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Americans Not Sold on Defense Increase

In-depth survey shows voters would reduce defense budget \$12 billion, cut F-35 program, retire one aircraft carrier

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama and leading Republican presidential candidates have called for increasing defense spending. However, given the opportunity to make their own defense budget, a majority of voters (61 percent) cut defense spending in a new in-depth survey released today by Voice Of the People. Not even a majority of Republicans made increases.

In the survey, a representative sample of more than 7,000 registered voters across the country were first presented detailed, nonpartisan information and competing arguments about the current defense budget. The majority trimmed annual spending by \$12 billion, including ground forces by \$4 billion (or 3 percent), nuclear weapons by \$3 billion (13 percent), air power by \$2 billion (1.5 percent), naval forces by \$2 billion (2 percent) and missile defense by \$1 billion (13 percent). Special operations and the marines were left untouched. No areas were increased.

A majority of Democrats cut \$36 billion, independents \$20 billion; while there was not majority support for either increases or decreases among Republicans. African American respondents cut the budget \$34 billion; Hispanics cut \$20 billion.

In addition, 54 percent of respondents approved of cutting the F-35 program, saving \$97 billion through 2037. Reducing the numbers of aircraft carriers from 11 to 10 was approved by six-in-ten, saving \$7 billion over the next ten years.

“Given all the talk about increasing the defense budget, we were surprised to find how much Americans are not sold on increases, including a majority of Republicans nationwide,” said Steven Kull, director of the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation (PPC) and president of Voice Of the People, a nonpartisan organization working to give citizens greater influence in policy making.

Some programs fared better. Asked about continuing a controversial program for a new long-range stealth bomber called ‘Next Generation’ to replace the B-2 bomber, 56 percent approved of it. Fifty-four percent of respondents rejected a proposal to reduce the number of planned nuclear submarines from 12 to 8.

The probability-based, online sample consisted of 7,126 registered voters across the country, with subsamples for California, Florida, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas and Virginia, who were presented the defense budget in some detail. In the online survey, respondents were given a briefing on the defense budget and presented with strongly-stated arguments for and against the current level of spending for each area, which were vetted for accuracy and balance by both minority and majority congressional staffers from the House and Senate Appropriations Defense subcommittees. They were then allowed to increase or decrease the amount budgeted to different areas of defense spending.

The defense budget presented for 2015 was \$509 billion. But a majority of the respondents said they wanted to cut it back to \$497 billion. PPC previously surveyed public attitudes towards defense spending in 2012, when – in a similar exercise – a majority of respondents proposed a \$65 billion cut in the defense budget that year – bringing annual defense spending to exactly the same \$497 billion level.

The president's newly-released budget for FY2017 calls for a base defense budget of \$524 billion, plus an additional \$58.8 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations, the majority of which is for Afghanistan.

Respondents were specifically briefed on the two options currently under consideration for U.S. troops in Afghanistan – reducing to a contingent of 5,500 troops or withdrawing all of them. Fifty-six percent favored retaining the 5,500 level.

The survey was conducted by the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, and was fielded Dec. 20, 2015 – Feb. 1, 2016.

The Citizen Cabinet panel was drawn from Nielsen-Scarborough's probability-based national panel, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households. Additional panelists were recruited by Communications for Research. The margin of error for the national sample was +/- 1.4 percent; for the states it ranged from +/- 3.9 percent to +/- 5.0 percent.

Unlike a standard poll, Citizen Cabinet surveys take respondents through an online process called a 'policymaking simulation' that gives respondents information and seeks to put them in the shoes of a policymaker.

The survey's report can be found at:

http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Defense_Budget_Report.pdf

The questionnaire can be found at:

http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Defense_Budget_Quaire.pdf

Once the results of the survey are released, a public version of the simulation is posted at vop.org for anyone to try. It can be found at: <http://research.cfrinc.net/vop15350pub/>

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Voice Of the People is a nonpartisan organization that uses innovative methods and technology to help give the American people a more effective voice in government.