

New study shows government spending preferences of Americans

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In its 27th survey of American spending priorities since 1973 conducted as part of its General Social Survey (GSS), NORC at the University of Chicago Wednesday released a report on its most recent findings. By a notable margin, education and health care were the top two spending priorities of Americans. And Americans are consistent in that: those two categories have finished in the top two in each of the ten surveys since 1990.

The spending priorities report is derived from recently released data of the 2010 General Social Survey which NORC has conducted for forty years. The GSS is a biennial survey that gathers data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes. NORC makes the high-quality data easily accessible to scholars, students, policy makers, and others. Over 16,000 research uses in articles, textbooks, monographs, dissertations, etc. have been documented. The GSS is supported by the National Science Foundation and it is the second most-referenced survey in America after the U.S. Census.

Rounding out the top ten spending priorities were (3) assistance to the poor (4) halting crime, (5) Social Security, (6) the environment, (7) dealing with drug addiction, (8) childcare, (9) drug rehabilitation, and (10) law enforcement. Finishing lowest in priority, as it has in every survey since 1973, is foreign assistance. The study surveys public preferences on twenty-two spending categories.

The findings have additional significance in that they are derived from the first GSS to be conducted since the 2008 [economic meltdown](#). Despite the poor economy and despite the pinch of taxes for a majority, (in 2010, 53% said their federal taxes were too high, 46% about right, and 2% too low) Americans back more spending in about three-quarters of the areas and less spending only in the bottom quarter.

However, the level of support for more spending declined from 2008 in most but not every category. For instance, the net percentage of people who felt we spend too little on law enforcement fell from 44.8% in 2008 to 36.4% in 2010; the net percentage of those who feel we spend too little on the environment fell from 58.7% in 2008 to 48.5% in 2010.

The survey employs a sample of 2,044 interviews. The order of spending priorities is determined by subtracting the percentage of respondents saying "too much" is being spent in a category from those saying that "too little" is being spent for that category. The resulting net percentage in each category determines their rank in the list of spending categories.

Tom W. Smith, the Director of the General Social Survey and Principal Investigator said, "Facing soaring deficits and disagreements over the mix of taxes and spending in the budget, it is valuable to consider what the American people think governmental spending priorities should be and how their preferences have changed over the last four decades."

More information: A copy of the full report with comparative data dating back to 1973 can be obtained on the NORC web site.

Provided by University of Chicago

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