

ABC News/Washington Post poll: Where to Cut
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State Budgets vs. Social Security: What's the Real Third Rail?

While Social Security long has been seen as the deadly third rail of American politics, an ABC News/Washington Post poll finds that state budgets may in fact pose the greater hazard to ax-wielding lawmakers.

Beyond freezing pay and trimming pensions for new hires, state governments have little leeway in terms of public support for cost-cutting measures. Sizable majorities of Americans, six in 10 or more, reject 10 out of 12 state deficit-cutting approaches tested in this poll. The choices are so poor that raising or enacting taxes, while far from popular, are among the less unpopular options.

Nor does reducing union bargaining rights – the Wisconsin approach – look like a popular solution. Sixty-seven percent in this poll, produced for ABC News by [Langer Research Associates](#), say workers employed by state governments should have a right to form unions to negotiate their working conditions, pay, benefits and pensions. (More, 81 percent, say all workers in general should have that right.)

Perhaps surprisingly, there may be a little more wiggle room for lawmakers in Washington eyeing Social Security. Despite the system's "touch it and die" reputation, one option gets narrow majority support – lifting the cap on the amount of income that's taxed to fund benefits. And two others, reducing early retirement benefits and slowing the rate of growth in benefits, approach a split decision.

One impetus could be the sense of risk: Eighty-one percent of Americans see a crisis ahead for Social Security if changes aren't made, up 10 points from six years ago. And more than half now favor "major" changes to keep the system secure. Given those shifts, support for proposed changes to Social Security has gained in several cases, even when it still falls short (sometimes well short) of a majority.

STATE CUTS – State-level budget battles, for their part, look highly hazardous. Fifty-five percent of Americans favor freezing wages for state employees; 51 percent back reducing pension benefits for new state workers. But a range of other state budget options are off the table in terms of public support, several emphatically so. The rundown:

- Opposition is broadest and deepest to laying off firefighters (89 percent opposed) teachers (86 percent) or police officers (again 86 percent). At least seven in 10 "strongly" oppose each of these.
- More than three-quarters reject reducing state aid to public schools (79 percent opposed, with 64 percent strongly opposed), cutting state funding for Medicaid (76 percent opposed) or closing or limiting access to state parks and recreation facilities (also 76 percent).

- Fewer but still significant majorities oppose increasing or enacting a state income tax (63 percent) or sales tax (61 percent), reducing spending on roads and infrastructure (61 percent) or laying off state employees in general (60 percent). Raising or enacting either a sales or income tax is “strongly” opposed by 45 percent.

While cutting police and firefighter positions are unpopular across the board, views on other proposals break down along customary partisan lines. Democrats, liberals and critics of the Tea Party political movement are all significantly more likely to oppose the remaining proposals that involve reductions in the public sector, and less critical of higher taxes.

Conservatives, Republicans and Tea Party supporters are more apt to support public sector cuts, and to oppose tax increases. Independents are a mixed bag, but closer to Republicans than to Democrats on most elements, and especially on taxes.

SOC SEC – On Social Security, as noted, a majority of Americans, 53 percent, support collecting taxes on all the money a worker earns, not just the first \$107,000. That’s similar to what it was in 2005.

Two others come fairly close to half: Forty-six percent support trimming early-retirement benefits, up 10 points from six years ago; and 45 percent support cutting the rate of growth in benefits, up 8 points since 2005.

Among other items, 42 percent favor raising the retirement age for full benefits from 67 to 68 – still short of a majority, but up 9 points from 2005. Just 35 percent favor raising the Social Security tax rate and 32 percent back reducing guaranteed benefits for future retirees; the first is up by a scant 4 points from 2006, but the latter – while still last on the list – is up 12 points.

There are also partisan differences. Compared with their political opposites, Democrats are significantly more apt to support raising taxes and less apt to support cutting benefits. Again independents side more with Republicans, and in fact exceed Republicans in support for trimming Social Security benefits.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone March 10-13, 2011, among a random national sample of 1,005 adults, including landline and cell-phone-only respondents. The results from the full survey have a 3.5-point error margin. The survey was produced for ABC News by [Langer Research Associates](#) of New York, with sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

Full results follow.

1-17, 24-31, 33-36 previously released.

32 held for release.

18. Now thinking about the Social Security system that mainly provides retirement income for senior citizens: If changes are not made, do you think the Social Security system is heading for a crisis down the road, or not?

| | Yes | No | Already in crisis (vol.) | No opinion |
|----------|-----|----|--------------------------|------------|
| 3/13/11* | 81 | 15 | 1 | 3 |
| 3/13/05 | 71 | 23 | 1 | 5 |

*Add: "Now thinking about the Social Security system that mainly provides retirement income for senior citizens"

19. (IF HEADED FOR/IN CRISIS) (To avoid a crisis,) Do you think Social Security needs major changes, or minor changes?

| | Major | Minor | No opinion |
|---------|-------|-------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 66 | 32 | 3 |
| 3/13/05 | 67 | 30 | 3 |

18/19 NET.

| | ----- System in crisis ----- | | | | No crisis | No opinion |
|---------|------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|-----------|------------|
| | NET | Major | Minor | No op. | | |
| 3/13/11 | 83 | 54 | 26 | 2 | 15 | 3 |
| 3/13/05 | 72 | 48 | 22 | 2 | 23 | 5 |

20. I'm going to mention changes some leaders have proposed for Social Security. Please tell me if you support or oppose each one.

3/13/11 - Summary Table*

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---|---------|--------|------------|
| a. Increasing the Social Security tax rate | 35 | 61 | 4 |
| b. Collecting Social Security taxes on all the money a worker earns, rather than taxing only up to about \$107,000 of annual income | 53 | 43 | 4 |
| c. Raising the retirement age to receive full Social Security benefits to 68, instead of the current 67 | 42 | 57 | 1 |
| d. Further reducing the benefits paid to people who retire early. For instance, people who retire at age 62 would get 63% of their full benefits, rather than the current 70% | 46 | 52 | 2 |
| e. Changing the way Social Security benefits are calculated so that benefits increase at a slower rate than they would under the current formula | 45 | 48 | 6 |
| f. Reducing guaranteed benefits for future retirees | 32 | 66 | 2 |

*Full sample asked items a-d; half sample asked item e; other half sample asked item f.

Trend:

a. Increasing the Social Security tax rate

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|---------|--------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 35 | 61 | 4 |
| 3/13/05 | 31 | 64 | 4 |

b. Collecting Social Security taxes on all the money a worker earns, rather than taxing only up to about \$107,000 of annual income

| Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|--------|------------|
|---------|--------|------------|

| | | | |
|----------|----|----|---|
| 3/13/11 | 53 | 43 | 4 |
| 3/13/05* | 56 | 40 | 4 |

* "up to the first \$90,000..."

c. Raising the retirement age to receive full Social Security benefits to 68, instead of the current 67

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|---------|--------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 42 | 57 | 1 |
| 3/13/05 | 33 | 66 | 2 |

d. Further reducing the benefits paid to people who retire early. For instance, people who retire at age 62 would get 63% of their full benefits, rather than the current 70%

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|---------|--------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 46 | 52 | 2 |
| 3/13/05 | 36 | 62 | 2 |

e. Changing the way Social Security benefits are calculated so that benefits increase at a slower rate than they would under the current formula

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|---------|--------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 45 | 48 | 6 |
| 3/13/05 | 37 | 57 | 6 |

f. Reducing guaranteed benefits for future retirees

| | Support | Oppose | No opinion |
|---------|---------|--------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 32 | 66 | 2 |
| 3/13/05 | 20 | 75 | 5 |

21. Now thinking about budget problems at the state level: I'm going to name some proposals that may help reduce state budget deficits. For each, please tell me if that's something you would support strongly, support somewhat, oppose somewhat or oppose strongly in your state. How about [ITEM]?

3/13/11 - Summary Table*

| | Support | | | Oppose | | | No |
|---|---------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| | NET | Strgly | Smwht | NET | Smwht | Strgly | opin. |
| a. (increase/enact) state income taxes** | 36 | 9 | 27 | 63 | 18 | 45 | 1 |
| b. cut state funding for the Medicaid health insurance program | 22 | 11 | 11 | 76 | 23 | 53 | 3 |
| c. (increase/enact) state sales taxes** | 38 | 10 | 28 | 61 | 16 | 45 | 1 |
| d. reduce state aid to public schools | 21 | 11 | 10 | 79 | 15 | 64 | 1 |
| e. lay off state employees | 37 | 17 | 20 | 60 | 23 | 37 | 3 |
| f. lay off public school teachers | 13 | 4 | 9 | 86 | 12 | 74 | 1 |
| g. lay off police officers | 13 | 9 | 4 | 86 | 16 | 70 | 1 |
| h. lay off firefighters | 10 | 5 | 5 | 89 | 15 | 75 | 1 |
| i. freeze wages for state employees | 55 | 29 | 27 | 43 | 16 | 27 | 2 |
| j. reduce pension benefits for new state workers | 51 | 26 | 25 | 45 | 21 | 24 | 4 |
| k. close or limit access to state parks and recreation facilities | 22 | 8 | 13 | 76 | 24 | 52 | 2 |
| l. reduce spending on roads and other infrastructure projects | 39 | 14 | 25 | 61 | 26 | 35 | * |

*Half sample asked items a-f; other half sample asked items g-l.

** "increase" asked in states with income/sales tax, "enact" asked in states without income/sales tax.

22. On another subject, do you think workers in this country should or should not have a right to form unions to negotiate with employers on things like their working conditions, pay, benefits and pensions?

| | Should | Should not | No opinion |
|---------|--------|------------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 81 | 18 | 2 |

23. Now thinking specifically about workers employed by state governments, do you think those workers should or should not have a right to form unions to negotiate things like their working conditions, pay, benefits and pensions?

| | Should | Should not | No opinion |
|---------|--------|------------|------------|
| 3/13/11 | 67 | 32 | 1 |

END