

Maine Penny Poll Message: Cut the Pentagon, Not Human Needs

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As the Supercommittee considers recommendations for cutting the federal deficit, is it paying attention to the people who pay the taxes?

On November 8th, Election Day, volunteers conducted “Penny Polls” at eleven polling locations in Maine, asking more than 2,000 people who had just voted: “How would YOU like your federal tax dollars to be spent?”

Education (20%), health care (18%), and veterans' benefits (13%) were the top priorities among those polled. Towns and cities represented included Portland, Lewiston, Bowdoinham, Belgrade, Wilton, Skowhegan, Belfast, Monroe, Old Town, Orland, and Southwest Harbor.

The results were surprisingly at odds with the way taxpayer dollars are currently spent by Congress but consistent with previous polls. During May-July 2011, polls in every Maine county surveyed the preferences of more than 1,500 participants. Results of the polls were unexpectedly consistent—from downtown Ogunquit to the Houlton Post Office, from the Andover General Store in western Maine to a downeast community fair in Milbridge.

In both polls, participants voted with their pennies for human needs funding—education, health care, veterans benefits, environment/science, and food/agriculture programs—with very little spent on the category labeled “Defense.”

Participants were given ten pennies, each representing ten percent of income taxes they pay to the federal government’s discretionary budget. They were not coached on how to respond; they were simply asked to participate in a survey and asked how they would like to see their federal tax dollars spent. Volunteers did not identify their own preferences or display material from Maine's Bring Our War \$\$ Home campaign (www.bringourwardollarshome.org). Those polled simply saw ten jars labeled with broad categories of federal tax spending.

“Education” drew the most spending with 2,075 people allocating 19.5% of their pennies, followed by “Health care,” with 17.5%, and “Veterans' benefits,” with 13.2%. “Food/agriculture” was at 9.8%, “environment/science” at 9.3%, “Transportation” at 7.7%, and “Interest on the national debt” at 7.5%. Bringing up the rear were “Defense” at 6.5%, “Housing/urban development” at 6.4%, and “General government” at 2.7%.

According to the National Priorities Project’s calculations of the 2010 budget for U.S. discretionary spending, where individual income taxes actually go, “Defense” receives 58% of every tax dollar. “Education,” “Environment/science,” and “General government” (Treasury, Justice, Congress, and the White House), receive 6%, “Health care,” “Veterans' benefits,” and “Housing” each get 5%, with “Transportation” at 2 % and “Food/agriculture” at 1%.”

While there are various ways of calculating the discretionary budget which the Supercommittee is charged with reducing, most agree that the Pentagon portion of that budget is in excess of 50%

for 2010. This portion does not include the cost of operating the Veterans' Administration.

The contrast between how taxpayers want their money spent and how Congress spends it could hardly be more dramatic. The Pentagon receives about nine times more than what taxpayers want it to have, while education and health care get less than one third of what taxpayers advocate, and veterans' benefits less than half. Transportation and food/agriculture both get short-changed as well.

Congress and the people who pay the tab are on different wave lengths. It is clear that, if Congress makes cuts, they should be primarily, if not entirely, in the Pentagon portion of the budget.

Why are spending priorities between the public and Congress so different? Are people in Congress that removed from the realities of daily life that they don't worry about education, health care, veterans benefits, and other issues important to the rest of us? Are they under the thumb of lobbyists, especially those representing military contractors, and wealthy donors to their campaigns? Is there a culture of militarism—the necessity of wars, foreign bases, and a huge military—that only lives in corporate board rooms and in Congress?

The huge gap between what the public wants and what Congress allocates brings up questions about how much of a democracy we have in this country. The current Occupy Wall Street movement and its local offshoots point out how our democracy is slipping away, as members of Congress get richer and become part of the 1%, rather than part of the 99%.

Our democracy is in crisis; millions have lost faith in a system that claims to represent them. Unless Congress listens to and reflects the wishes of the vast majority in this country, popular support of our economic system, tax system, and government will continue to erode.

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