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## Voters are the cause of America's fiscal mess

By: [Gene Healy](#)

Examiner Columnist | 6/2/09 5:44 AM

There's plenty of blame to go around for the fiscal mess we're in. By ramming through a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, President George W. Bush launched the biggest expansion of entitlements in four decades.

President Obama has added insult to injury by pushing through a \$789 billion "stimulus" package, and attempting to, as the *New Republic's* John Judis puts it, transform "the American relationship of state to economy," with a budget that envisions a public sector more like France's or Sweden's.

The result is that, in the midst of the Baby Boom generation's retirement, we're facing a 2009 deficit of nearly \$1.8 trillion--larger than the entire federal budget in 2000.

There's no end of finger-pointing in our Red-Team/Blue-Team battles over fiscal incontinence. But there's one group that rarely gets the blame it merits. That's us. When you look at the positions embraced by the ordinary American voter, you start to suspect that we're getting the government we deserve.

Sixty percent of Americans say the federal government has too much power and too much money, according to a Rasmussen poll released last month. And they're right. But what are they willing to do about it?

In 2007, the Harris polling firm looked into that question, and the answer was "not much." Very few of us are willing to support the spending reductions necessary to get our fiscal house in order. Harris reports that "hardly anyone would cut Medicaid (4%)... Social Security (2%) or Medicare (1%)"--among the biggest chunks of the federal budget.

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the Harris poll rejected higher taxes to handle the deficit; the only increases they'd support are in "sin" taxes on alcohol and tobacco. Fair enough: taxes are far too high as it stands.

If you're not going to increase revenue, though, you've got to reduce spending. So what does the public want to slash? "Space programs top the list by a wide margin (51%)." Keep in mind that NASA spends less than \$18 billion out of a \$3.9 trillion federal budget.

The GOP is known as the party of smaller government, and polling results reflect that sentiment. In the Pew Research Center's 2007 political values survey, 68 percent of self-identified Republicans said they'd rather have a smaller government providing fewer services; only 28 percent of Democrats said the same.

But the Harris data show that Republicans don't support cuts in any area that represents a large percentage of the federal budget. Democrats were more willing to trim Pentagon outlays (22 percent of federal spending), but overall, fewer than one in three Americans would support defense cuts.

Add up defense, health care, and Social Security, and you find that the public has declared more than two-thirds of the federal budget off limits. Nondefense discretionary spending--the territory on which most budget fights take place--is 17 percent.

We could (and should) shutter the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, and Homeland Security (for starters) but even that wouldn't begin to dig us out of the hole we're in.

Analyzing two recent government reports on Social Security and Medicare, economist Bruce Bartlett reports that "federal taxes would have to rise by roughly 81% to pay all the benefits promised by these programs under current law."

Yet the American voter wants to head off our looming fiscal apocalypse by giving a haircut to NASA and raising taxes on booze and smokes. Sure, that'll cover it.

Few politicians can get through a speech without lavishly praising "the wisdom of the American people." Interestingly, the people themselves are less sure that they're quite so wise.


The Pew survey reports that "the public is increasingly suspicious of itself," with fewer Americans than ever expressing confidence in "the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions."

H.L. Mencken once described democracy as "the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard." We're going to get it "good and hard" in the coming decades, and it won't be pleasant. But the pain we'll suffer may help us learn a badly needed lesson.

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