

Only 2% of Reports on Debt Ceiling Battle Mention Public Opposition to Increase

## **Network evening shows ignore polls showing deeper concern over rising federal debt than default; fail to debunk Obama's Social Security remarks.**

By Julia A. Seymour

Thursday, July 14, 2011 3:36 PM EDT

The 2010 elections, which changed the balance of power in the House, were driven by popular opposition to government spending, debt and the threat of tax increases. Yet even with the federal debt limit already breached and only days left to prevent a national default, the media continue to ignore the public's wishes.

The theme of network reports on the debt ceiling battle is that some agreement MUST be reached so that the limit can be increased, but many Americans disagree with raising the debt limit and are more concerned about government spending. But that has barely been mentioned in stories.

Polls taken by Gallup, CBS and AP have all registered significant worry about federal debt and opposition to an increase in the debt ceiling. But ABC, CBS and NBC coverage of the debt limit battle being waged on Capitol Hill has not reflected that fact.

Out of 45 reports on the broadcast network's evening news programs between June 16 and July 12, only one mentioned a poll that showed public opposition to raising the debt ceiling. That's a mere 2 percent of reports. An additional two stories had some reference to what the public might think, but without polling data.

Those two other stories included a politician and journalist's respective opinions about public sentiment. In one, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said that the public opposes tax increases but supports a balanced budget. In the other, Bob Schieffer claimed he knew what public opinion was without giving any poll to back it up. He declared, "I doubt that many people would argue with the president when he says it can only get worse if Congress does not find a way to raise the debt ceiling."

The network's willingness to ignore public opinion on the issue is shocking given the poll numbers. Gallup found that nearly twice as much opposition to an increase than support for one. In that July 7-10 poll, [42 percent of Americans](#) indicated that they want their representative to vote against raising the debt ceiling, compared to only 22 percent who want them to vote for such a bill.

A June AP/GFK poll taken between June 16 and 20 also showed more public opposition to raising the debt ceiling than support for increasing it.

Gallup also found widespread fear of runaway spending. When asked "Which concerns you more - [the government would not raise the debt ceiling and a major economic crisis would result (or) the government would raise the debt ceiling but without plans for major cuts in future spending]?" A [51 percent](#) majority said their greater concern would be raising the debt ceiling without plans to cut spending, compared to 32 percent worried about an economic crisis caused by not raising the limit.

### **Obama's Social Security Threat**

As the debt limit debate has grown more heated plenty of unfair rhetoric has been tossed around, but President Obama's threat on July 12 that he "[cannot guarantee](#)" August Social Security payments "if we haven't resolved this issue" should have been soundly debunked by network reporters.

After all, they had earlier cited experts who said that there was enough money "in the coffers" to pay for Social Security payments. There wouldn't be enough money for everything, but Social Security, disability and veterans' payments could be paid out according to numbers from MarketWatch and the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Sadly on the networks, it did not incite outrage or much criticism. CBS "Evening News" aired the conversation between Scott Pelley and the president, which included Obama's refusal to guarantee those payments. But Pelley did not offer any criticism, contradiction or debunking of the social security threat during the broadcast.

The next morning, only one of the broadcast morning shows was skeptical of Obama's statement. "The Early Show" on CBS replayed the Pelley interview and warned that ["it's about to get personal for many Americans."](#) ABC's George Stephanopoulos uncritically summarized the president's remarks. Only NBC's "Today" thought Obama might be using it as a "scare tactic."

Mark Tapscott of the Washington Examiner did the math in his Beltway Confidential column July 12. Using numbers from MarketWatch and the Bipartisan Policy Center, Tapscott proved that there will be plenty of money in federal coffers to make August Social Security payments.

He wrote that the government takes in \$200 billion each month. Subtract \$29 billion for interest on the national debt, \$49.2 billion for Social Security, \$50 billion for Medicare and Medicaid, \$2.9 billion each for active duty military pay and veterans programs and [you are left with \\$39 billion each month.](#)

"This is demagoguery of the worst sort because Obama has to know what he is saying is false. When you and I say something we know to be false, it's called a 'lie,'" Tapscott declared.

Before Obama made the claim that Social Security payments might be at risk if a debt ceiling deal isn't reached, the networks knew that the third rail program wasn't at risk.

Just two nights earlier on the July 10 CBS "Evening News," Whit Johnson reported numbers from the Bipartisan Policy Center.

"It says in the month of August the Treasury has to make \$306 billion in payments, but it will take in only \$172 billion. Under one scenario, that's enough to pay interest on the debt, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, defense contractors and unemployment benefits. But there would be no money left for active duty military, federal workers and a slew of other programs," Johnson said.

Economist Mark Zandi was also interviewed by "Evening News" on June 28. He told Anthony Mason that the government would be forced to prioritize if the debt ceiling wasn't increased.

"On August 2nd, the government won't have to cut Social Security payments or Medicare. But if it drags on for a couple or three, four weeks then yes, I think they'll have no choice but to cut almost everything that the government does, including Social Security and Medicare," Zandi said.

Obama's statement also exposed the government's misleading claims about the viability of Social Security.

A blogger for Forbes.com reacted saying, "Well, [either Obama and Geithner are lying to us now](#), or they and all defenders of the Social Security status quo have been lying to us for decades. It must be one or the other."

That blogger, Merrill Matthews, continued saying, "Here's why: Social Security has a trust fund, and that trust fund is supposed to have \$2.6 trillion in it, according to the Social Security trustees. If there are real assets in the trust fund, then Social Security can mail the checks, regardless of what Congress does about the debt limit."

Faith in the Social Security "trust fund" however, is misplaced. For years there has been a pervasive myth spread by politicians and journalists who described Social Security as a "[trust fund](#)." Matthews went on to expose the fallacy of the trust fund in his column, as many others have done before.

The reality of course is that the government has been spending that money and replacing it with Treasury bonds (IOUs) for years. In 2010, the Business & Media Institute reported that as Social Security turned 75 years old, it was also running a \$41 billion deficit (ahead of estimates).

Back then Cato's Michael Cannon criticized media outlets (specifically The New York Times) for claiming the program can still "pay full benefits until 2037" and current attention to the red ink does not "endanger benefits, because any shortfall can be covered by the trust fund."

Cannon reacted: "[No. It. Can't. Because there are no funds in the Social Security 'trust fund'.](#)" He characterized the entire idea as "an institutionalized, ritualized lie." One that BMI found news outlets continued to promote.

Like this article? [Sign up](#) to receive free e-mail alerts from BMI