

U.S. Budget: The Public's Priorities

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U.S. Public Would Significantly Alter Bush Administration's Budget

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A new poll finds that the American public would significantly alter the Bush administration's recently proposed federal budget. Presented a breakdown of the major areas of the proposed discretionary budget and given the opportunity to redistribute it, respondents made major changes.

The most dramatic changes were deep cuts in defense spending, a significant reallocation toward deficit reduction, and increases in spending on education, job training, reducing reliance on oil, and veterans. These changes were favored by both Republicans and Democrats, though the changes were generally greater for Democrats.

Sixty-one percent of respondents redirected some funds to reducing the budget deficit, with the mean respondent reallocating \$36 billion (Democrats \$39.4 billion, Republicans \$29.6 billion), though they were not told anything about the size of the deficit.

Defense spending received the deepest cut, being cut on average 31percent—equivalent to \$133.8 billion—with 65 percent of respondents cutting. The second largest area to be cut was the supplemental for Iraq and Afghanistan, which suffered an average cut of \$29.6 billion or 35 percent, with two out of three respondents cutting. Also cut were transportation (cut \$12.6 billion or 18 percent), federal administration of justice (\$8.7 billion or 21 percent), and space research and science (\$1.2 billion or 5 percent). Majorities of 53-58 percent of respondents favored cuts in each of these cases.

The largest increases were for social spending. Spending on human capital was especially popular including education which

was increased \$26.8 billion (39%) and job training and employment which was up \$19 billion or a remarkable 263%. Medical research was upped on average \$15.5 billion (53%). Veterans benefits were raised 40 percent or \$12.5 billion and housing went up 31 percent or \$9.3 billion. In most cases clear majorities favored increases (education 57%, job training 67%, medical research 57%, veteran's benefits 63%), though only 43 percent of respondents favored increases for housing.

In percentage terms, by far the largest increase was for conserving and developing renewable energy - an extraordinary 1090 percent or \$24 billion—which also had the highest percentage of respondents (70%) favoring an increase. The environment and natural resources received a more modest increase of 32% or \$9 billion, with 42 percent of respondents favoring increases.

As the defense cuts proposed were large, respondents were asked in a separate set of questions what areas they would want to cut. Majorities favored cutting the capability for large-scale nuclear wars, the number of nuclear weapons, and spending on developing new types of nuclear weapons. (Asked how many nuclear weapons the United States needs to have on alert, the median response was just 150.) Capabilities for large-scale naval wars and large-scale land wars were both reduced by 58 percent of respondents. Majorities also favored cutting spending on new types of naval destroyers (55%), bombers (53%), and submarines (52%) and nearly as many cut the inventory for each of these items as well.

However, respondents particularly preserved spending for troops, including for salaries (82%), the overall number of military personnel (61%), and development of new equipment for infantry and Marines (64%). Spending relevant to fighting terrorism was also preserved, such as for intelligence (62%), troops for special operations (58%), and advanced communications systems (69%). Also preserved was spending on capabilities for conducting peacekeeping (58%), fighting insurgents or guerrillas (56%), and work on new types of high-technology missiles and bombs (55%).

The variation in feelings toward U.S. troops and other parts of the defense establishment were expressed in another pair of questions. Asked to give a rating on a scale of 1 to 10, the average rating for U.S. armed forces was a very warm 8.0, while the Pentagon received a lukewarm 5.4.

In the budget exercise, homeland security received a robust average increase of \$10.5 billion or 38 percent, though only 41 percent of respondents favored increases.

In contrast to the large cuts to defense spending in the budget exercise, respondents made substantial increases to forms of soft power. The United Nations and U.N. peacekeeping received one of the largest percentage increases—going up an average of 207 percent or \$4.8 billion. Spending on economic and humanitarian aid went up an average of \$3.2 billion or 23 percent, military aid went up \$4.7 billion or 53 percent and the State Department went up an average of \$3.2 billion, also 53 percent. However, in all these cases it was an enthusiastic minority (25-39%) that was driving these increases.

When asked how the United States should deal with its military commitments to protect other countries, 69% said that “the United States should only spend enough to protect itself and to join in efforts to protect countries together with allies or through the U.N.” Only 17 percent thought the United States should spend enough to protect other countries on its own and only 11 percent said the United States should only protect itself and not other countries.

Steven Kull comments, “The American public as a whole takes a fairly coherent position. They favor redirecting a portion of defense spending to deficit reduction and social spending and look for savings by cutting spending on large-scale Cold War style capabilities--not unlike Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld—and sizing capabilities on the assumption that the US will be acting together with allies, not on its own.”

Besides reallocating funds to deficit reduction, a clear majority (63%) favored rolling back the tax cuts for people with incomes over \$200,000. However, when the tax revisions were not specifically limited to the wealthy, only 48 percent favored letting the tax cuts expire and 45 percent wanted them extended. Those who perceive that the deficit is large (62%) allocated more to lowering the deficit (\$48.4 billion), and were more supportive of rolling back the tax cuts (68%) and allowing the tax cuts to expire (57%).

The poll was conducted Feb. 18-25, 2005, with a nationwide sample of 1,182 American adults. The margin of error was 2.9-4.1%, depending on whether the question went to the full sample or part of the sample. The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp.