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Virginia Citizen Cabinet Survey: Republicans, Democrats Agree on Key Measures to Resolve Social Security Shortfall

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

RICHMOND, Va. – Voice Of the People’s first survey of its newly established Virginia Citizen Cabinet finds overwhelming majorities of Republicans and Democrats agree on recommendations that would cover most of the looming Social Security shortfall.

The Virginia Citizen Cabinet is an online representative panel of Virginia 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 (73 percent), raising the full retirement age to 68 years old (83 percent), raising the cap on income subject to the payroll tax (89 percent), and raising the payroll tax rate from 6.2 to 6.6 percent (74 percent). Together, these steps would eliminate two-thirds of the Social Security shortfall. Partisan differences are minor, with over six in ten Republicans and Democrats endorsing each of these steps.

“Many characterize Social Security as a ‘third rail’ in American 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. “Virginians are more united than divided.”

Fifty-seven percent recommended a further step of making all income subject to the payroll tax (including 52 percent of Republicans, 59 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of independents). Together with the other steps, this would more than completely eliminate the Social Security shortfall.

Fifty-eight 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.

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.

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The survey was completed by a statewide sample of 525 Virginia registered voters. The margin of error is plus or minus 4.2 percent.

The methodology used in Citizen Cabinet surveys goes beyond that of standard polls. The surveys – called ‘policymaking simulations’ – seek to mirror 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 types of difficult tradeoffs Congress faces.

Once the Cabinet goes through the policymaking simulation, it is made available online at www.vop.org, so all Virginians 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 Virginia Citizen Cabinet can be found at http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CC_SS_VA.pdf

The survey’s questionnaire can be found at http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CC_SS_VA_Quaire.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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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.