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# >> America's Future

## What Should Our Budget Priorities Be?

**A**S WE GRADUALLY shake off the effects of the recession, we need to make decisions about our nation's spending. Retirement and health-care programs, major military costs, deteriorating infrastructure, and a steadily increasing national debt all demand attention. We cannot meet all the needs. What should our priorities be?

### OPTION ONE

#### Keep Tightening Our Belt

This option would continue trimming the budget across the board, with the exception of defense, and require workers to pay more into Social Security and Medicare.

### OPTION TWO

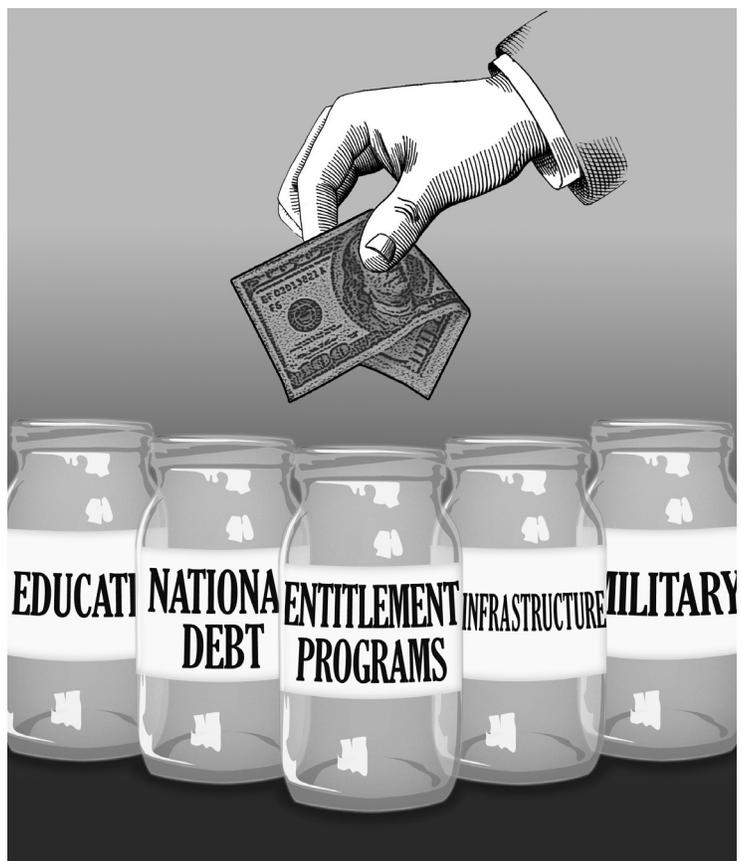
#### Invest for the Future

This option calls for spending more money on infrastructure and education instead of aggressively cutting the deficit, and it would extend the retirement ages of Social Security and Medicare.

### OPTION THREE

#### Tame the Monsters

This option would cut more deeply into defense, Social Security, and Medicare/Medicaid to rein in the growth of the budget.



# >>National Issues Forums and Study Guides

## Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

## How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the PROS and CONS of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

# >>Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

## >> Stages of a Forum

### Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

### Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

### Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

### Deliberation

Participants examine all the options. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each option.

### Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

### Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

## >> If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

### You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

### Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions begin on Page 5.) Listen to others.

### Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's difficult to move on to another option when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly.

### Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

## >>Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

## >>Ending a Forum

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

### **I. Individual reflections**

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

### **II. Group reflections**

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

### **III. Next-step reflections**

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

### >> Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some examples:

#### O P T I O N O N E

- Do you think that across-the-board spending cuts, such as occurred during the sequester, are the only feasible way to curtail federal spending? Do you think our leaders will ever be able to agree on budget cuts in a less drastic way?
- How—if at all—have cuts in federal programs, mandated by the sequester, affected you and your family or friends this past year?
- What might be the consequences of cutting the defense budget back to pre-war levels now that our troops have been largely withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan?
- How would you favor reforming Social Security and Medicare to keep them financially viable?

#### O P T I O N T W O

- What large-scale government investment—in education, roads and bridges, or digital infrastructure, for example—do you think would be of most benefit in growing the economy?
- Raising the age of eligibility for Social Security to 68 would bring huge savings to the system. What might be the consequences? How would it affect you or your family?
- What effect might raising the minimum wage to at least \$10 an hour have on the economic well-being of your community?
- Should we even be thinking about spending billions of dollars to fix roads and provide Internet access in every classroom when major health-care programs need shoring up and increasing proportions of our taxes go to paying off the national debt each year?

Questions continued on Page 6.

## Questions, continued.

### OPTION THREE

- Many retirees now collecting Social Security benefits are considerably better off than many workers paying into the system and struggling to make ends meet. Is that fair? Should Social Security and Medicare be transformed into needs-based programs?
- What would be the first thing you'd do if you had a say in reforming the tax code?
- Social Security was originally designed to provide financial security for the elderly. It was expanded during years of surplus to cover the needs of the disabled. Would it help to scale Social Security back to its intended purpose?
- If you were in a higher income bracket, would you be willing to forgo some of your Social Security or Medicare benefits in favor of higher pay-outs for individuals who needed them more?

## >>Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

A national report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

## >>The Role of the Moderator

- to provide an overview of the deliberation process
- to ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- to encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- to remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

## >>For More Information

To order issue guides or starter tapes for this issue, visit [store.nifi.org](http://store.nifi.org), call 1-800-600-4060, or e-mail [info@ait.net](mailto:info@ait.net). Other issue guides and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

For more information or to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org) or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: [forums@nifi.org](mailto:forums@nifi.org).

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## Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

Moderator's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Date and location (state) where forum was held \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

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What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants? \_\_\_\_\_

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What common concerns were most apparent? \_\_\_\_\_

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What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? Describe.

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Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

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Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with most? Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

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Did the group identify shared directions for action? \_\_\_\_\_

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Return with questionnaires to:  
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