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# Toolkit for engaging millennials with the national debt debate

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## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

The Brookings Economic Studies program analyzes current and emerging economic issues facing the United States and the world, focusing on ideas to achieve broad-based economic growth, a strong labor market, sound fiscal and monetary policy, and economic opportunity and social mobility. The research aims to increase understanding of how the economy works and what can be done to make it work better.

The mission of the Millennial Action Project is to re-establish political cooperation across parties and defeat the polarization and gridlock that is holding back our government and country. Our generation has a unique opportunity to forge a new path and lead our nation into the future, which is why MAP is committed to activating our nation's youngest generation of leaders and lawmakers.

## STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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Millennials and younger Americans differ sharply from older generations in the urgency they place on addressing climate change and the national debt. While the two issues are not equivalent, they are both major long-term concerns that need attention now. But while the younger generations are very worried about climate change and demand urgent action, they are far more relaxed about the escalating national debt. What lessons should stakeholders take from the successful public engagement of younger generations around action on climate change to encourage them to embrace the need for greater fiscal responsibility?

## 1. Reframe the message

**The economic and social realities of today demand that we change how we frame concern about national debt to create salience among younger generations.**

Context matters in discussing a major issue with any segment of the population. That certainly applies to climate change and debt. Today the impact of climate change seems to be everywhere, and younger Americans have grown up with it – record-breaking temperatures, historic storms, melting glaciers. But for these same Americans, rising debt has had no apparent adverse effects. It is no longer the 1970s, when high interest rates and inflation were rampant. Older Americans well remember those times. True, the COVID-19 crisis has upended the economy for now, but the long period of rising debt before that was accompanied by unemployment at fifty-year lows, historically low interest rates and virtually no inflation. Moreover, staggering increases in debt now seems like a necessary – even painless – way to combat the economic crisis.

The way we talk about concerns associated with enormous national debt and unprecedented budget deficits must therefore evolve to match today’s perception of reality. Simply ratcheting up apocalyptic and fatalistic messaging around fiscal irresponsibility, born of a concern about future catastrophic debt crises, simply does not relate to anything experienced by younger Americans. Furthermore, younger Americans frequently face tremendous financial burdens in their personal lives that often preclude a faithful reckoning with the implications of our national debt. So, although the traditional framing of the need for fiscal responsibility may remain accurate, with its emphasis on the risk of ignoring growing deficits and debts, the focus on worst-case outcomes only increases younger people’s skepticism, cynicism, and detachment. And to the extent that the message of economic risk gets through to younger Americans, it rarely stirs a desire for strong action any time soon.

*“... perhaps if connections were made to personalize the issue of national debt, that make it real to actual human beings rather than making it feel like an ethereal policy conversation, then maybe we’d see it have more salience as a political issue.”*

*-U.S. Representative Derek Kilmer*

Surveys and research evidence suggest that to be successful, the debt message must be reframed to focus on actionable solutions now that will lead to future benefits and opportunities as a result of tackling the problem. In other words, focus on the benefits of action and not the calamities associated with inaction. If younger Americans are presented with the benefits and opportunities available to them from less debt-related pressure on future government and private investment, they will be more likely to demand action. Critically, this framing also addresses a root cause of Millennial and Gen Z ambivalence towards reducing

the national debt: their personal financial burdens and worries about the rising cost of education and healthcare do not seem to require tighter national fiscal policy.

The contrasting experience of climate change activists underscores the importance of this approach to messaging. That experience shows that advocates can get traction when talking about dire consequences – but only if those consequences seem evident every day. It is floods, wildfires, and freak storms today that make dire predictions of the future seem plausible and that generates a passion for action now. That’s not the case with debt and deficits – we just don’t see the debt equivalent of wildfires. And that is why we need a positive, future-oriented message.

The success of climate change activists has been both to point to apparent dangers today and to identify specific policies and individual actions young people can take that will lead to a healthier and more prosperous future – from specific policies to reduce emissions, to the financial and environmental benefits of driving a hybrid, to recycling. Although people know that their individual actions alone will not make a large difference, they feel part of an environmentally conscious movement, and their activities as members of that movement increase their support for large-scale reforms.

Advocates of fiscal responsibility need to learn from this. They need to communicate that addressing long-term fiscal imbalances will empower individuals and communities with the public and private resources they need to choose their own futures. They must also focus on feasible and specific steps that individuals, communities, and government can take now, from increasing personal savings to freeing up funds to fix potholes and build better airports. And they need to emphasize the long-term importance and benefits of reducing debt, rather than emphasizing the urgency of avoiding economic danger.

*“There is this magic persuasive combination where you’re able to balance senses of urgency – this is a problem, this is real, it matters to you, it needs to be addressed – with equally robust senses of efficacy – that there are things that can be done, solutions are there, [and] this is not an intransigent problem...”*

*- Nat Kendall-Taylor  
Chief Executive Officer  
Frameworks Institute*

## 2. Rethink the messenger

**Identify new messengers of fiscal responsibility and new ways to distribute this message, breaking away from a bygone era of mostly unfulfilled pessimism, constantly seeming to cry wolf, and the association of fiscal responsibility with an austere class of elites.**

Compounding the negatives of a stale message that’s often interpreted as inaccurate, fiscal responsibility lacks salient messengers. There are few outspoken advocates of national fiscal responsibility that are convincing and authoritative to younger generations. And few, if any, are celebrities, otherwise non-political, or in the social movement space. Moreover, the experts do not all see eye-to-eye on the issue. While most economists are worried about the long-term consequences of rising deficits and debt, they clash on what

to do, leading public understanding of the problem and potential solutions to become increasingly muddied.

If we are to re-ignite public consciousness about the need for fiscal responsibility, policy advocates must rethink how – and by whom – the message gets delivered. The credibility and authority of the messenger is crucial.

*“But maybe the folks from the local credit union who are coming into the high school to talk about financial literacy and our financial stability, maybe those folks are the right messengers – and maybe, just maybe, we should be building a grassroots effort on these issues that engage young people since it’s their generation that will be damaged the worse by inaction on it.”*

*-U.S. Representative Derek Kilmer*

In crafting a successful message, changemakers should begin from a point of understanding and sympathy, not frustration or derision, with young people’s ambivalence about the issue and their distrust of economists and politicians predicting doom and gloom. With this in mind, fiscal reformers need to identify individuals who have authority with the younger public and can generate messages that resonate. Given the sharp distrust of austerity imposed by far-off elites, persuasive messengers are not likely to be politicians or even economists (who just don’t typically have the cachet of scientists or today’s public health experts). And generating a more natural conversation about everyday personal financial concerns and linking national fiscal responsibility to personal life goals will likely be more effective than relying on charts and graphs.

The example of grassroots climate activism among younger people provides an instructive contrast. Although the warnings of climate change often came from what might be labelled “establishment” sources, much of the messaging and awareness-raising has been undertaken through grassroots networks and non-expert authorities, and often within families themselves. This should serve as an example of the power of building narratives from within communities and transmitting “official” or “expert” information through community, familial, or other quotidian social relationships rather than through official or “expert” megaphones.

### 3. Build trust and bipartisan coalitions

**Lawmakers concerned with debt must create a culture of accountability and collaboration around debt, uniting to eliminate political games and prioritize fiscal responsibility.**

As long as political concern for debt and deficits appears opportunistic for politicians and partisan disputes rage over causes and policies, public cynicism and skepticism will continue to rise. And when concern for deficits and debt shifts back and forth from party to party during the election cycle, known as a “regime effect,” or only emerges in times of temporary economic stress, veracity is doubted and the impact of the message wanes.

*“Young people are open to government solutions to some of these big, meaty problems.”*

*-Layla Zaidane*

*Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer  
Millennial Action Project*

To begin closing this credibility gap on the discussion of deficits and national debt, it's important for lawmakers and policy experts to remember that all political agendas are constrained over the long term by structural fiscal imbalance. Many hopes and national goals are crowded out by debt. Tax reductions, stable retirement programs, improved infrastructure, strong defense – all are imperiled by soaring debt. So, to build a broad constituency for better fiscal management, it is important for all to “depoliticize” the issue by emphasizing how it is important to everyone, no matter what their particular vision of the scope and scale of government.

A likely starting place for building nonpartisan coalitions of policymakers with public credibility would be efforts to shore up the fiscal stability of specific programs with public visibility and affinity, such as Social Security or the Highway Trust Fund. Alternatively, lawmakers can build credibility among younger Americans by addressing what might be called “poison pills” in the national debt debate among younger generations. These poison pills are elements of the budget debate, often misrepresented publicly, that automatically inhibit engagement with the larger national debt conversation. An example is the corporate tax rate: as long as younger Americans believe a large source of our annual deficit stems from corporate tax avoidance, they will not consider other facets of the fiscal responsibility debate.

By making a concerted effort to start small through tackling individual line items with public sympathy and addressing perceived poison pills, policymakers can begin to close the credibility gap. By remembering the shared goal of securing the benefits of national fiscal responsibility, it will be possible to assemble durable bipartisan coalitions for action. Policymakers need to recognize that climate change is increasingly less political among citizens here in the U.S. and in other countries. That has allowed governments of different hues to act. Seeking to create an apolitical consensus around the benefits of reducing debt can do the same here.

*“... we want to leave a positive legacy, we want to leave the world better off for our children and grandchildren – and when you see it in that kind of nonpartisan frame then you can start to throw a lot of solutions across the spectrum at the problem and look at it in a much more pragmatic way.”*

*-Steven Olikara*

*Founder and President  
Millennial Action Project*

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