
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Deficit hawks or just a fairy tale?

Press Criticism | By Greg Marx | Budget deficit, Media, Politics

February 9, 2011 — My family hails from Germany on my father's side. When I was growing up, we occasionally had markers of German heritage around the house — a box of spaetzle in the pantry, or a stollen, wrapped in tinfoil, at Christmas.

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One of these Teutonic totems was a children's picture book called “Was Ist Der Lieber?” which translates, roughly, as “Which would you rather?” The book was a collection of cartoonishly illustrated horrors, frights, and assorted unpleasanties; the game was to choose whether you'd prefer, say, to spend the night in a haunted house, or eat a jar of spiders for breakfast. Nobody in my immediate family, including my dad, actually read any German, but that didn't diminish the sense of terrified delight those drawings could inspire in a young reader.

I thought of that book after stumbling upon a poll conducted by USA Today and Gallup on Jan. 26, one day after President Obama announced his support for a partial freeze of federal spending in his State of the Union address. More specifically, I thought of it after reading [the following survey question](#):

Which proposal for government spending do you favor more — President Obama's proposal to freeze discretionary domestic spending for the next five years, or congressional Republicans' proposal to cut discretionary domestic spending back to 2008 levels?

As Remapping Debate [has previously noted](#), pollsters sometimes omit key policy choices and offer respondents only “a relatively narrow range of policy options.” Even by those standards, though, this question imposes extraordinary constraints on the range of alternatives available to the policy-makers who will soon be hashing out the federal budget — or more precisely, it readily accepts the constraints that have been suggested by those policy-makers, rather than asking whether respondents actually embrace those limitations.

Choosing between two unappealing options can be fun when you're a kid and you know the whole enterprise is make-believe. But as an adult in the real world, one is much more likely to say, “Aren't there any other choices?” Indeed, according to Gallup, seven percent of respondents volunteered “neither,” and another 13 percent offered no opinion.

As for those respondents who did make a selection, as Gallup notes, “Democrats and Republicans generally line up behind their party’s plan.” This is not surprising — if Obama said the key to recovery was spending the night in a haunted house, and Republicans insisted that no, it was eating spiders for breakfast, most Democrats, forced to choose between the two, would opt for the haunted house over an eight-legged McMuffin. That’s how partisanship works.

But — and this is a crucial point — that does not mean they actually want to sleep in the haunted house, or even that they believe such a stay is essential to economic well-being. By the same token, if a few more respondents go for the Spider Meal — because independents happen to tilt toward Republicans, or because the Democrats in the survey are less likely to play along, or simply because of random variation in the sample — it does not mean that the public wants to eat arachnids.

Unfortunately, press coverage of the poll has not heeded these cautions, focusing instead on a 41-39 result in favor of the Republicans’ rollback proposal. A write-up in USA Today [stated that the findings](#) “underscore the public desire for more fiscal discipline at a time of soaring deficits.” And just yesterday, a prominent political blog at The Washington Post [used the Gallup survey](#) in the course of arguing that while Republicans’ pursuit of steep spending cuts may be perilous, “at least it looks like the public is on their side.”

That claim, tossed off by the Post’s reporters, seems especially specious, even setting aside objections about constraints on debate. The 41-39 split was within the Gallup poll’s margin of error, or effectively a tie. (Indeed, Gallup’s headline was “Americans Divided on Obama, Republican Spending Proposals.”) That outcome mirrored a similar result [in a recent New York Times/CBS News poll](#), which found the public split between Obama and the GOP on both the budget deficit and job creation.

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Meanwhile, the other item offered as evidence by the Post’s reporters was [a poll commissioned by The Hill](#) that found widespread opposition to raising the debt ceiling — an exercise that, given the obscurity of that subject, seems about as useful as a general survey asking whether *A Bout de Souffle* or *Jules et Jim* represents the pinnacle of the French New Wave. Compare that to the finding in the Times/CBS poll that a bare six percent of respondents consider the budget deficit to be the most important problem facing the country, and it’s hard to see an uprising in support of spending cuts.

This string of errors — lopsided questions and tendentious reporting, all tied to the story of the day — is especially unfortunate, because polling about budget priorities has actually yielded some of the most consistent and durable survey findings we have. As the political scientist Larry Bartels [recently wrote for YouGov](#), a research and consulting organization, “in survey after survey [Americans] support spending more, not less, on most of the major programs that make up most of the federal budget”; at the same time, they “also routinely say they favor lower taxes and a balanced budget.”

It's plausible, as the USA Today story suggests, that "at a time of soaring deficits," public sentiment could shift in favor of cutting spending. But it's the sort of thing one might like to know, rather than just asserting. So YouGov recently undertook to find out. The outfit conducted one poll asking about public

support for federal spending cuts; as usual, it was scarce, and the bigger and costlier the program, the less enthusiasm there was for cutting it. (Military spending was a partial outlier, a result that is also consistent with other polls.)

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And public support for spending persisted even when the deck was stacked against it. YouGov also conducted a second, identical poll — except this time, respondents were read a "deficit hawk" prologue that outlined the perils of excessive government debt, just to bring people who haven't been following the Beltway-centric austerity debate up to speed. The outcome? Support for spending cuts barely budged, especially for the biggest programs. (Over at the group political science blog The Monkey Cage, [John Sides has put the results in graph form.](#))

As Bartels writes, outside of a core group of conservative activists, "public support for serious fiscal austerity is nowhere in sight." That's true when times are good; it seems to be true now, too, even as politicians of both parties compete to signal "responsibility" through spending cuts and a raft of blue-ribbon commissions talks about the need to share the pain. And if we're trying to understand what the priorities of "the public" are for federal budget policy, it's the persistence of these findings that matter, not a quick poll that attempts to gauge the political debate — and adopts the political terms — of the moment.

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