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Our \$2 Trillion Bridge to Nowhere

Americans believe Washington squanders half of every tax dollar.

By STEPHEN MOORE

If you want to know why Americans are so fearful of a government takeover of the health-care system, take a look at the results of a new Gallup poll on government waste released Sept. 15. One question posed was: "Of every tax dollar that goes to Washington, D.C., how many cents of each dollar would you say is wasted?" Gallup found that the mean response was 50 cents. With Uncle Sam spending just shy of \$4 trillion this year, that means the public believes that \$2 trillion is wasted.

In a separate poll released on Monday, Gallup found that nearly twice as many Americans believe that there is "too much government regulation of business and industry" as believe there is "too little" (45% to 24%).

Perhaps most significantly, in both of these polls Gallup found that skepticism about government's effectiveness is the highest it's been in decades. "Perceptions of federal waste were significantly lower 30 years ago than today," say the Gallup researchers. Even when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 with the help of the antigovernment revolt of that era, Americans believed only 40 cents of every dollar was wasted, according to Gallup.

These results are in some ways surprising because voters just elected a president who promised expensive government expansion almost across the board—from health care to foreign aid to housing to energy policy. Mr. Obama was the first president elected since Lyndon Johnson who didn't even pretend to want to cut the size of government.

Now there's a powerful voter backlash against the Bush-Obama agenda of bailouts, stimulus plans and trillion-dollar-plus deficits. The rage began with the bank bailouts last fall. It grew with the \$787 billion stimulus bill, which was little more than a refill of the budgets of every left-wing program Democrats have wanted to throw money at for 40 years. The nearly \$100 billion bailout of General Motors and Chrysler—some \$300,000 for every auto job saved—was a bridge too far for debt-weary voters. When Mr. Obama then released his 10-year budget plan—which even he admitted would double the national debt with \$9 trillion of new borrowing over the next decade—he was lighting a match in a munitions factory.

There are several political lessons we can learn from the Gallup results. One is that Republicans' strategy of creating a unified bloc of "no" votes to Obama spending initiatives like government-run health care and the cap-and-trade-energy bill is in line with where voters are. The Washington establishment is dead wrong: Americans don't want bipartisan cooperation in supersizing the government right now. Pollster Frank Luntz tells me that Republicans can kill ObamaCare by relentlessly hammering home one message: This is a government takeover of health care. "Americans hate that idea," he says.

But the polling suggests something even bigger: Americans are in the mood for a radical shrinking of government in

order to reduce debt and waste. Republicans and Blue Dog Democrats should be talking nonstop about how to achieve this goal.

First, they should push for a 15% cut in every federal agency budget before the debt cap is raised later this year. Given that most agencies saw their budgets expand by more than 50% in the past year, according to the House Budget Committee, this is hardly going to throw programs into the poor house.

They should also propose an immediate freeze on federal pay and benefits until the budget is balanced—even furloughs of federal workers to save money. A new report from the Cato Institute shows that federal pay packages are nearly twice as generous as those in the private sector for jobs that require similar skill levels. They should call for the elimination of hundreds of useless and obsolete agencies like the Legal Services Corporation. Finally, they should demand that every penny of TARP money repaid by banks should go into a fund to reduce the debt—rather than allow the Obama administration to create a new slush fund for pet projects.

Over the last decade, the federal government has become bloated and inefficient. Voters are on to the scam. Mr. Obama keeps calling federal spending an "investment," but Americans apparently feel this is the worst investment they've ever made. They've come to regard Washington as a \$2 trillion Bridge to Nowhere. They are right.

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