

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of March 7–14, 2005.)

In this edition of Public Opinion Watch:

Where the Public Wants the Money Spent
Social Security: What Part of “No” Don’t You Understand?

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Where the Public Wants the Money Spent

Knowledge Networks poll of 1,182 adults for Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), released March 7, 2005 (conducted February 18–25, 2005)

I strongly recommend the new report from PIPA, “**The Federal Budget: The Public’s Priorities.**” The report, based on an extensive poll, highlights just how far away from the public’s preferences the priorities of the current administration are. Here is an excerpt from the report summarizing some of the major findings (but I urge you to take a look at the whole report):

To find out how Americans would allocate the discretionary federal budget if they each could control a correspondingly small portion, a representative sample participated in a budget exercise. Respondents were shown a spreadsheet with allocations for 16 key areas of the discretionary budget. All the figures they saw were based on the requests in the president’s budget proposal for fiscal 2006. Two other items were included: the amount of probable supplemental funding for operations primarily in Iraq but also in Afghanistan (as projected by the Congressional Budget Office); and an option to assign money to reduce the budget deficit.

Budget items were converted in terms of a total of \$1,000 for all of these budget items, as this is an amount that respondents would feel more comfortable dealing with and

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happens to roughly be the portion of the median taxpayers' bill that corresponds to the portion of the general budget devoted to these items. . . .

Respondents were also provided a line for reduction of the budget deficit, which, of course, was set at zero.

Nearly all respondents were able to complete the exercise. And overall, there were many changes made to the proposed budget. The budget items that were most deeply cut were defense spending, the Iraq supplemental, transportation, and federal administration of justice. The budget items that were increased the most were allocations to reduce the budget deficit and spending on education, conserving and developing renewable energy, job training and employment, and medical research. . . .

National Security Spending

Overall, by far the largest modification to the proposed budget was a major cut in defense spending. On average, defense spending was cut by the equivalent of \$133.8 billion (or 31%), from \$435.9 billion to \$302.1 billion. Fully two-thirds of respondents (65%) made cuts to the defense budget.

The projected Iraq supplemental was reduced a similar percentage (35%) from \$85 billion to \$55.4 billion—a reduction of \$29.6 billion. Here again, two thirds (65%) of respondents cut this item.

Homeland security received a robust average increase of 38% or \$10.5 billion (from \$27.3 to \$37.8 billion). But only 41% favored such increases.

Cutting the Deficit

The largest increase was the reallocation to reductions in the budget deficit. The mean respondent reallocated \$36.3 billion to deficit reduction, with 61% of respondents making some reallocation.

Interestingly, Democrats allocated more to deficit reduction (\$39.4 billion) than Republicans (\$29.6). It should be noted that respondents were in no way prompted to make some allocation to the deficit, other than offering a line for doing so. They were also not told the size of the deficit and, as will be discussed below, a large minority did not believe there was a large deficit. Those who did believe there was a large deficit allocated substantially more to deficit reduction.

Social Spending

The largest budget areas increased were for social spending. Spending on human capital was especially popular. Education was increased \$26.7 billion, from \$68.5 billion to \$95.2 billion (a 39% increase), with a majority of 57% making increases. Job training and employment-related services were increased \$19 billion, from \$7.2 billion to \$26.2 billion, a sizeable increase of 263%, which was made by a strong majority of 67%. Veterans' benefits were also increased \$12.5 billion, from \$31.4 billion to \$43.9 billion, an increase of 40% by a majority of 63%. Likewise, medical research was increased

\$15.5 billion, from \$29.2 billion to \$44.7 billion—a 53% increase by a 57% majority. . . .

Environmental Spending

By far the largest increase in percentage terms was for conserving and developing renewable energy. This amount was increased \$24 billion, from \$2.2 billion to \$26.2 billion—an extraordinary increase of 1090%. This was also the area increased by the largest majority—70%. The environment and natural resources received a more moderate increase of \$9 billion (from \$28 billion to \$37 billion), up 32%—an increase driven by 42% of respondents. Similarly, housing was also increased \$9.3 billion, from \$30 billion to \$39.3 billion—a 31% increase made by 43% of respondents.

Wow! Now if we could only get an administration whose priorities were remotely like the public's. . . .

Social Security: What Part of “No” Don’t You Understand?

Quinnipiac University poll of 1,534 registered voters, released March 9, 2005 (conducted March 2–7, 2005)

Ipsos poll of 1,001 adults for AP, released March 10, 2005 (conducted March 7–9, 2005)

TNS poll of 1,001 adults for *Washington Post/ABC News*, released March 14, 2005 (conducted March 10–13, 2005)

Polling data continue to stream in indicating that the public’s answer to Bush’s Social Security plan is a polite, but firm, “no.”

A Quinnipiac University poll released on March 9 found Bush’s approval rating on Social Security down to 28 percent, with 59 percent disapproval. Among independents, that rating worsens to 25 percent/62 percent.

In addition, the public opposes “reducing Social Security benefits to bring more money into the Social Security system” (part of Bush’s plan) by 81 percent to 16 percent, but supports “raising [the] \$90,000 income cap to help bring more money into Social Security system” (which Bush opposes) by 72 percent to 23 percent.

The latest Ipsos-AP poll, released on March 10, measures his approval rating on Social Security at 37 percent with 56 percent disapproval, down slightly from 39 percent/56 percent in late February. And his approval rating on this issue among “pure” independents (those who refuse to lean toward either party) is now a stunningly bad 20 percent/62 percent.

Finally, in the new *Washington Post/ABC News* poll, released March 13, Bush’s approval rating on Social Security has dropped to 35 percent, with 56 percent disapproval, his lowest rating every on this issue in this poll.

The poll also finds that the public now opposes “Bush’s proposals to change the Social Security system” 55 percent to 37 percent. *Even worse for Bush, 58 percent of the public says that, the more they hear about these proposals, the less they like them.* That compares to just 33 percent who say that the more they hear about these proposals, the more they like them.

In addition, the benefit-cutting part of Bush’s plan generates strong 57 percent to 36 percent opposition even when described using Bush’s preferred language: “Changing the way Social Security benefits are calculated so that benefits increase at a slower rate than they would under the current formula”. And the more straightforward language of “Reducing guaranteed benefits for future retirees” yields overwhelming 75 percent to 20 percent opposition.

That’s a lot of “no” in a lot of different ways. Perhaps even Bush is getting to the point where he can (or perhaps must) understand this all-important two-letter word.

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Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you’ve ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they’re talking about—you’ll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site:

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