

# Changing Expectations: Americans deliberate our nation's finances and future

*September 2008*



An initiative of the *Facing up to Our Nation's Finances* Project. Project partners: The Brookings Institution, The Concord Coalition, The Heritage Foundation, Public Agenda and Viewpoint Learning. Project Sponsors: The Ford Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation

*Submitted by Viewpoint Learning, Inc.*

*PRINCIPAL AUTHORS: Steven A. Rosell, Isabella Furth, Heidi Gantwerk*





<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	5
<b>REPORT</b>	
Introduction	9
Specific Findings	10
Stakeholder Dialogues: A Two-Way Learning Process	13
Regional Differences	14
Understanding the Public's Learning Curve	16
Conclusions	18
<b>APPENDIX A: Choice-Dialogue Methodology</b>	21
<b>APPENDIX B: Dates and Locations of Choice-Dialogues and Stakeholder Dialogues</b>	23
<b>APPENDIX C: Quantitative Findings</b>	24





## Executive Summary

Our population is aging, baby boomers are nearing retirement, health care costs are skyrocketing, the national debt continues to rise and the economy is growing more turbulent and troubled. In these challenging times, it is increasingly vital for Americans to have a serious conversation about national priorities, entitlements, what we expect from the Federal government and what we are willing to pay to get it. But building public understanding of and support for difficult choices is easier said than done. Leaders are not sure whether or how they can reach the public on these issues; let alone what sorts of solutions the public would find acceptable if they did.

To help provide this insight, over the last two years Viewpoint Learning – in partnership with Public Agenda, The Concord Coalition, The Brookings Institution and The Heritage Foundation – has conducted a nationwide series of *Choice-Dialogues*™. In these day-long sessions, which go far beyond what is

possible with polls or focus groups, representative samples of Americans worked to come to terms with the challenges facing America's finances and future. What we found, in dialogue after dialogue across the country, is that ***the main obstacle to building public support for the difficult choices we face is not public opposition to tax increases or program cuts, nor is it public lack of interest. The main obstacle is a deeply felt and pervasive mistrust of government.*** Americans were clear: It's not about taxes. It's not about spending. It's about trust.

Perhaps as important, the dialogues, along with a follow-up survey with dialogue participants conducted this summer, revealed the leading edge of a significant and widespread shift in what Americans expect of their leaders and themselves. This shift is surfacing powerfully in the current presidential campaign, and it has real implications for what it will take to reduce mistrust of government and build public support for major reform. Our respondents

emphasized that trust is a two-way street:

- They want leaders to provide an honest, straightforward assessment of the challenges facing the nation. They are increasingly suspicious of easy answers, and are more aware when they are being pandered to or spun; such tactics tend to reinforce mistrust.
- They do not expect leaders to provide all the answers – but they do expect leaders to give people the chance to wrestle with the tough choices and take citizens' viewpoints seriously.
- They want to be challenged and play a role in problem solving: being asked to consider hard choices is not a poison pill.

These expectations are now surfacing in the public on a broader scale, as the current economic downturn and the election cycle converge to accelerate the public's learning curve about the challenges facing the nation, much as the dialogues accelerated the learning curve



of participants. It is no accident that the two presidential nominees are those who best tapped into this shift in public expectations. John McCain has long had a reputation as a maverick who acts independent of his party and who offers the public ‘straight talk.’ Barack Obama has built his candidacy around a new way of doing politics and direct engagement with the public. Each candidate represents a move away from ‘politics as usual,’ and each promises candor, honesty and the possibility of bi-partisan problem-solving.

### SPECIFIC FINDINGS

We conducted twelve day-long dialogues in cities and towns across the country, each with a randomly recruited representative sample of 35-45 participants. These intense sessions focused on the kind of America participants want to see for themselves and their children, the role they want the Federal government to play in realizing that future, and the tradeoffs they are prepared to make to achieve those ends in four specific areas: Medicare/Social Security; defense; other federal activities; and taxes/debt.

In all twelve dialogues, participants reached a strikingly similar set of conclusions:

## Participant Conclusions

### THE DEBT

**The national debt must be stabilized, and reduced if possible.** This became the bottom line against which all other issues were judged.

### MEDICARE & SOCIAL SECURITY

#### Support for significant reforms, including:

##### Medicare

- Focus on prevention, disease management, and palliative care.
- Cover only treatments proven effective.
- Allow Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices.
- Scale premiums to income

##### Social Security

- Raise or eliminate caps on FICA taxes.
- Adjust Social Security benefits for income

#### Precondition:

**Increase accountability and transparency**

### DEFENSE & OTHER FEDERAL ACTIVITIES

##### Defense

- Maintaining a strong defense does NOT mean continuing all we are doing now.
- Pick our battles.
- Fight the next war, not the last

##### Other Federal Activities

- Strong priority for education and the environment.
- Open to some cuts (esp. business & agriculture subsidies) but want more information on program performance.

#### Precondition:

**Cut waste, increase accountability and transparency**

### TAXES

If spending and other reforms are not enough, **will pay increased taxes for the future we want, if conditions for accountability and transparency are met.**

#### Precondition:

**Accountability, transparency, ensure money used for purposes intended**

Trust was the was the major recurring theme on each issue. Participants had an overarching precondition: they would accept no reform or tax unless they could trust that their leaders were acting in the public interest, and that their money was being spent responsibly and for the purposes intended. This was an assurance they felt was sorely lacking today.

## CONCLUSIONS

What we saw at laboratory scale in the dialogues, and are seeing more widely today, is how Americans' expectations of their leaders and themselves are changing and how that affects what it will take to reduce mistrust of government and build public support for major reform.

This change is driven in part by a growing sense of crisis about the direction of the country and (especially) the troubles of the economy – including a growing anxiety that we as a nation are living beyond our means and that leaders are disconnected from citizens' concerns. The dialogues surfaced that anxiety more than a year ago in a laboratory setting, by requiring participants to focus on and work through the implications of these challenges – breaking through denial and wishful thinking and accelerating participants' learning curve. The dramatic downturn in the economy combined with the election cycle is now having a similar effect on a broader scale, accelerating the public's learning curve about these questions and changing the expectations they have of leaders and themselves. These expectations cut across the usual demographic and political categories.

Even on contentious policy issues the red-blue divide was not in evidence – while, predictably, conservatives were more likely to resist raising taxes and liberals were more positive about the role of government, on most issues partisan differences played a surprisingly small part. Also going against conventional

wisdom, participants frequently supported reforms that would impact them personally (e.g., increased taxes or reduced benefits). And, far from being a transient artifact of an intense dialogue experience, participants' concerns and willingness to act remained firm even a year or more after the dialogues.

These findings also point to an important opportunity – and potential obstacle – for a new administration. Rebuilding public trust is a fundamental precondition for public support on a wide range of issues. As such, it should be treated as an objective in its own right. A new administration will need to take concrete steps to rebuild trust and meet public expectations for a different kind of relationship with their leaders. This research suggests a number of constructive actions they can take to that end:

1. **Focus on problem solving; not ideology, spin or scare stories.** The public are pragmatists, not ideologues. They want to grapple with real choices, presented in a balanced fashion, that enable them to engage in practical problem solving; and they are increasingly sensitive to – and suspicious of – one-sided presentations or spin.
  - **Frame the issue as “the future we want,” not as a discussion of the debt and deficit.** Focusing attention on the balance between what people want and what they are willing to pay for sets the stage for a values-based rather than a technical conversation. This is an arena where the public can contribute a great deal, and the shift in focus makes people more willing to face up to difficult choices.
  - **Be honest about uncertainties.** In the dialogues we saw public trust built most effectively not when leaders said what the public wanted to hear or seemed to have all the answers. Instead trust grew when leaders were

more open about their own concerns, uncertainties and misgivings.

2. **Build on common ground.** These Choice-Dialogues identified significant areas of common ground where effective leaders can build broad-based public support for action. Building on common ground is a way to increase trust and move toward sustainable solutions, while building on wedge issues tends to reinforce polarization and gridlock.
3. **Engage the public to overcome mistrust.** Accountability alone is not enough - One critical cause of mistrust is that government is often not fully attuned to the voice of ordinary citizens. Citizens' calls for greater accountability and transparency were often really calls for more effective and honest two-way communication with their government.
4. **The public is ready for this conversation.** Far from being apathetic or unwilling to consider difficult decisions, the random sample of Americans involved in this study were thoughtful and serious, and it was clear that beneath their mistrust and dissatisfaction was a deep desire to address the problem.

The dialogues showed that when Americans are given an opportunity to look at the bigger picture, to connect the dots, and to engage in dialogue with others from very different backgrounds and perspectives, they think and act more like citizens and less like consumers, they develop a shared community perspective, and they are ready to make and support big changes to advance the common good.

In the words of one participant: “It's time to get real.”





Our population is aging, baby boomers are nearing retirement, health care costs are skyrocketing, the national debt continues to rise and the economy is growing more turbulent and troubled. In these challenging times, it is increasingly vital for Americans to have a serious conversation about national priorities, entitlements, what we expect from the Federal government and what we are willing to pay to get it. But building public understanding of and support for difficult choices is easier said than done. Leaders are not sure whether or how they can reach the public on these issues; let alone what sorts of solutions the public would find acceptable if they did.

To help provide this insight, over the last two years Viewpoint Learning – in partnership with Public Agenda, The Concord Coalition, The Brookings Institution and The Heritage Foundation – has conducted a nationwide series of *Choice-Dialogues*<sup>TM</sup>. In these daylong sessions, which go far beyond what is

possible with polls or focus groups, representative samples of Americans worked to come to terms with the challenges facing America's finances and future.<sup>1</sup> What we found, in dialogue after dialogue across the country, is that ***the main obstacle to building public support for the difficult choices we face is not public opposition to tax increases or program cuts, nor is it public lack of interest. The main obstacle is a deeply felt and pervasive mistrust of government.*** Americans were clear: It's not about taxes. It's not about spending. It's about trust.

Perhaps as important, the dialogues, along with a follow-up survey with dialogue participants conducted this summer, revealed the leading edge of a significant and widespread shift in what Americans expect of their leaders and themselves. This shift is surfacing powerfully in the current presidential campaign, and it has real implications for what it will take to reduce mistrust of government and build public support for major reform. Our respondents

emphasized that trust is a two-way street:

- They want leaders to provide an honest, straightforward assessment of the challenges facing the nation. They are increasingly suspicious of easy answers, and are more aware when they are being pandered to or spun; such tactics tend to reinforce mistrust.
- They do not expect leaders to provide all the answers – but they do expect leaders to give people the chance to wrestle with the tough choices and take citizens' viewpoints seriously.
- They want to be challenged and play a role in problem solving: being asked to consider hard choices is not a poison pill.

These expectations are now surfacing in the public on a broader scale, as the current economic downturn and the election cycle converge to accelerate the public's learning curve about the challenges facing the nation, much as the dialogues accelerated the learning curve

1. A description of Choice-Dialogue methodology can be found in Appendix A.

of participants. It is no accident that the two presidential nominees are those who best tapped into this shift in public expectations. John McCain has long had a reputation as a maverick who acts independent of his party and who offers the public 'straight talk.' Barack Obama has built his candidacy around a new way of doing politics and direct engagement with the public. Each candidate represents a move away from 'politics as usual,' and each promises candor, honesty and the possibility of bi-partisan problem-solving.

## SPECIFIC FINDINGS

We conducted twelve day-long dialogues in cities and towns across the country, each with a randomly recruited representative sample of 35-45 participants. These intense sessions focused on the kind of America participants want to see for themselves and their children, the role they want the Federal government to play in realizing that future, and the tradeoffs they are prepared to make to achieve those ends in four specific areas: Medicare/Social Security; defense; other federal activities; and taxes/debt.<sup>2</sup> Each set of dialogues in a given region was followed by a Stakeholder Dialogue that brought together citizens who had participated in the Choice-Dialogues with political leaders, civic leaders and experts. Together these participants built on the citizen conclusions from the Choice-Dialogues and discussed potential next steps.

In all twelve Choice-Dialogues and all three Stakeholder Dialogues participants reached a strikingly similar set of conclusions. We further tested and confirmed many of these conclusions in a series of open-ended interviews and a follow-up poll conducted with a representative cross section of Choice-Dialogue participants in summer 2008.

## The debt

Most had not given much consideration to the debt before the start of the dialogue, but they quickly agreed that *the national debt must be stabilized, and reduced if possible*. An overwhelming 91% of participants agreed that we must reduce the debt and control deficits to avoid burdening future generations, and half (51%) agreed strongly.<sup>3</sup> This became the bottom line against which all other choices and issues were judged.

*"If I live beyond my means ... I end up bankrupt, and I end up in poverty. Our country is heading towards that degree of crash. Do I want to eliminate the debt? Yes... We're spending money that we don't have."<sup>4</sup>*

## Medicare/Social Security

Participants were surprised to learn how much of the budget goes towards Medicare and Social Security, and that items which usually came to mind when they thought of federal spending (like education, foreign aid, the space program) were a relatively small part of the picture. They quickly grasped that rising costs for these entitlement programs pose an enormous challenge as the population ages. What brought this home most clearly was realizing that while 5 workers supported each retiree in 1960, today that ratio is only 3:1 and by 2030 it will be down to 2:1.

From the outset, participants were firmly committed to preserving Medicare and Social Security in some form – they

felt that these programs are at the heart of the American social contract and that every American must receive some benefit. Participants spent much of the dialogue working through how they could preserve these programs in some form without massively increasing the debt. To accomplish this they identified a number of significant reforms they would be prepared to support:

### Medicare:

- Many felt the logical place to begin was to *focus more on prevention, disease management, wellness, and palliative care* – participants strongly agreed that such steps would improve people's quality of life as well as save money over time.
- Participants also supported allowing *Medicare to leverage its purchasing power to negotiate better prices for prescription drugs*.
- Most supported *limiting experimental treatments and covering only services that have been scientifically proven most effective* (63% support). This was supported by similar margins among participants of all ages and incomes.

*"On Medicare, ... we really wanted to focus on the elderly all receiving care on a needs basis. The big thing that always came through was that there has to be equality, and that the rich kick in their fair share."*

2. Dates and locations for the twelve Choice-Dialogues can be found in Appendix B.

3. Figures represent the aggregate of all twelve Choice-Dialogues. Complete quantitative results for the Choice-Dialogues and the summer 2008 follow-up survey can be found in Appendix C.

4. Choice-Dialogue participant quote. In this section, participant comments illustrating key points are taken from all twelve ChoiceDialogues.



- They also supported implementing a **sliding scale for Medicare premiums so that wealthier recipients pay more for coverage** (66% support). Even higher income and older respondents supported this idea.
- More broadly, participants concluded that many of the problems facing Medicare are in fact challenges facing the U.S. health care system as a whole, and fixing Medicare would necessarily involve considering these wider systemic issues.
- There were also some reforms participants were not willing to embrace. These included raising the eligibility age to 70 (68% oppose) and requiring seniors to pay more out of pocket (86% oppose).

### *Social Security:*

- By the end of each dialogue, **participants strongly supported raising or eliminating caps on FICA taxes** (84% support). Higher income participants – who would pay more as a result – supported this idea by similar margins.
  - Participants also **supported adjusting Social Security benefits for income** - 65% supported limiting benefits for high-income seniors. Again, higher income participants supported this idea by the same margin as those making less.
- Participants opposed measures that would reduce benefits across the board, such as raising the retirement age (53% oppose), or indexing initial benefits to inflation (62% oppose). Most felt this would put an unacceptable burden on seniors of modest means and those in physically demanding jobs.

### ***A precondition for supporting any of these reforms was to increase the accountability and transparency of both Medicare and Social Security by:***

- Ensuring that FICA taxes are used only to fund Medicare and Social Security.
- Enhancing transparency and reporting so taxpayers can “follow the money.”
- Strengthening oversight through watchdog groups.

Participants reached common ground on most proposals discussed in this area; however, they struggled with the question of whether individual accounts should replace a portion of traditional Social Security benefits.

- Many were concerned about introducing greater risk into a program that is supposed to reduce risk and that so many rely on for retirement. Others supported individual accounts because they did not trust the government to do a good job handing their retirement funds and so wanted to have more control over those funds.

- As they worked to resolve this issue, most arrived at a compromise position: the idea of individual accounts is worth exploring further, but only if any change is phased in over a long transition period and investments are limited to low-risk.
- When pushed to make a choice in the final questionnaire: **61% of participants concluded that Social Security should remain a guaranteed monthly benefit; 37% preferred letting younger people decide how to invest their money**

### ***and having their benefit reflect the performance of those investments.***

- This was one question where political affiliation made a significant difference: 75% of participants who described themselves as conservative favored investing payroll taxes in individual Social Security accounts, while only 36% of liberals agreed.<sup>5</sup>

*"We were mostly in agreement that the individual accounts are a good idea, but we had real concerns. The fact is people make bad choices or they do the wrong things. Take Enron – people put their money in, and they had hundreds and thousands of dollars for retirement, and the bad guys came along and stole it from them. [And then there are people who say] "I'm going to party and have a good time and retirement will take care of itself." What's going to happen to them if we have a strict personal responsibility system? What happens to the people who get screwed by bad guys? What happens to the people who are foolish?"*

5. 26% of Choice-Dialogue participants identified themselves as conservative, 28% identified themselves as liberal, and 43% identified themselves as moderate.

Over the course of the day, participants became acutely aware that Medicare and Social Security face real and urgent challenges, and this awareness stuck with them long after the dialogues were over. In the summer 2008 follow-up survey, three-quarters of Choice-Dialogue participants polled agreed that we will have to make hard choices to preserve these programs. Similar majorities agreed that it is very important that the Presidential candidates have a practical plan to control Medicare costs (81%), to ensure the future of Social Security (85%) and that they consider the debt when proposing tax cuts or spending increases (76%).

## Defense

In all twelve dialogues participants supported a strong defense; however, this did not mean strong support for everything we are now doing. Participants were especially concerned about waste and mismanagement of defense dollars, and they emphasized the need to “spend smarter” in three basic ways:

- **Pick our battles:** Stay engaged in the world but be more selective about when and where.
- **Fight the next war, not the last:** Move away from Cold War military models and weapons systems and toward those more relevant to the challenges we face today (e.g., special operations, intelligence, etc.).

*"Yes, we should eliminate no-bid contracts. But more importantly, we should rely more on diplomacy and negotiations and less on fighting."*

- **Cut waste and increase accountability:** Participants saw enormous waste in defense spending (e.g. sweetheart deals and no-bid contracts). They called repeatedly for much stronger oversight and accountability.

***At the end of the day a majority of participants (61%) – both liberals and conservatives – supported cutting defense spending in order to reduce the deficit.***

## Other Federal Activities

Participants believed that much Congressional spending is wasteful (82% agree), and they strongly supported Congressional reforms to strengthen accountability (in particular by ending last minute appropriations and limiting earmarks).

When it came to specifics, participants agreed on a number of basic points:

- Participants placed a high priority on education and the environment, and they were willing to spend more for it.
- They were open to cuts in other programs (in particular subsidies to business and agriculture). However, most felt they would need more information before they could say which specific programs should be cut.

***At the end of the day two-thirds of participants (67%) – again, both liberals and conservatives – supported lowering domestic spending as a means of reducing the deficit,*** although most felt they needed more information before they could say which specific programs to cut.

## Taxes

Participants recognized that if spending and other reforms were not enough to resolve the nation's fiscal difficulties, some additional revenues would be required. In every dialogue, participants concluded that they would be prepared to pay increased taxes for the future they

wanted, on two conditions:

- 1) Stronger measures to curb waste, increase accountability and make better use of existing funds.
- 2) Confidence that additional funds are still needed to close the budget gap and pay for the future they want.

Participants spent some time working through what sorts of tax increases they would be prepared to support under those conditions. Most agreed that:

- Any new taxes should be earmarked for particular purposes to make it easier to “follow the money.”
- The tax system must be simplified and made more transparent, and to that end many considered a national sales tax or a flat income tax (as long as low income people were protected).

*"We came to the conclusion, which was not happy for any of us ... that taxes had to increase. This wasn't something we liked; it was something we concluded. It's not like we walked in saying, let's raise taxes."*

At the end of the dialogue, 57% of participants supported raising taxes as a means of reducing the deficit; and 67% were willing to invest in programs like education and transportation even if taxes go up.

In the summer 2008 follow-up survey, 69% of respondents said that they would be willing to pay more in taxes if they could trust that the money was being well spent.

## Trust and Accountability

In all of the dialogues participants established a single essential precondition for any changes they were willing to embrace: **they would accept no reform or tax unless they could trust that their money was being spent responsibly and in accordance with their priorities.**

In all dialogues participants suggested some basic mechanisms they thought would create a climate of greater trust and accountability between citizens and government:

- **More attention to results.** Participants called for government to focus more on measuring and reporting outcomes, and to use this as the basis to fund or change programs.
- **Stronger oversight mechanisms with real teeth.** Participants' repeated calls for watchdogs and accountability mechanisms should be seen less as an attempt to provide a technical solution to the problem, and more as a symptom of how serious public mistrust of government has become.
- **A critical role for citizens.** All twelve dialogues agreed that citizens must do their part in making government more accountable, whether by participating in new external watchdog mechanisms or more active participation in the political process.

The summer 2008 follow-up survey asked Choice-Dialogue participants more



specifically about how to build trust. An overwhelming 97% of respondents said that they wanted candidates to talk about long-range solutions, and 98% said that candidates need to talk about tradeoffs and sacrifices needed to solve these problems. They agreed that this isn't happening now: 90% said that candidates are not paying enough attention to the debt and the future costs of Medicare and Social Security.

Most also spoke of the need to bring the voice of ordinary citizens to the table and to find more ways of doing that: their own ability to reach common ground across their differences led them to hope that their leaders could do so too.

## STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES: A TWO-WAY LEARNING PROCESS

A few weeks after each set of Choice-Dialogues, Viewpoint Learning conducted a day-long "Stakeholder Dialogue" in each region. These sessions brought together some of the citizen participants from the Choice-Dialogues with political and civic leaders from their region. The Stakeholder sessions were similar to the Choice-Dialogues, but differed in two key respects:

1) The starting point for the discussion was the conclusions reached by citizens in the Choice-Dialogues. Stakeholder participants then defined the common ground between the citizens' vision and the future that leaders see.

2) Stakeholder Dialogues focused more on developing a set of practical steps and action plans to move toward that common ground vision that leaders and citizens defined.

At the outset of each dialogue, participants began by identifying key factors that have contributed to the current situation. In all of these dialogues, participants spoke of declining personal responsibility and growing political and economic polarization. They talked of the U.S.

*"If nothing changes?  
- [The next generation  
will say] 'Damn, why  
didn't those people  
address this? They've  
left us out to dry.'"<sup>6</sup>*

losing its sense of community and mutual responsibility – focusing on short-term gain at the expense of the greater good of society. They saw both individuals and governments increasingly willing to borrow rather than make painful but necessary sacrifices. One participant spoke in terms of a fatal "lack of imagination" that prevents America from taking the long view of its current situation and making the painful but necessary decisions required. Participants felt that if nothing changes we will face a grim future – a lower standard of living, a damaged and degraded environment, a further fragmented sense of community and an even greater gap between rich and poor. This was not the world they wanted to leave to their children or grandchildren.

## Address mistrust

In every session, participants agreed that public mistrust of government is a major obstacle to resolving the problems facing the nation and that addressing it must be the top priority. In each Stakeholder Dialogue, participants outlined a range of steps they believed would help address the current crisis of trust and make the system more accountable. Suggestions included:

- **Improving reporting to make the federal budget and finances more transparent.**
- **Establishing a high profile bipartisan group (like the 9-11 commission) to report on the fiscal situation, the challenges it poses to our future and what must be done to address it.**

6. In this section, participant comments illustrating key points are taken from the three Stakeholder Dialogues.

- **Improving civics education**, to foster public understanding and encourage greater civic participation.
- **Implementing campaign finance reform** to reduce the distortions created by lobbying and improve public confidence and participation in the system.
- **Developing a system of performance and accountability reports** allowing citizens to better understand and evaluate elected officials' performance.
- **Streamlining the tax code** to eliminate loopholes and ensure that all are paying their fair share.

While much of the conversation in the Stakeholder sessions revolved around

*"The key obstacle to fixing the system now ... is mistrust. We simply don't trust Washington [to] raise taxes or require mandatory savings and deal with [shortfalls] properly."*

steps that could be taken to overcome mistrust, what was even more striking was how trust grew visibly between the citizens and leaders during the dialogue. Most citizen participants had expressed significant mistrust of leaders during the Choice-Dialogues, and many entered the Stakeholder Dialogue with fairly low expectations for what the leaders there would do and say. However, as the day progressed, the atmosphere shifted.

What seemed to make the difference was not when a leader said something citizens wanted to hear, or when leaders seemed to have the answers. Instead, what seemed to make the most difference was when leaders in the room were honest about their own concerns, misgivings and uncertainties. It was then that citizens

began to shift from being critics or petitioners to becoming part of a problem-solving team. After the first hour or two, outside observers at each of these sessions noted that it was very difficult to tell which of the participants was a member of the public and which was one of the elected or civic leaders, as they worked together to find solutions. In effect, trust crept in.

*"What I found most surprising is that people of opposite political persuasions could come together in a consensus as to what our goals are and how to go about them. I wish that you leaders, now that you've done this with ordinary citizens, I wish you could do it with Congress and get them to come together on some agreement on goals and solutions."*



## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The findings outlined above were consistent across regions; however, there were some differences in priorities and intensity of responses in different regions:

### Tennessee

- **Stronger commitment to protecting the elderly.** Tennessee participants were particularly concerned about proposals that would reduce benefits to the elderly. They rejected increasing the retirement age (62% opposed in TN vs. 53% nationwide) and they were somewhat less open to reducing benefits or increasing premiums for higher income seniors. In addition, while they recognized that some limits on heroic end-of-life care would be necessary they emphasized the need for strong protections to make sure that we don't "give up" on the old and ill.
- **Somewhat greater interest in individual Social Security accounts.** Tennessee participants were more likely to emphasize the importance of personal responsibility. Many (71%, vs 59% nationwide) expressed some interest in the idea of private accounts. However, when forced to make a choice most (54%) still preferred keeping Social Security as a guaranteed benefit (compared to 61% nationwide). Their conditions for any change in the system were the same as those established by other groups: private accounts should be available for only a portion of SS benefits, accounts should be limited to low risk investments, and any change must be implemented over a long transition time.
- **Less support for overall reduction in defense spending.** Tennessee participants were split in their support for making cuts in defense and military spending to reduce the deficit (48% supported, vs. 61% nationwide). However they strongly shared the

nationwide agreement that support for the military does not equal support for all current policies.

- **Less support for increased taxes, but still willing to pay for the future they want.** Slightly less than half of Tennessee participants supported raising taxes as a way of reducing the deficit (47%, compared with 57% of participants nationwide). However, a majority (56%) still preferred raising taxes to pay for important programs over keeping taxes low and cutting programs (compared to 67% nationwide). They also strongly preferred sales tax over income taxes (57% vs. 42% nationwide).

*"We're not opposed to increasing the taxes we're already paying... We want to pay and be responsible for our country and the things we receive as benefits. But we DON'T want any more new taxes until things have been reviewed. We need to make sure the taxes we're paying now are used exactly for what they're supposed to be, and in the best manner before you add another tax to take up the slack that wasn't explained in the first tax."*

– Tennessee Participant

### New Hampshire/Maine

- **Greater confidence that citizens can make a difference.** Possibly because of the region's strong tradition of participatory democracy, participants in New Hampshire and Maine were more confident than residents of other areas that leaders would listen to them. While still extremely mistrustful of government – 46% of New Hampshire and Maine participants believed that elected officials do not care what people think – this mistrust was not as overwhelming as the national average of 62%. New Hampshire and Maine participants spoke repeatedly of the importance of civic education and getting involved in important issues, and they were confident that attentive and engaged citizens can make government more accountable and more effective.

- **Greater preference for progressive income tax over flat or consumption taxes.** Like participants nationwide, New Hampshire and Maine participants called repeatedly for a simpler and more transparent tax system. They were more likely than those in other areas to opt for progressive taxes over flat or consumption based taxes. When asked which approach they would prefer to meet the rising costs of Medicare and Social Security, two-thirds (63%) opted for income tax over sales tax, compared to the overall average of 52%.

*"We need to make sure people know how to [evaluate] their representatives, listen to them, read through what they're trying to say. That way people can make an informed vote, not just vote for somebody based on how much money they raised. People can learn how to get [leaders] to really represent them."*

– New Hampshire Participant

### Washington/Oregon

- **Stronger support for progressive approaches to taxes and benefits.** Participants in Washington and Oregon spoke often of the importance of making taxes and benefits more progressive. They strongly favored reducing Social Security benefits for high income seniors (76% support, compared to 65% nationwide), as well as scaling Medicare premiums for income (73% support, compared to 66% nationwide).
- **Greater willingness to pay taxes for the future they want.** 78% of Washington/Oregon participants said it was more important to invest in programs like education and transportation than to keep taxes low, and 40% agreed strongly (nationwide, 67% agreed, 30% strongly). They also favored raising taxes as a way of reducing the deficit by larger margins than were seen nationwide (67% support, vs. 57% nationwide).

- **Greater openness to cuts in defense and homeland security.** Participants in the Pacific Northwest showed considerable support for reducing defense and homeland security budgets and using this money to pay for investments in the future. 79% supported reducing defense and military spending as a way of reducing the deficit (vs. 61% nationwide)

*"We're spending a lot of money on defense. We need greater accountability for that budget, making sure it gets spent appropriately. Instead of spending the defense money on offensive means, [we need] a new definition of peacekeeping for the United States. It doesn't mean going in and nation-building and tearing things apart, more like helping with rebuilding after natural disasters and things of that sort."*

– Oregon Participant

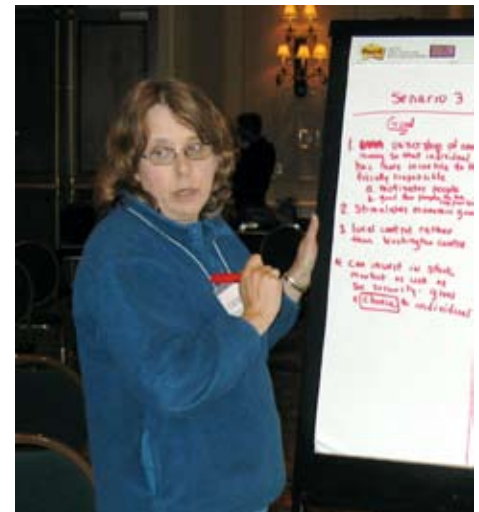
## UNDERSTANDING THE PUBLIC'S LEARNING CURVE

More than 50 years of research led by Viewpoint Learning Chairman Daniel Yankelovich has demonstrated that public opinion on complex issues evolves in stages. From an initial stage of highly unstable "raw opinion" the public moves through a series of steps in which they confront tradeoffs, establish priorities and reconcile choices with their deeply held values. This process can take anywhere from days to decades. Only when the public understands and accepts responsibility for the consequences of their views can we say that this "learning curve" is complete.

Americans' understanding of the issues at stake in shaping the nation's fiscal future is advancing along this learning curve. Certainly not every individual and group in the country is at the same stage on every aspect of the issues. But the dialogues have revealed a great deal of common ground – our respondents were impressively consistent on a range of conclusions:

**a. The public is ready to take some steps now. These are areas where the public is furthest along in its learning curve:**

- **Stabilizing/reducing the debt.** While few people had given much explicit thought to the national debt, most came into the dialogue with a general sense that the nation is living beyond its means, and is on the wrong track. From this starting point only a few pieces of information were needed for participants to begin connecting the dots. The need to stabilize and reduce the debt became the bottom line against which all other issues were judged. The debt is a problem that transcends specific programs – to the public it is a dangerous symptom of the nation's inability to make hard choices.
- **Raising the cap on FICA taxes.** There was widespread support for raising



the cap on FICA taxes, so that people who could afford to pay a little more would do so to help make the system more sustainable. Significantly, higher-earning participants – who would themselves be directly affected – also strongly supported the change.

- **Scaling Medicare premiums to income.** As with raising the FICA cap, most participants felt that it made sense to ask people with higher incomes to pay a little more to help sustain the system.
- b. There are other directions the public is not willing to go:**
- **Raising the retirement age.**
- **Reducing Social Security benefits across the board.**

Participants roundly rejected both these proposals on the grounds that they would harm the most vulnerable seniors. While there was some support for increasing incentives for seniors to retire later, participants did not want to force seniors — especially those in physically demanding jobs — to work even longer. Similarly, they were concerned that reducing benefits across the board (e.g. by changing indexing rules) would more seriously harm lower income people who depend more heavily on Social Security benefits to make ends meet during

retirement. It will be very difficult to build public support for such changes unless these concerns can be satisfied.

*c. On other issues, the public has moved some distance along the learning curve, but they have some way to go before the issue is fully resolved.* With leadership and an opportunity to work through the tradeoffs, Americans can be ready to take some additional steps:

• ***Shifting the focus in end-of-life care.***

In all dialogues, participants wrestled with the question of how much Medicare should pay for heroic end-of-life care. Many felt that life extending treatments frequently do little but prolong suffering, and they were concerned about how much is spent on these measures. They were emphatically not willing to withdraw life-extending treatment from people who want it, but many also said that they would want to reject such treatment themselves. As they discussed the issue, they began to consider how to better support seniors and their families at the end-of-life so that options like palliative care and hospice are more available. Ultimately, this was not about saving money – it was about how to provide good care and quality of life for people in their last weeks and months.

*"If I'm just going to be dead in a matter of months or days, I don't want you doing open heart surgery or a whole bunch of other invasive things that are running up the medical bill, no matter who's paying for it."*

- ***Evidence-based medicine.*** Many participants had similar questions about the role of evidence-based medicine in Medicare. Most readily agreed that Medicare should give priority to treatments that have been proven to be most effective. They had more difficulty when they realized that this could mean that approaches recommended by their own doctors would not be available. The question was how to establish strong and effective standards for care while maintaining enough flexibility to address individual circumstances. As they worked it through most concluded that evidence-based protocols make sense, as long as there is a sound scientific basis for the determination and a mechanism for appeal.
- ***Rethinking defense.*** Some of the most intense discussions revolved around the issue of defense – many participants entered the room with strong feelings about U.S. foreign policy, defense priorities and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, participants quickly found that regardless of their position on these issues they shared a common concern about waste in current defense spending. From this common ground they moved to a deeper question of priorities – what is the U.S. proper role in the world, and how should we use our resources to support that role? Regardless of their positions on intervention, pre-emption and whether to export democracy, most ultimately agreed that America's most powerful influence does not come from military might. As a nation, we need to place much more emphasis on diplomacy, humanitarian aid and other 'soft power' strategies. This led many to become more open to reductions in defense spending, especially on big-ticket Cold-War weapons systems and approaches.
- ***Increasing taxes to pay for the future we want.*** Many participants expressed



deep skepticism about the prospect of a tax increase at the beginning of the dialogue. But as the day progressed and they discussed the issue further, most recognized that spending and other reforms might not be enough to dig America's finances out of the hole. Some additional revenues would be required. The conversation then came down to establishing the conditions under which a tax increase would be acceptable. This discussion revolved around three key questions. First, how to make sure that existing tax dollars are being well spent and that new revenues are needed. Second, how to make sure that any new monies will be used to support public priorities and accounted for properly. And finally, how to ensure that everyone pays a fair share.

Given the chance to work through the issues, Americans arrive at thoughtful and realistic solutions. Understanding the public's learning curve can help leaders build broader public support for significant reform. This requires understanding how the public processes information, the steps they take as they work through the issues, and how to sequence the conversation in a way that keeps pace with the public's learning process. But in order to build public support for significant reform, leaders will also need to address deeper issues of trust.

## CONCLUSIONS

What we saw at laboratory scale in the dialogues, and are seeing more widely today, is how Americans' expectations of their leaders and themselves are changing and how that affects what it will take to reduce mistrust of government and build public support for major reform.

This change is driven in part by a growing sense of crisis about the direction of the country and (especially) the troubles of the economy – including a growing anxiety that we as a nation are living beyond our means and that leaders are disconnected from citizens' concerns. The dialogues surfaced that anxiety more than a year ago in a laboratory setting, by requiring participants to focus on and work through the implications of these challenges – breaking through denial and wishful thinking and accelerating participants' learning curve. The dramatic downturn in the economy combined with the election cycle is now having a similar effect on a broader scale, accelerating the public's learning curve about these questions and changing the expectations they have of leaders and themselves.

In the follow-up survey, participants from left and right overwhelmingly agreed about what they wanted from their leaders: honesty, a straightforward assessment of hard choices, and a chance for citizens to make their voices heard in a meaningful way. These expectations cut across the usual demographic and political categories.

Even on contentious policy issues the red-blue divide was not in evidence – while, predictably, conservatives were more likely to resist raising taxes and liberals were more positive about the role of government, on most issues partisan differences played a surprisingly small part. Also going against conventional wisdom, participants frequently supported reforms that would impact them personally (e.g., increased taxes or

reduced benefits). And, far from being a transient artifact of an intense dialogue experience, participants' concerns and willingness to act remained firm even a year or more after the dialogues.

These findings also point to an important opportunity – and potential obstacle – for a new administration. Rebuilding public trust is a fundamental precondition for public support on a wide range of issues. As such, it should be treated as an objective in its own right. A new administration will need to take concrete steps to rebuild trust and meet public expectations for a different kind of relationship with their leaders. This research suggests a number of constructive actions they can take to that end:

**1. Focus on problem solving; not ideology, spin or scare stories.** The public are pragmatists, not ideologues. They readily mixed and matched elements from differing political approaches as long as the result was a solution they believed would work for them, their families and communities. Their guiding question as the day evolved was not “Does this fit into my political framework?” but “Will this work?” Rather than focusing on the ideological divisions that preoccupy so many political elites, they want to grapple with real choices, presented in a balanced fashion, that enable them to engage in practical problem solving to create the future they want. They are increasingly suspicious of one-sided presentations or spin; for example, the credibility of the Choice-Dialogue materials was much enhanced by the bipartisan project partners involved in preparing them. To build public support we need to focus more on creating a shared vision and on practical problem solving to achieve it, and less on scare stories that can quickly become counter-productive – discouraging action, increasing denial, and creating a sense of hopelessness.

*"A lot of this distrust that we all seem to share is because almost daily what we hear from politicians is more obfuscation and more spin. Why aren't they talking about the truth about these issues that have been on the table today? Why are they so unwilling to tell the American people where we as a country are heading?"*

- **Frame the issue as “the future we want.”** Instead of focusing the issue too narrowly as a discussion of the debt and deficit, framing the issue and the background materials in terms of “the future we want” focused attention on the balance between what people want and what they are willing to pay for. Such an approach set the stage for a values-based conversation – something where the public has a great deal to contribute. It also made people more willing to face up to difficult choices.
- **Be honest about the uncertainties.** In the Stakeholder Dialogues, in particular, what did the most to build public trust was not leaders saying what the public wanted to hear or seeming to have all the answers; it was when leaders were more open about their own concerns, uncertainties and misgivings.

**2. Build on common ground.** Far from seeing the issues in terms of young vs. old, rich vs. poor, or “red vs. blue,” dialogue participants of all ages, incomes and political stripes found a surprising amount of common ground. These Choice-Dialogues identified significant areas of common ground in all of the policy areas tested – Social Security and Medicare, defense, other federal activities, taxes and debt. It is on such areas of common ground that effective leaders can build broad-based public support for action. Building on common ground is a way to increase trust and move toward sustainable solutions, while building on wedge issues tends to reinforce polarization and gridlock. What we found in these (and other) dialogues is that people generally agree on about 80% of the questions at issue on a given topic, even though they may disagree vehemently about the remaining 20%. But if you first map that 80% of common ground it changes the context. Once we know we agree on 80%, then dealing with the remaining 20% becomes a different proposition and more likely to lead to a productive outcome.

**3. Engage the public to overcome** mistrust. Increasing accountability and transparency and providing better information to the public is a necessary part of rebuilding public trust, but it is unlikely to be sufficient. One critical cause of mistrust between citizens and government is that government is often not fully attuned to the voice of ordinary citizens. Most participants in the Choice-Dialogues (62%) said that elected leaders did not really care what they thought. (In a recent Pew poll, 62% of the general public also said that leaders didn't care what they thought, an increase of 10% since 2002). Their response was to call for greater oversight and accountability. But as the dialogues proceeded it

became clear that participants' calls for greater accountability and transparency were really calls for more effective and honest two-way communication with their government – this is basic to what Americans now expect from both their leaders and themselves.

**4. The public is ready for this conversation.** Far from being apathetic or unwilling to consider difficult decisions, the random sample of Americans involved in this study were thoughtful and serious, and it was clear that beneath their mistrust and dissatisfaction was a deep desire to address the problem. As Edmund Andrews of the New York Times said in an article about one of the Choice-Dialogue sessions, “if there was a message, it was not that people wanted to dodge tough choices. It was that they wanted good ideas from their leaders.”

The dialogues showed that when Americans are given an opportunity to look at the bigger picture, to connect the dots, and to engage in dialogue with others from very different backgrounds and perspectives, they think and act more like citizens and less like consumers, they develop a shared community perspective, and they are ready to make and support big changes to advance the common good.

In the words of one participant: “It's time to get real.”



## ChoiceDialogue: THE METHODOLOGY

ChoiceDialogue methodology differs from polls and focus groups in its purpose, advance preparation, and depth of inquiry.

### **PURPOSE**

ChoiceDialogues are designed to do what polls and focus groups cannot do and were never developed to do. While polls and focus groups provide an accurate snapshot of people's current thinking, ChoiceDialogues are designed to predict the future direction of people's views on important issues where they have not completely up their minds, or where changed circumstances create new challenges that need to be recognized and addressed. Under these conditions (which apply to most major issues), people's top-of-mind opinions are highly unstable, and polls and focus groups can be very misleading. ChoiceDialogues enable people to develop their own fully worked-through views on such issues (in dialogue with their peers) even if they previously have not given it much thought. By engaging representative samples of the population in this way, ChoiceDialogues provide unique insight into how people's views change as they learn, and can be used to identify areas of potential public support where leaders can successfully implement policies consonant with people's core values.

### **ADVANCE PREPARATION**

ChoiceDialogues require highly trained facilitators and (above all) the preparation of special workbooks that brief people on the issues. These workbooks formulate a manageable number of research-based scenarios, which are presented as a series of values-based choices, and they lay out the pros and cons of each scenario in a manner that allows participants to work through how they really think and feel about each one. This tested workbook format enables people to absorb and apply complex information quickly.

### **DEPTH OF INQUIRY**

Polls and focus groups avoid changing people's minds, while ChoiceDialogues are designed to explore how and why people's minds change as they learn. While little or no learning on the part of the participants occurs in the course of conducting a poll or focus group, ChoiceDialogues are characterized by a huge amount of learning. ChoiceDialogues are day-long, highly structured dialogues – 24 times as long as the average poll and 4 times as long as the average focus group. Typically, participants spend the morning familiarizing themselves with the scenarios and their pros and cons and developing (in dialogue with each other) their vision of what they would like to have happen in the future. They spend the afternoons testing their preferences against the hard and often painful tradeoffs they would need to make to realize their values. To encourage learning, the ChoiceDialogue methodology is based on dialogue rather than debate – this is how public opinion really forms, by people talking with friends, neighbors and co-workers. These 8-hour sessions allow intense social learning, and both quantitative and qualitative measures are used to determine how and why people's views change as they learn.

## STEPS IN A ChoiceDialogue PROJECT

**1. ARCHIVAL ANALYSIS OF POLLS (OR CONDUCTING A SPECIAL ONE) AND OTHER RESEARCH TO PROVIDE A BASELINE READING ON WHAT STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT PUBLIC OPINION HAS REACHED.**

**2. THE IDENTIFICATION OF CRITICAL CHOICES AND CHOICE SCENARIOS ON THE ISSUE AND THEIR MOST IMPORTANT PROS AND CONS, AND THE PREPARATION OF A WORKBOOK BUILT AROUND THOSE SCENARIOS IN A TESTED FORMAT FOR USE IN THE DIALOGUES.**

**3. A SERIES OF ONE-DAY DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH REPRESENTATIVE CROSS-SECTIONS OF THE POPULATION**

Each dialogue involves about 40 participants, lasts one full day and is videotaped. A typical one-day session includes the following:

- Initial orientation (including the purpose of the dialogue and the use to be made of the results, the nature of dialogue and ground-rules for the session, introduction of the issue and some basic facts about it);
- Introduction of the choice scenarios on the issue, and a questionnaire to measure participants' initial views;
- Dialogue among participants (in smaller groups and in plenary) on the likely good and bad results that would occur as a consequence of each choice if it were adopted, and constructing a vision of the future they would prefer to see;
- A second, more intensive round of dialogue among the participants (again both in smaller groups and in plenary) working through the concrete choices and tradeoffs they would make or support to realize their vision;
- Concluding comments from each participant on how their views have changed in the course of the day (and why), and a questionnaire designed to measure those changes.

**4. AN ANALYSIS OF HOW PEOPLE'S POSITIONS EVOLVE DURING THE DIALOGUES**

We take before and after readings on how and to what extent people's positions have shifted on each choice as a result of the dialogue. This analysis is both quantitative and qualitative.

**5. A BRIEFING TO LEADERS TO MAKE SENSE OF THE RESULTS**

The briefing summarizes what matters most to people on the issue, how positions are likely to evolve as surface opinion matures into more considered judgment, the underlying assumptions and values that shape that evolution, and the opportunities for leadership this creates.

## **DATES AND LOCATIONS OF Choice-Dialogues AND Stakeholder Dialogues**

San Diego, CA: June 24, 2006

Kansas City, MO: July 8, 2006

Philadelphia, PA: July 15, 2006

Nashville, TN: April 29, 2007

Memphis, TN: May 5, 2007

Chattanooga, TN: May 12, 2007

Tennessee Stakeholder Dialogue – Nashville TN: July 21, 2007

Portland, ME: June 9, 2007

Concord, NH: June 23, 2007

Manchester, NH: July 8, 2007

New Hampshire/Maine Stakeholder Dialogue – Manchester NH: September 29, 2007

Seattle, WA: October 6, 2007

Spokane, WA: October 13, 2007

Portland, OR: October 28, 2007

Pacific Northwest Stakeholder Dialogue – Portland OR: November 29, 2007

Phone and on-line follow-up survey with Choice-Dialogue participants from all 12 dialogues: July 7-29, 2008

**QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

**RATINGS OF THE FOUR SCENARIOS**

In each ChoiceDialogue, participants were surveyed twice, once at the beginning of the day and again at the end. They were asked to rate their response to each scenario independently on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being totally negative and 10 being totally positive. The initial mean for each scenario indicates participants' average rating of the choice in the morning; the final mean represents participants' average rating of the same scenario at the end of the dialogue.

	INITIAL MEAN	FINAL MEAN
Stay on our present course	3.3	3.2
Keep our promises to the elderly	6.2	7.3
Increase personal responsibility	5.8	7.2
Invest in the future	6.8	8.0

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

Please indicate the extent to which you favor or oppose each of the following as a way to reduce the deficit

... Lowering domestic spending

	Total %
Favor strongly	23
Favor somewhat	44
Oppose somewhat	22
Oppose strongly	10

... Lowering defense and military spending

	Total %
Favor strongly	30
Favor somewhat	31
Oppose somewhat	20
Oppose strongly	18

... Raising taxes

	Total %
Favor strongly	10
Favor somewhat	47
Oppose somewhat	22
Oppose strongly	19

Which of the following statements do you think best describes the Social Security system 10 - 15 years from now?

	TOTAL %
State of crisis	26
Major problems	52
Minor problems	19
No problems	2

Here are a number of proposals that have been made to keep SOCIAL SECURITY financially sound in the future. Please indicate how much you favor or oppose each proposal:

... Gradually raising the age when a person can collect full Social Security benefits.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	19
Favor somewhat	28
Oppose somewhat	18
Oppose strongly	35

... Removing the cap on income that is subject to Social Security taxes.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	61
Favor somewhat	23
Oppose somewhat	10
Oppose strongly	5

... Increasing the payroll tax rate employers and employees pay to fund Social Security..

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	7
Favor somewhat	36
Oppose somewhat	36
Oppose strongly	20

... Make future Social Security benefits less generous than they are today by linking them to inflation

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	7
Favor somewhat	30
Oppose somewhat	32
Oppose strongly	30

... Gradually replacing guaranteed Social Security benefits with a system where workers invest their payroll taxes in individual accounts and use that money to pay for retirement.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	22
Favor somewhat	37
Oppose somewhat	23
Oppose strongly	17

... Reducing Social Security benefits for high-income seniors.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	31
Favor somewhat	34
Oppose somewhat	16
Oppose strongly	18

Which do you think is more important?

	TOTAL %
Keeping Social Security as a guaranteed monthly benefit based on a person's earnings during his or her working life.	61

Letting younger workers decide for themselves how their contributions to Social Security are invested, which would cause their benefits to be higher or lower depending on how their investments perform.	37
---	----

Which of the following statements do you think best describes Medicare 10 - 15 years from now?

	TOTAL %
State of crisis	34
Major problems	47
Minor problems	16
No problems	2

Here are a number of proposals that have been made to keep MEDICARE financially sound in the future. Please indicate how much you favor or oppose each proposal:

... Gradually raising the Medicare eligibility age to 70.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	12
Favor somewhat	20
Oppose somewhat	28
Oppose strongly	40

... Increasing the payroll tax rate employers and employees pay to fund Medicare..

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	7
Favor somewhat	40
Oppose somewhat	37
Oppose strongly	17

... Creating a sliding scale for Medicare premiums - the more income seniors have, the more they must pay.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	26
Favor somewhat	40
Oppose somewhat	18
Oppose strongly	16

... Requiring seniors to pay a larger share of Medicare costs out of their own pockets.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	2
Favor somewhat	11
Oppose somewhat	36
Oppose strongly	50

... Gradually replacing guaranteed Medicare benefits with a system where workers invest their payroll taxes in individual accounts and use that money to pay for health insurance and expenses in retirement.

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	14
Favor somewhat	33
Oppose somewhat	24
Oppose strongly	29

... Only covering medical services and treatments that have been scientifically proven most effective

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	24
Favor somewhat	39
Oppose somewhat	22
Oppose strongly	15

... Placing limits on the care provided for people who are very sick and unlikely to recover

	TOTAL %
Favor strongly	19
Favor somewhat	33
Oppose somewhat	21
Oppose strongly	27

If it is necessary to reduce spending on Federal programs (other than Medicare and Social Security), which **TWO** of the following would you choose to cut? Which **TWO** would you choose NOT to cut under any circumstances?

	CUT	DO NOT CUT
Defense	16	12
Education	3	26
Transportation	4	3
Natural resources/environment	5	9
Scientific and medical research	4	5
Medicaid	1	9
Homeland security	12	4
Support for business and agriculture	15	1
Federal assistance to the states	5	1
Disaster relief and insurance	3	2
Justice administration	11	1
Unemployment insurance, food stamps	6	4
Federal retirement	3	1
No answer	12	21

If it is necessary to raise taxes in the future to meet the rising costs of Medicare and Social Security, which approach would you prefer?

	TOTAL %
Raise income taxes so that people with higher incomes pay more	52
Establish a national sales tax so that everyone pays something	42

Which comes closer to your point of view?

	TOTAL %
The government should take more responsibility to make sure that everyone is provided for.	42
People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves.	53

Which comes closer to your point of view?

	TOTAL %
Federal tax cuts have been worth it – they have helped strengthen the economy by allowing Americans to keep more of their own money	40
Federal tax cuts have NOT been worth it – they have increased the deficit and caused cuts in government programs.	55

Which comes closer to your point of view?

	TOTAL %
We should keep taxes low even if it means we have to reduce spending for most federal programs	29
Even if it means higher taxes, we should invest in federal programs like education and transportation that will benefit everyone in the long run	67

Which comes closer to your point of view?

	TOTAL %
Social Security and Medicare really do face a crisis.	79
We are just being told that Social Security and Medicare are in crisis so that political leaders can change them.	17

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

	TOTAL %
... Most elected officials care about what people think.	
Agree strongly	6
Agree somewhat	32
Disagree somewhat	38
Disagree strongly	24

... Much of the national debt is the result of Congress spending money on unnecessary or wasteful projects.

	TOTAL %
Agree strongly	50
Agree somewhat	32
Disagree somewhat	13
Disagree strongly	4

... It is our responsibility to reduce the deficit so that future generations will not be burdened with the cost of our heavy debts.

	TOTAL %
Agree strongly	51
Agree somewhat	40
Disagree somewhat	6
Disagree strongly	2

... Taking care of future generations should be a higher priority than caring for the elderly.

	TOTAL %
Agree strongly	7
Agree somewhat	31
Disagree somewhat	42
Disagree strongly	17

Would you say that things in the U.S. are headed in the right direction, or on the wrong track?

	TOTAL %
Right direction	21
Wrong track	77

How would you rate economic conditions in America today?

	TOTAL %
Excellent	5
Good	26
Fair	52
Poor	16

How satisfied are you with your family's financial situation?

	TOTAL %
Very satisfied	10
Somewhat satisfied	39
Somewhat dissatisfied	29
Very dissatisfied	21

## CHOICE-DIALOGUE DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

	TOTAL %
Male	46
Female	53

Age

	TOTAL %
Under 18	0
18-24	9
25-34	15
35-44	19
45-54	21
55-64	18
65+	16

Do you have children under 18 living at home?

Yes	36
No	63

In general, would you describe your political views as:

Very liberal	8
Liberal	20
Moderate	43
Conservative	21
Very conservative	5

Annual household income from all sources before taxes

Under \$25,000	17
\$25,000 - \$34,999	15
\$35,000 - \$49,999	19
\$50,000 - \$74,999	25
\$75,000 - \$99,999	13
\$100,000 or more	8

Highest level of schooling you have completed

Less than HS	2
HS grad	19
Some college	33
College degree	28
Grad study/degree	16

In congressional elections, how likely are you to vote?

Always vote	65
Usually vote	18
Sometimes vote	6
Rarely vote	4
Registered never vote	3
Not registered	3

Ethnicity

African American	16
Asian	3
Caucasian	72
Hispanic	6
Other	4

## FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Phone and on-line survey conducted July 7-29 2008 with a representative sample of 179 Choice-Dialogue participants from all 12 dialogues.

After you attended the dialogue did you talk about it with anyone else? (Check all that apply.)

	TOTAL %
Husband/wife	59
Other family member	47
Friends	49
People at workplace	24
Neighbors	15
Other	4

Did you share any of the ideas or information from the dialogue with others by other means - such as email or blog?

Yes	13
No	85

To what extent did the dialogue increase your awareness and concern about each of the following issues?

... Financial issues facing our country

A great deal	40
Somewhat	40
A little	13
Not at all	6

... Cost of the national debt

A great deal	40
Somewhat	37
A little	13
Not at all	9

... Deficit spending

A great deal	41
Somewhat	31
A little	16
Not at all	11

... Future costs of Social Security and Medicare

	TOTAL %
A great deal	50
Somewhat	31
A little	10
Not at all	8

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY (cont'd)

<p>... Sacrifices and trade-offs that would be required to deal with these issues</p>	<p>TOTAL %</p>	<p>... Candidates shouldn't just say what people want to hear - they should be honest and talk about the trade-offs and sacrifices we have to make to solve our problems</p>	<p>How important is it for the presidential candidates... ... to have a workable plan to insure the future of Social Security</p>
A great deal	44	Agree strongly	89
Somewhat	36	Agree somewhat	9
A little	11	Disagree somewhat	1
Not at all	8	Disagree strongly	0
<p>... Need for accountability in government</p>		<p>... The government should put less emphasis on military efforts and more on diplomatic and economic efforts in fighting terrorism.</p>	<p>Suppose a candidate proposed that we invest in the future by spending more on federal programs that improve education, transportation, health care for children and the environment, even if it required an increase in federal taxes. Would it make you much more likely, a little more likely, no more likely or less likely to support that candidate?</p>
A great deal	47	Agree strongly	49
Somewhat	27	Agree somewhat	20
A little	15	Disagree somewhat	17
Not at all	11	Disagree strongly	9
<p>Did the dialogues have any effect on your feelings about spending vs. saving for the future as applied to your own life?</p>		<p>From what you have heard and read, which party - the Democrats or the Republicans - would be most capable of dealing with each of the following problems?</p>	<p>Much more likely</p>
Yes, made me aware of the need to save for the future	41	<p>... Federal government running up record budget deficits</p>	37
no, had no effect	13	Democrats	55
no, I was already saving for the future as much as possible	46	Republicans	26
<p>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</p>		<p>... Rising cost of Medicare</p>	<p>A little more likely</p>
<p>... Candidates in the current election are not paying enough attention to the important issues of the national debt and the future costs of Medicare and SS</p>		Democrats	58
Agree strongly	55	Republicans	27
Agree somewhat	35	<p>... Sustaining Social Security when the baby boom retires</p>	<p>No more likely</p>
Disagree somewhat	8	Democrats	57
Disagree strongly	2	Republicans	25
<p>... I want candidates to talk about what is needed for long-range solutions to our problems, rather than offering quick fixes and easy answers.</p>		<p>How important is it for the presidential candidates... ... to consider the debt when they are proposing tax cuts or spending increases?</p>	<p>Less likely</p>
Agree strongly	84	Very important	76
Agree somewhat	13	Somewhat important	21
Disagree somewhat	3	Not very important	1
Disagree strongly	0	Not at all important	1
<p>... I'd be willing to pay more in taxes if I could trust that the money was being well-spent and having a real effect on our problems</p>		<p>... have a practical plan to control Medicare costs?</p>	<p>Suppose a candidate said we should have a sliding scale for Medicare premiums so wealthier people had to pay more. Would it make you much more likely, a little more likely, no more likely or less likely to support that candidate?</p>
Agree strongly	42	Very important	81
Agree somewhat	27	Somewhat important	16
Disagree somewhat	13	Not very important	0
Disagree strongly	13	Not at all important	1
		<p>Did your experience in the dialogue influence your feelings about the possibility of finding common ground to solve these problems?</p>	<p>Made me more confident that people could find common ground</p>
		Made me less confident that people could find common ground	70
		Didn't influence me one way or the other	13
			16

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY (cont'd)

Here are some things that people have said in thinking about their experiences in the dialogues. For each one, please indicate if you mostly agree, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or mostly disagree.

... it was gratifying to see that people with different viewpoints could arrive at common solutions

Agree strongly	64
Agree somewhat	29
Disagree somewhat	3
Disagree strongly	2

...my hope is that the dialogues will bring the voice of the ordinary people to decision-makers

Agree strongly	81
Agree somewhat	17
Disagree somewhat	1
Disagree strongly	1

... we should look for a way of doing dialogues like this on a larger scale, involving more people

Agree strongly	73
Agree somewhat	21
Disagree somewhat	3
Disagree strongly	2

... it made me more conscious of the need to step up to the plate and take an active role as a citizen

Agree strongly	63
Agree somewhat	31
Disagree somewhat	3
Disagree strongly	2

... I was impressed that there isn't a war between generations - young people are concerned about elders and elders don't want to leave later generations with an enormous debt

Agree strongly	56
Agree somewhat	29
Disagree somewhat	10
Disagree strongly	3

... if we were able to reach common ground, shouldn't the lawmakers in Washington be able to do so?

Agree strongly	75
Agree somewhat	18
Disagree somewhat	2
Disagree strongly	3

... the dialogue made me aware that we are going to have to make some hard choices if we want to preserve SS and Medicare

Agree strongly	75
Agree somewhat	19
Disagree somewhat	1
Disagree strongly	3

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Male	50
Female	49

Age

Under 18	0
18-24	3
25-34	10
35-44	15
45-54	21
55-64	22
65+	28

Do you have children under 18 living at home?

Yes	33
No	66

Highest level of schooling you have completed

TOTAL %	
Less than HS	3
HS grad	16
Some college	27
College degree	30
Grad study/degree	23

Annual household income from all sources before taxes

Under \$25,000	14
\$25,000 - \$34,999	13
\$35,000 - \$49,999	21
\$50,000 - \$74,999	21
\$75,000 - \$99,999	16
\$100,000 or more	9

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS (cont'd)

In general, would you describe your political views as:

Very liberal	11
Liberal	18
Moderate	35
Conservative	22
Very conservative	8

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself Republican, Democrat, Independent or something else?

Republican	22
Democrat	39
Independent	30
Something else	7

In congressional elections, how likely are you to vote?

Always vote	71
Usually vote	16
Sometimes vote	5
Rarely vote	1
Registered never vote	2
Not registered	4

Ethnicity

African American	13
Asian	5
Caucasian	75
Hispanic	2
Other	2

4660 La Jolla Village Drive, Suite 700  
San Diego, California 92122  
(858) 551-2317  
[www.viewpointlearning.com](http://www.viewpointlearning.com)