

Poll: Most Americans Want Tax Hike to Save Services

By SARAH DORSEY | Posted: Monday, August 27, 2012 5:00 pm

Two-thirds of Americans support raising taxes on the wealthiest before cutting funding for public services like food and drug safety and border security, a new poll commissioned by the National Treasury Employees Union found.

Large majorities also said the Federal government should better fund specific services NTEU members provide, such as nuclear safety and veterans' assistance. And fewer than half knew that Federal employees were already contributing \$75 billion to deficit reduction through pay freezes and higher pension contributions.

A Desire for Spending

The poll, which canvassed 1,000 Americans of different political affiliations and was conducted by Ipsos, found that even 67 to 91 percent of Republicans wanted the same or more resources devoted to the five areas they were asked about: food safety, border security, nuclear safety, veterans' assistance and drug and medical-device safety. In a press briefing last week, NTEU President Colleen Kelley said she wanted to counteract the rhetoric about bloated government that's sure to be heard as the campaign season heats up. Too many legislators view curbing the deficit as "only a cost-cutting exercise without thinking about what the options are," leaving Federal employees to bear the brunt of cuts, she said.

Federal workers are nearing the end of a two-year pay freeze, and in February, Congress significantly raised pension contributions for those hired after Dec. 31, 2012. Numerous proposals to freeze pay and further raise contributions have cropped up in recent months, backed primarily by House Republicans.

Ms. Kelley said there's a perception that the Federal workforce is the largest it's been in U.S. history, but noted that it has actually declined relative to the population. In 1953, one in every 78 residents was a Federal worker; in 2009 it was one in 147. Just since 1970, the percent of Americans working for the Federal Government has declined from 4 percent to 2 percent.

Ms. Kelley acknowledged that some shrinkage over the last few decades can be attributed to technological advances, but argued that jobs that require technical skills and higher education are more important than ever. And boosting staffing in some agencies is clearly "an investment for our country," she said—the IRS collects 93 percent of the money that funds the government, yet it's lost 20,000 employees since 1995. Since then, the population has only grown, and with it, the complexity of the tax code.

Getting Specific

The survey follows a pattern that's long been recognized among American pollsters: respondents often support spending cuts but change their tune when asked about specific programs. Ms. Kelley admitted that responses might have been different if a more-generic question about Federal spending were asked, but said that's kind of the point: people actually support many programs when they're forced to really think about what they do.

"The public just expects that when they wake up in the morning there will be someone protecting borders [and] monitoring air and water quality," she said, adding that there is a "very long list" of vital government services that would be defended just as fiercely.

Congress has been under pressure to make deep Federal spending cuts since it voted last year to raise the debt ceiling, which allows the government to borrow additional money—but only if steps are taken to reduce the deficit. Deep across-the-board cuts are due to take effect Jan. 1, 2013 unless Congress finds other ways to save \$1.2 trillion.

A Taxing State of Mind?

The NTEU poll suggests the public thinks raising revenues should be an important part of the deal—at least Democrats and independents do. Although 67 percent of respondents said taxes on the wealthiest should be raised before spending cuts are made, only 38 percent of those who lean Republican felt that way.

Federal employee unions including the NTEU and the American Federation of Government Employees favor allowing the income-tax cuts for those making over \$250,000 a year, passed during President George W. Bush's presidency, to expire.

Ms. Kelley also said that while Federal workers' salaries are a frequent target, those of private contractors have skyrocketed in the last 15 years. Top contractors can charge nearly \$765,000 annually—almost double what they could in 1998. Public-sector executives make much less; even the President is paid only \$400,000. New York Democratic Rep. Paul Tonko in May sponsored a bill to trim contractors' salaries to the level of the President's, but it was squelched in committee.

Few realize how much Federal employees have already given up in the name of deficit reduction, the survey also found. Only 40 percent accurately indicated that the pay freeze and higher pension contributions will cost \$75 billion over 10 years.

Public Not Always Kind

In recent polls, Americans have expressed widely-different opinions about Federal workers and government spending depending on who's asking the question and how it's asked. In January 2011, a majority of respondents told Gallup they supported finding ways to reduce the deficit before allowing the government to borrow more money—but large majorities opposed cutting spending on the largest Federal expenditures, such as Medicare, Social Security, education, defense, homeland

security and anti-poverty programs.

More than half of respondents to an October 2010 Washington Post poll said they believed Federal workers were overpaid, with about half saying they didn't work as hard as their private counterparts.