2011	36	59	5
	Dec 1-5, 2010	38	58	4
c.F1	Reduce federal funding for education			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	22	75	3
d.F1	Limit tax deductions for interest paid on home mortgages			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	47	44	9
	May 25-30, 2011	49	43	8
	TREND FOR COMPARISON:			
	Eliminate tax deductions for interest paid on home mortgages			
	Dec 1-5, 2010	34	56	10
NO ITEM e				
f.F1	Raise the tax rate on investment income			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	44	49	7
g.F1	Reduce Medicare benefits for seniors with higher incomes			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	49	47	4
ASK ALL:				
h.	Reduce military defense spending			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	40	56	4

[1] In September 2011, question began "As you may know, political leaders are debating various ways to reduce the deficit and size of the national debt." In December 2010, question began, "Thinking about ways to reduce the federal budget deficit…" In September 2011, respondents were asked whether they strongly approve/disapprove.

Q.35 CONTINUED…

		Approve	Disapprove	(VOL.) DK/Ref
ASK FORM 2 ONLY [N=749]:				
i.F2	Raise the amount people on Medicare contribute to cover their health care costs			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	35	57	8
	Dec 1-5, 2010	32	64	5
j.F2	Reduce federal funding for college student loan programs			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	34	61	4
k.F2	Limit tax deductions for large corporations			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	58	34	8
	Sep 22-25, 2011	56	39	5
	May 25-30, 2011	62	34	4
NO ITEM l				
m.F2	Raise the income tax rate on incomes over $250,000 a year			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	64	29	6
	Sep 22-25, 2011	67	29	4
	May 25-30, 2011	66	31	3
n.F2	Reduce federal funding for scientific research			
	Oct 4-7, 2012	38	54	8

ASK ALL:

PARTY In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or independent?

ASK IF INDEP/NO PREF/OTHER/DK/REF (PARTY=3,4,5,9):

PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?

BASED ON LIKELY VOTERS [N=1,112]:

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	(VOL.) No preference	(VOL.) Other party	(VOL.) DK/Ref	*Lean Rep*	*Lean Dem*
Oct 4-7, 2012	36	31	30	1	1	1	14	14
Sep 12-16, 2012	29	39	30	1	*	2	14	13

BASED ON REGISTERED VOTERS [N=1,201]:

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	(VOL.) No preference	(VOL.) Other party	(VOL.) DK/Ref	*Lean Rep*	*Lean Dem*
Oct 4-7, 2012	33	32	31	1	1	1	14	14
Sep 12-16, 2012	28	37	31	1	*	2	14	13
Jul 16-26, 2012	25	38	33	2	1	2	15	12
Jun 28-Jul 9, 2012	27	36	34	1	*	2	15	15
Jun 7-17, 2012	28	35	35	1	*	1	17	14
May 9-Jun 3, 2012	28	35	31	2	*	3	13	12
Apr 4-15, 2012	28	34	35	1	*	1	16	12
Mar 7-11, 2012	28	38	31	1	1	1	15	14
Feb 8-12, 2012	32	34	31	1	*	1	13	15
Jan 11-16, 2012	24	33	38	2	*	2	17	14
Jan 4-8, 2012	31	32	32	3	*	2	15	12

PARTY/PARTYLN CONTINUED…

BASED ON GENERAL PUBLIC:

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	**(VOL.)** No preference	**(VOL.)** Other party	**(VOL.)** DK/Ref	*Lean Rep*	*Lean Dem*
Oct 4-7, 2012	27	31	36	3	1	3	15	15
Sep 12-16, 2012	24	35	36	2	*	2	14	16
Jul 16-26, 2012	22	33	38	4	*	3	14	15
Jun 28-Jul 9, 2012	24	33	37	3	*	3	15	17
Jun 7-17, 2012	24	33	39	2	*	2	17	17
May 9-Jun 3, 2012	24	32	36	4	*	4	13	14
Apr 4-15, 2012	24	31	39	3	*	2	15	15
Mar 7-11, 2012	24	34	36	3	1	2	16	17
Feb 8-12, 2012	26	32	36	4	1	2	13	17
Jan 11-16, 2012	22	31	42	3	*	2	17	16
Jan 4-8, 2012	26	31	35	4	*	4	14	14
Yearly Totals								
2011	24.3	32.3	37.4	3.1	.4	2.5	15.7	15.6
2010	25.2	32.7	35.2	3.6	.4	2.8	14.5	14.1
2009	23.9	34.4	35.1	3.4	.4	2.8	13.1	15.7
2008	25.7	36.0	31.5	3.6	.3	3.0	10.6	15.2
2007	25.3	32.9	34.1	4.3	.4	2.9	10.9	17.0
2006	27.8	33.1	30.9	4.4	.3	3.4	10.5	15.1
2005	29.3	32.8	30.2	4.5	.3	2.8	10.3	14.9
2004	30.0	33.5	29.5	3.8	.4	3.0	11.7	13.4
2003	30.3	31.5	30.5	4.8	.5	2.5	12.0	12.6
2002	30.4	31.4	29.8	5.0	.7	2.7	12.4	11.6
2001	29.0	33.2	29.5	5.2	.6	2.6	11.9	11.6
2001 Post-Sept 11	*30.9*	*31.8*	*27.9*	*5.2*	*.6*	*3.6*	*11.7*	*9.4*
2001 Pre-Sept 11	*27.3*	*34.4*	*30.9*	*5.1*	*.6*	*1.7*	*12.1*	*13.5*
2000	28.0	33.4	29.1	5.5	.5	3.6	11.6	11.7
1999	26.6	33.5	33.7	3.9	.5	1.9	13.0	14.5
1998	27.9	33.7	31.1	4.6	.4	2.3	11.6	13.1
1997	28.0	33.4	32.0	4.0	.4	2.3	12.2	14.1
1996	28.9	33.9	31.8	3.0	.4	2.0	12.1	14.9
1995	31.6	30.0	33.7	2.4	.6	1.3	15.1	13.5
1994	30.1	31.5	33.5	1.3	--	3.6	13.7	12.2
1993	27.4	33.6	34.2	4.4	1.5	2.9	11.5	14.9
1992	27.6	33.7	34.7	1.5	0	2.5	12.6	16.5
1991	30.9	31.4	33.2	0	1.4	3.0	14.7	10.8
1990	30.9	33.2	29.3	1.2	1.9	3.4	12.4	11.3
1989	33	33	34	--	--	--	--	--
1987	26	35	39	--	--	--	--	--