



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Contact: Rich Robinson
rrobinson@vop.org or 202-232-5075

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Survey of Maryland Citizen Cabinet Finds Broad Bipartisan Agreement on How to Resolve Social Security Shortfall

New online tool also allows ALL Marylanders to weigh in on Social Security reform

COLLEGE PARK, Md. – Voice Of the People’s first survey of its newly established Maryland Citizen Cabinet finds overwhelming majorities of Republicans and Democrats agree on recommendations that would cover most of the looming Social Security shortfall. A modest majority recommends steps that would completely eliminate the shortfall.

The Maryland Citizen Cabinet is an online representative panel of Maryland registered voters, scientifically-selected and managed by the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation at the School of Public Policy. It will be consulted on a series of issues facing Congress in the months ahead.

Large majorities of the Cabinet recommend reducing benefits for the top quarter of earners (76 percent), raising the full retirement age to 68 years old (84 percent), raising the cap on income subject to the payroll tax (87 percent), and raising the payroll tax rate from 6.2 to 6.6 percent (76 percent). Together, these steps would eliminate two-thirds of the Social Security shortfall. Partisan differences are minor, with at least two in three Republicans and Democrats endorsing each of these steps.

“It’s often said that Social Security is a ‘third rail’ in politics, but given the right tools, majorities from both parties agree on how to fix most of the shortfall,” said Steven Kull, VOP president and director of the Program for Public Consultation. “Marylanders are more united than divided.”

A Citizen Cabinet was also recruited for Maryland’s 7th Congressional district, which includes Baltimore and surrounding areas. Its views were found to be nearly identical to those of the statewide Cabinet.

Fifty-five percent recommended a further step of making all income subject to the payroll tax (including 47 percent of Republicans, 59 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of independents). Together with the other steps, this would more than completely eliminate the Social Security shortfall.

Fifty-seven percent also recommended increasing the minimum benefit so that monthly benefit for someone who has worked for 30 years or more would increase from \$800 to \$1,216, though less than half of Republicans endorsed it. This would increase the shortfall by 7 percent.

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Other options for changing way the Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) are calculated, such as ‘chained CPI,’ or increasing benefits to the very old, were not recommended by a majority.

The survey was completed by a statewide sample of 535 Maryland registered voters, plus additional sample for MD-7 to bring the total for the district to 438. A total of 906 Maryland registered voters completed the survey. The margin of error for the state as a whole is plus or minus 4.2% and for MD-7, plus or minus 4.7%.

The methodology used in Citizen Cabinet surveys goes beyond that of standard polls. The surveys – called ‘policymaking simulations’ – seek to replicate the process that policymakers go through when making a policy decision. Respondents get a briefing on the issues, evaluate competing arguments for and against each of the policy options, and finally come to conclusions in a framework that requires dealing with the same difficult tradeoffs Congress is facing.

Once the Cabinet goes through the policymaking simulation, it is made available online at www.vop.org, so all Marylanders can go through the same process, learn about the issue, make their own recommendations and send them to their representatives in Congress.

All survey content is vetted in advance with experts from both parties. This survey was developed in close consultation with Republican and Democratic Congressional staff experts on Social Security, as well as various think tanks and advocacy groups with differing views on the issue, who reviewed all the content in advance to ensure that the briefing materials were accurate and that the strongest arguments for and against each option were presented.

Interestingly, when respondents made their recommendations for Social Security reforms most were not simply looking out for their own interests. Large majorities of those with high incomes favored raising the cap on taxable income, though it would increase their own taxes. Likewise, people under the age of 48 overwhelmingly favored raising the retirement age even though they were told only they would be affected.

“It appears that when people deal with these issues they are really thinking about the common good,” Kull said.

This report of the Maryland Citizen Cabinet can be found at <http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CC-Report-MD-FINAL.pdf>

The survey’s questionnaire can be found at <http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/MD-Social-Security-Questionnaire-FINAL.pdf>

The Social Security policymaking simulation can be found at <http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2024222/VOP-org-Social-Security-Simulation-PUBLIC-VERSION>

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