

***Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Winter 2026***

## **The Economics of Public Policy Issues**

Berkshire Community College

**Host: Geoffrey Woglom, Director  
National Economic Education Delegation**



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## **Course Schedule**

### **The Economics of Public Policy Issues**

- Week 1 (1/23): Economic Update & Central Bank Independence Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College
- Week 2 (1/30): Federal Debt and Deficits, Kathryn Wilson Kent State University
- Week 3 (2/6): Climate Change Economics Sarah Jacobson, Williams College
- Week 4 (2/13): An Introduction to Cryptocurrencies, Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College
- Week 5 (2/20): Saving Social Security, Jon Haveman, Executive Director NEED
- Week 6 (2/27): AI and Inequality, Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College



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## Submitting Questions

- I encourage questions. Raise your digital hand or put questions in the chat
- We will do a verbal Q&A once the material has been presented.
- Slides will be available from the NEED website tonight  
[https://needecon.org/delivered\\_presentations.php](https://needecon.org/delivered_presentations.php).
- Recording will be available: <https://padlet.com/berkshireolli/contemporary-economic-policy-issues-icsjzm4t38pc5kr>



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## The US Federal Debt

Jan. 30, 2026

Kathryn Wilson, Ph.D.  
Kent State University



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- **This slide deck was created by:**
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  - Geoffrey Woglom, Amherst College, Emeritus
- **This slide deck was reviewed by:**
  - Olivier Blanchard, Brookings Institution
- **Disclaimer**
  - NEED presentations are designed to be nonpartisan.
  - It is, however, inevitable that presenters will be asked for and offer their own views.
  - Such views are those of the presenters and not necessarily those of the National Economic Education Delegation (NEED).

## Outline

- I. First: A Budget Overview
- II. The Debt
- III. Important Points About the Debt
- IV. Can't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow
- V. How to Think About the Debt
- VI. Summary

# I. First: A Budget Review



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## What Does the US Govt. Budget Look Like? 2024 Budget Summary (in Trillions)

Revenue		Outlays	
Income Taxes	\$2.4	Mandatory	\$4.1
Payroll Taxes	\$1.7	Discretionary	\$1.8
Corporate Taxes	\$0.5	Interest	\$0.9
Other	\$0.3		
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4.9</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6.8</b>

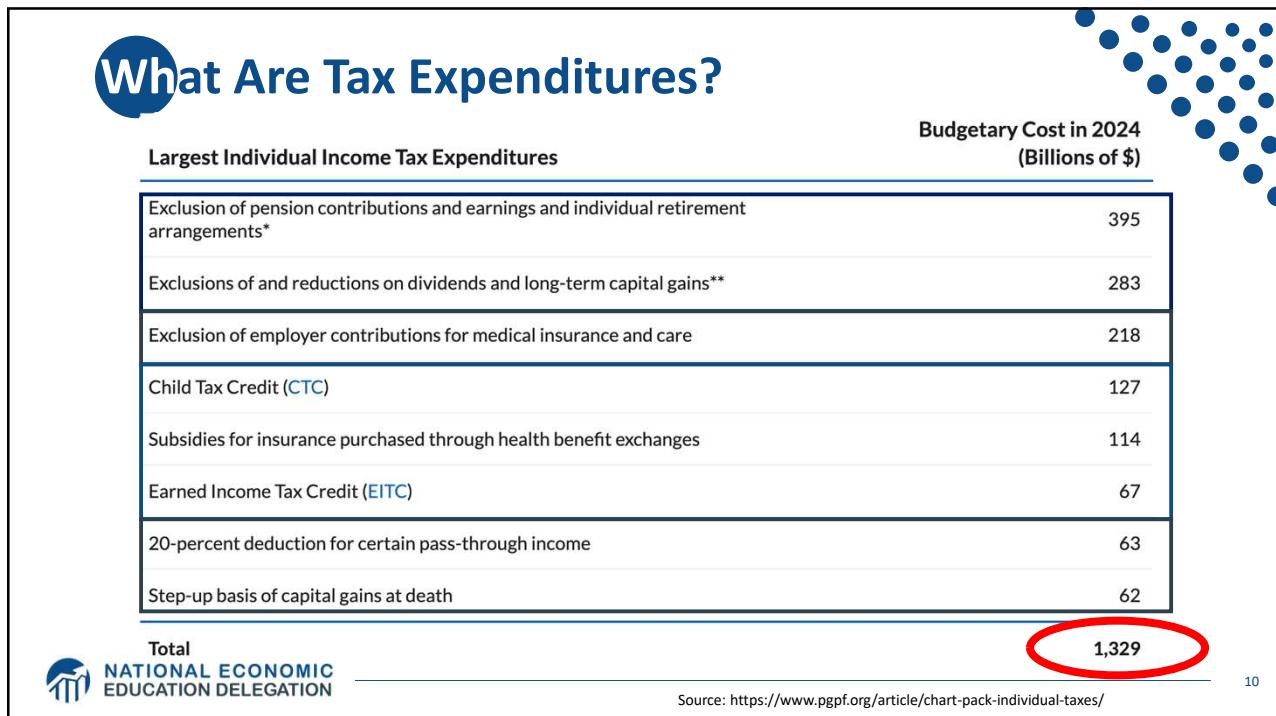
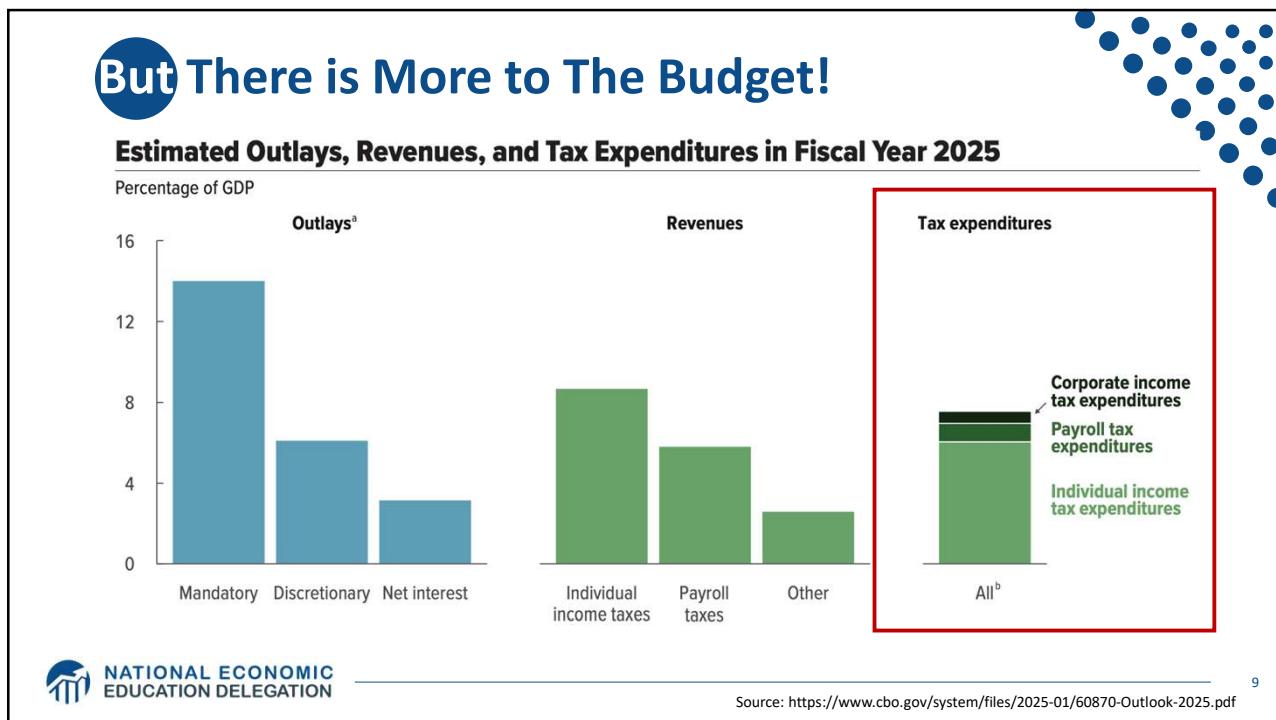
Budget Deficit: \$1.8 Trillion



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Source: <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60053>

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## II. And Now: The Debt



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WHAT IS THE NATIONAL DEBT TODAY?

**\$38,569,754,079,270**

THAT'S **\$113,002** FOR EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN AMERICA



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Source: <https://www.pgpf.org/national-debt-clock/>

# Of Debt, Deficits, and Surpluses

## • FLOW

- **Deficit:** The excess of outlays over revenues in a year.
- **Surplus:** The excess of revenues over outlays in a year.

## • STOCK

- **Debt:** The accumulation of deficits over time.
  - The sum of all past deficits and surpluses.

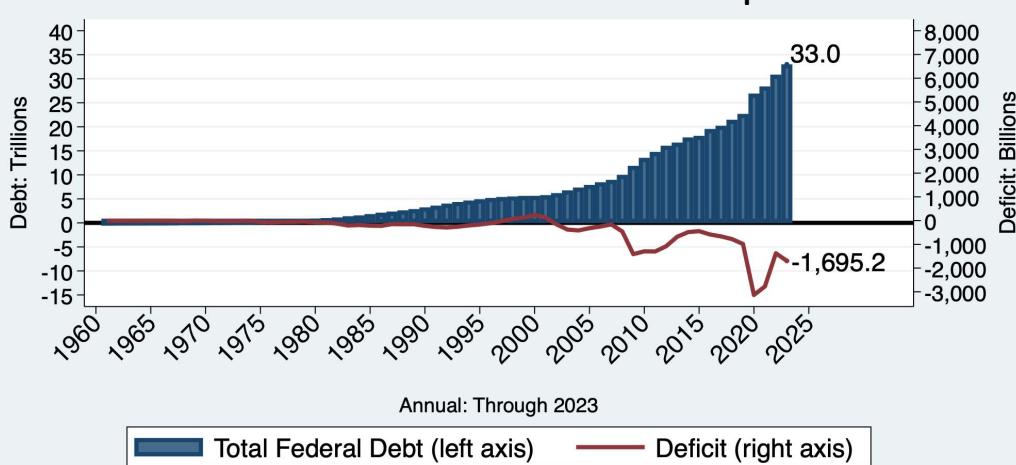


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# Debt vs. Deficit

Debt = The Sum of All Past Deficits Less Surpluses



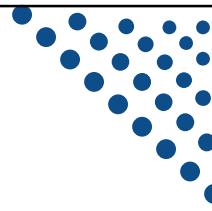
Source: Debt - Council of Economic Advisers; Deficit - U.S. Office of Management and Budget  
Graph by: National Economic Education Delegation ([www.NEEDEcon.org](http://www.NEEDEcon.org))



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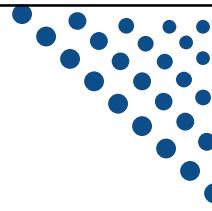
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## Major Takeaways: Talking Points

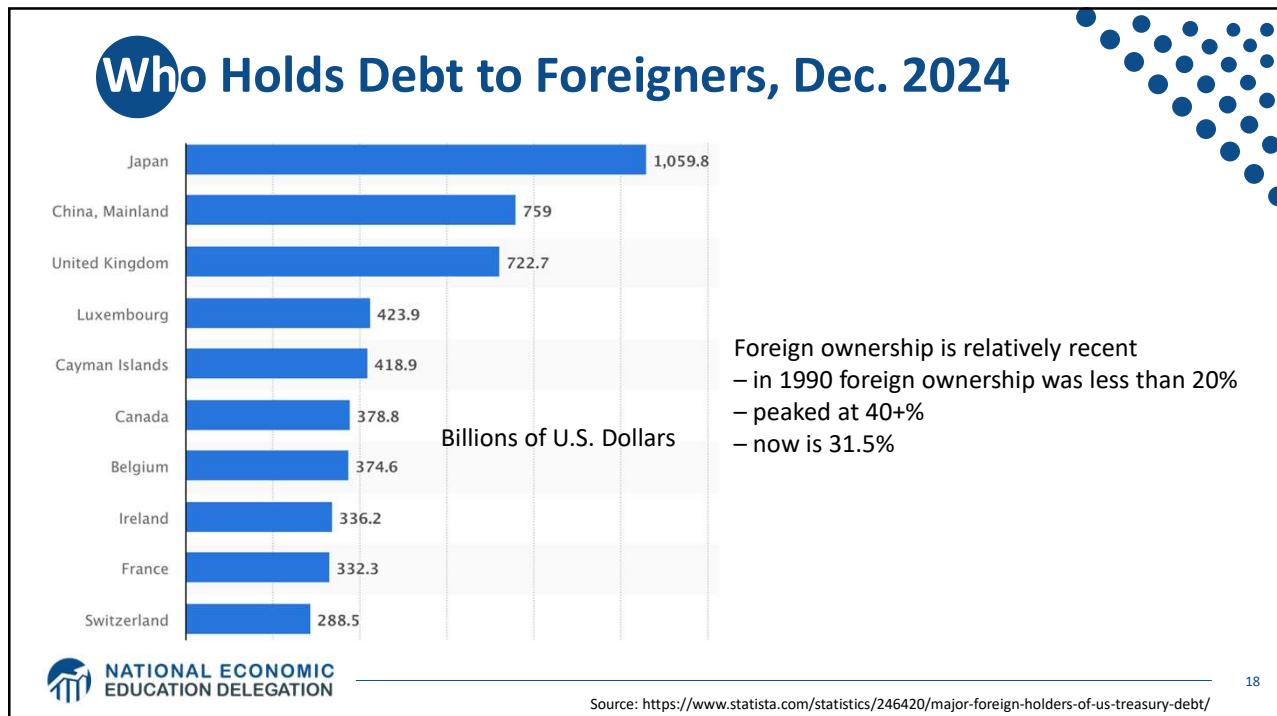
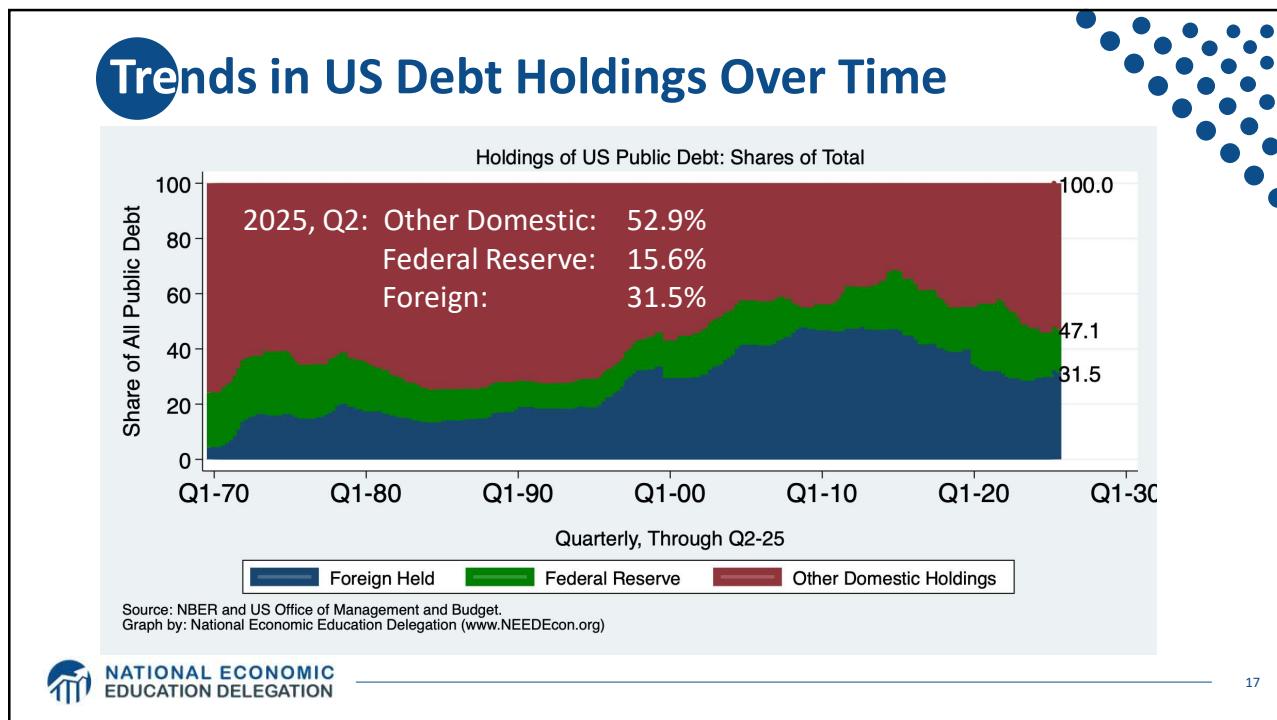


- The debt is not currently a significant problem.
- The current trajectory of federal debt is unsustainable.
- We must enact plans to reduce future deficits.
  - These are driven by Medicare and Social Security spending.
- The longer we postpone action, the greater the probability of a “fiscal crisis.”

## How Does the US Government Borrow?



- It issues debt.
  - Treasury marketable securities:
    - Treasury bills, notes, and bonds
    - TIPS: Treasury inflation-protected securities
    - Savings bonds
- Who buys the debt?
  - Other federal agencies
  - Individuals and businesses
  - State and local governments
  - Foreign governments and individuals
  - Federal Reserve



## Why Do Foreign Investors Buy US Treasuries?

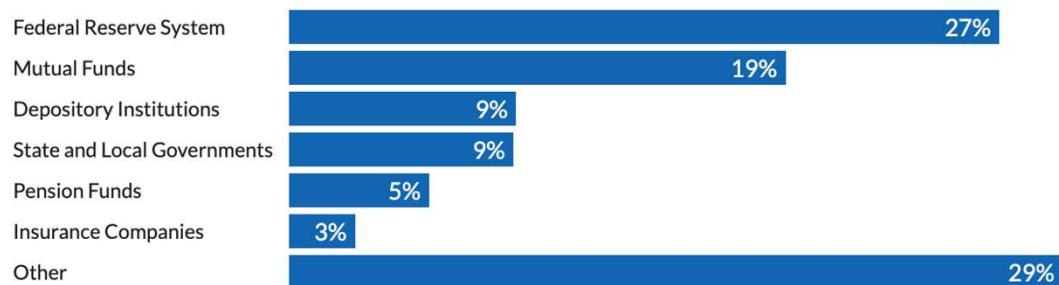
- Market for Treasuries is the deepest, most liquid capital market in the world.
- The US economy has a history of political and economic stability.
- The dollar is the largest international reserve currency.
  - Most trade transactions (e.g., oil) are quoted in dollars.
  - 54% of international trade involves the dollar.
  - 88% of international transactions involve the dollar.
  - With some exceptions, foreign governments borrow in dollars.



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## 35 The Federal Reserve owns about a third of domestically held debt

% of Debt Held by the Public Owned by Domestic Creditors

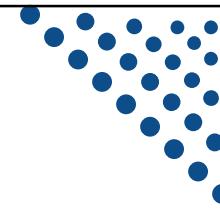


Source: U.S. Department of the Treasury • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#)

Notes: Data are through December 2023. The Other category is made up of U.S. Savings Bonds and Other Investors.



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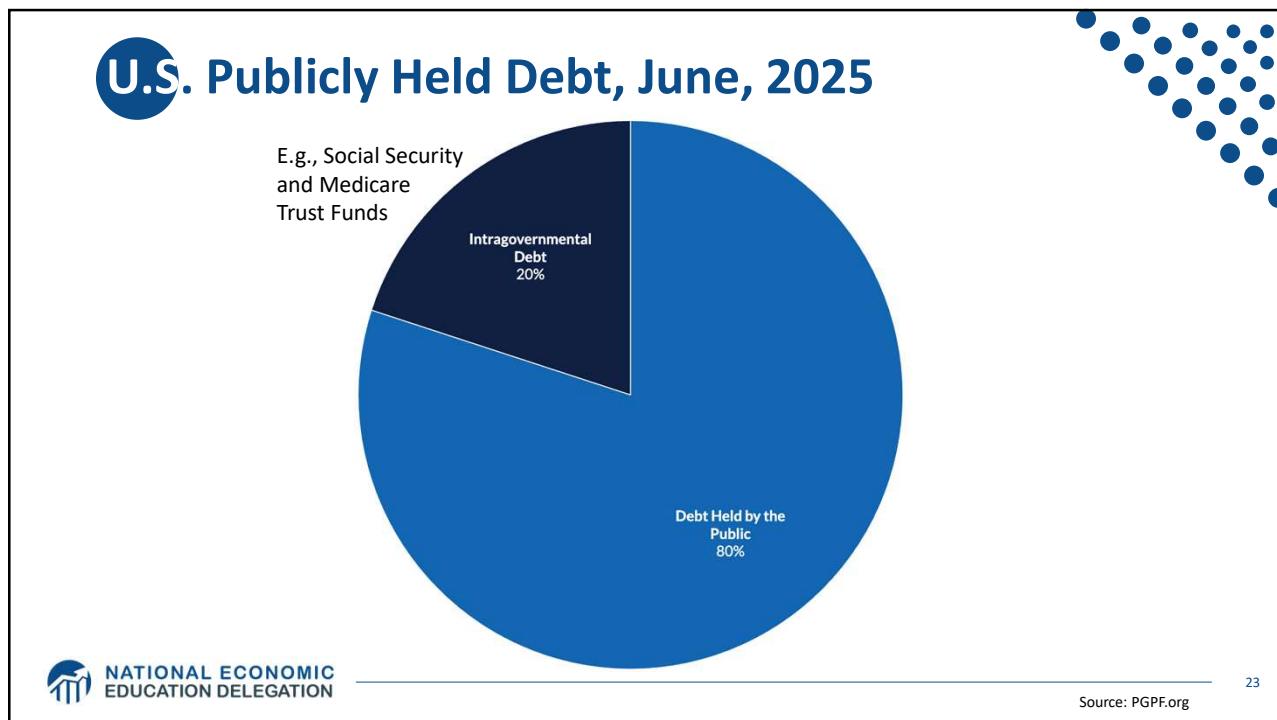
## III. Important Points:

- Not all debt is created equal.
- What is the right measure of the debt?

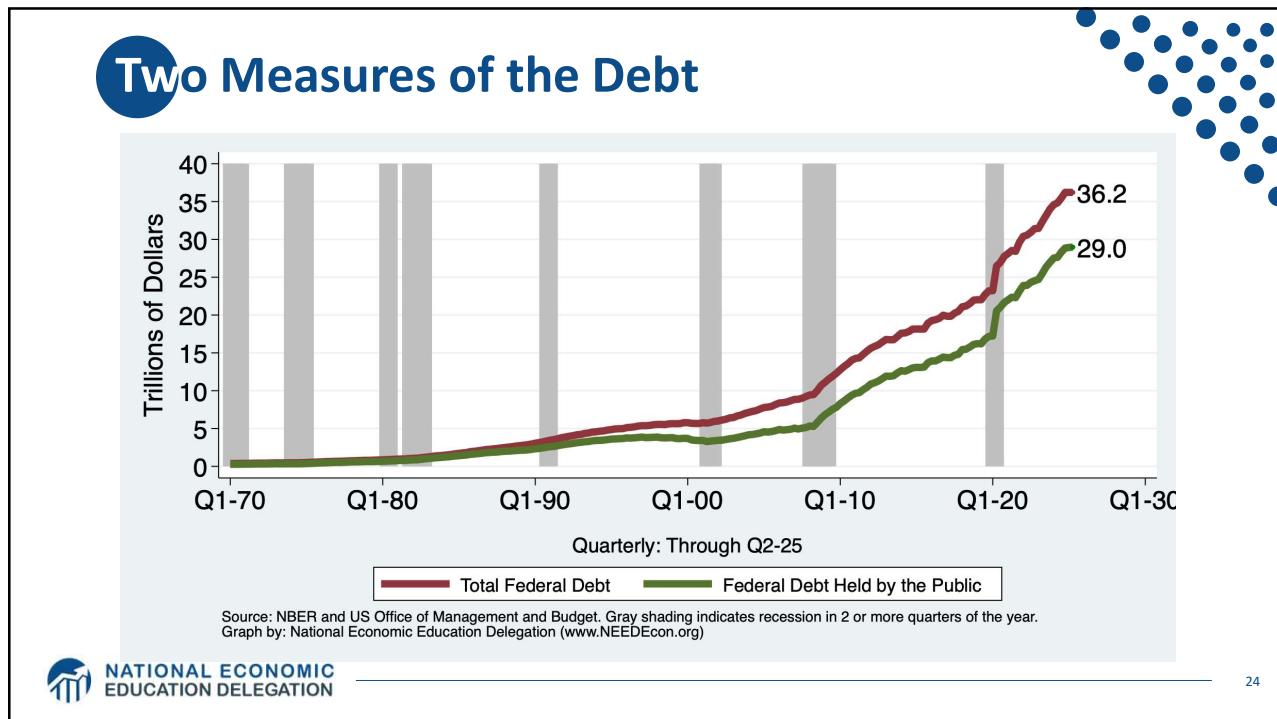
### Not All Debt Is Created Equal



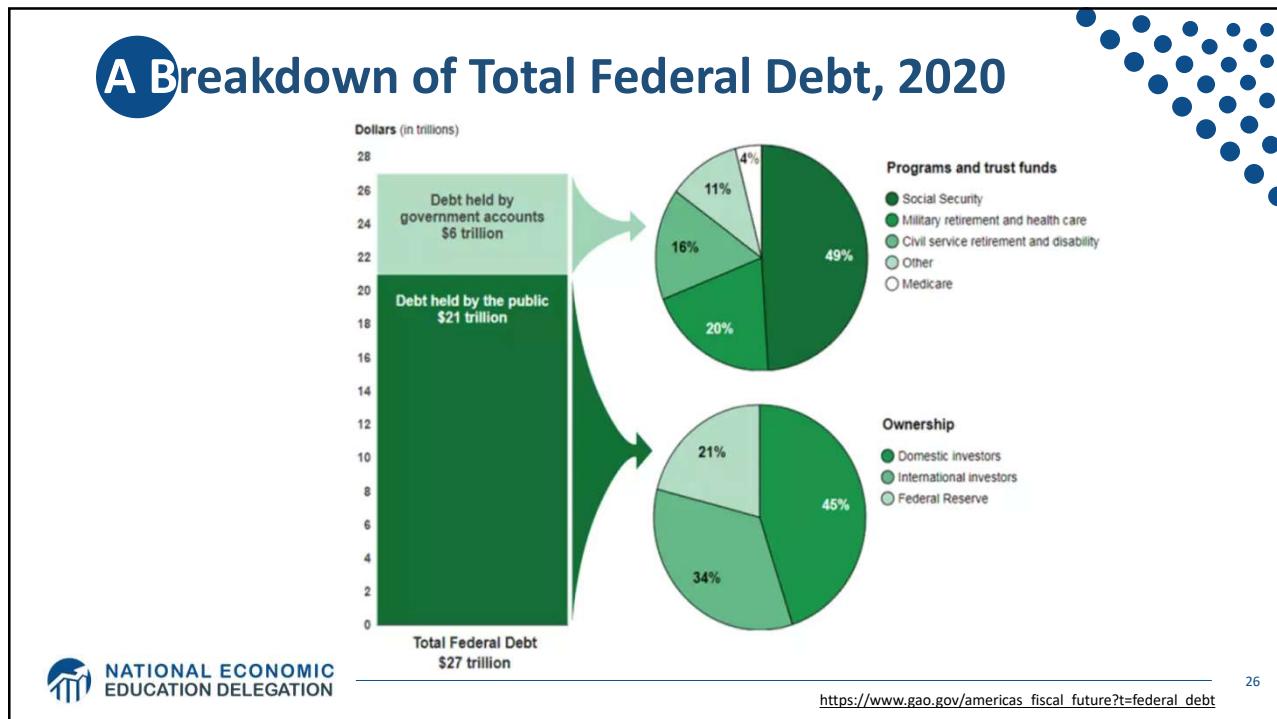
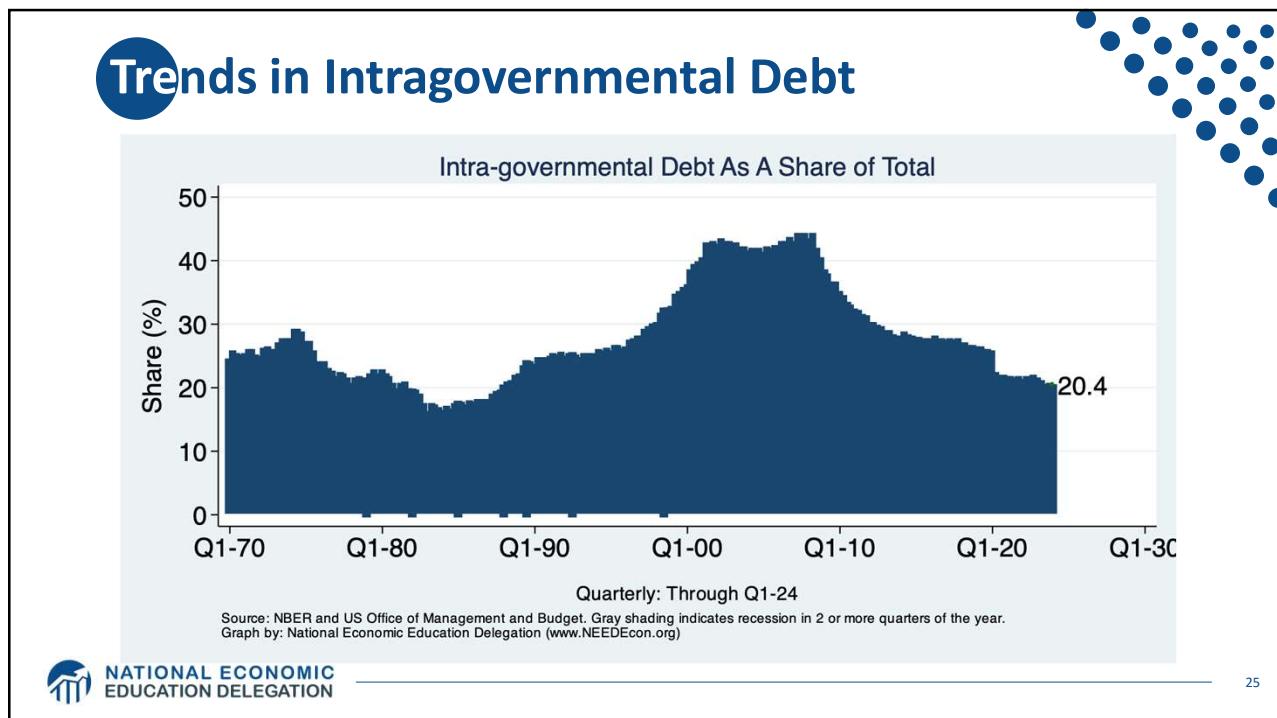
- **Some debt can reduce the availability of investment funds to other borrowers.**
  - Often referred to as “crowding out” private investment.
- **Intergovernmental debt is (important) bookkeeping.**
  - This debt **DOES NOT** crowd out private investment.
- **Debt held by the public.**
  - This debt **MIGHT** crowd out private investment.
- **Most analyses of debt focus on federal debt held by the public.**



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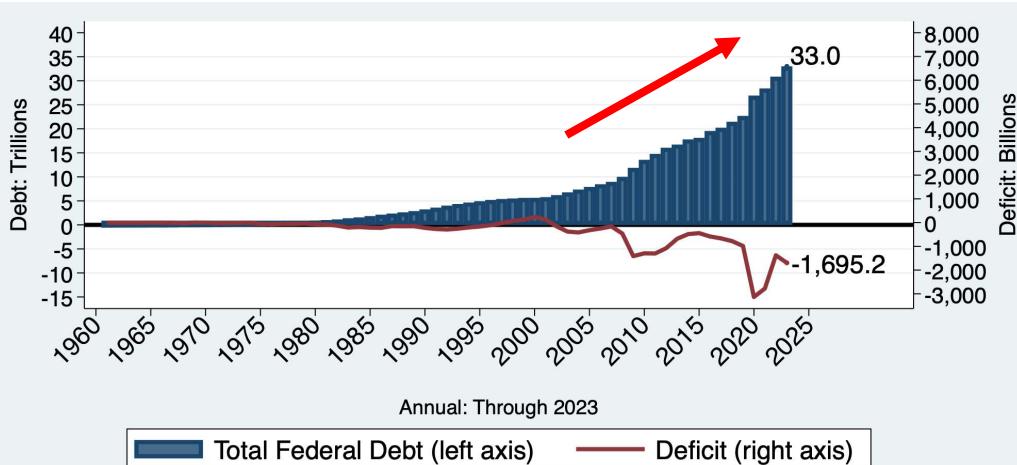
## The All-Important *Relative* Debt

- CBO analyzes the debt *relative* to GDP because:

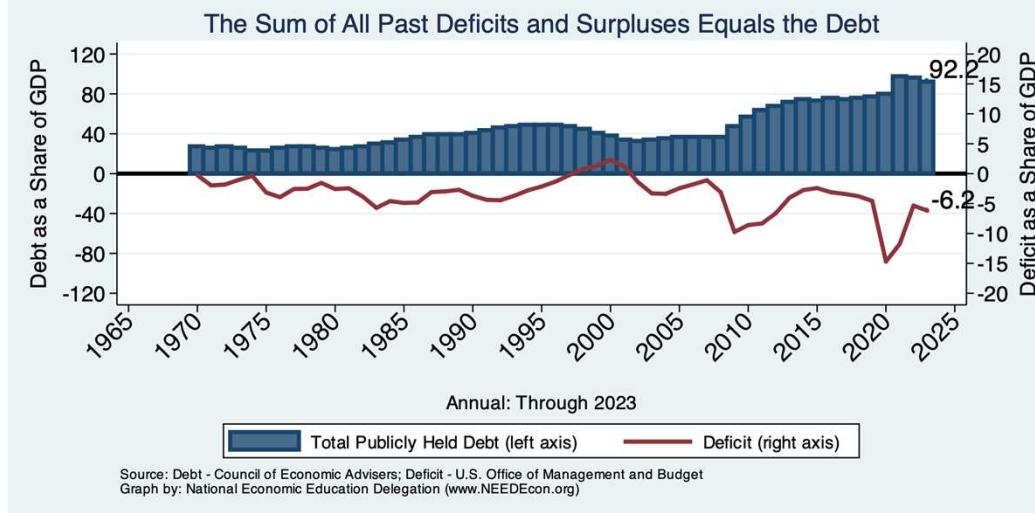
- To the extent that debt and deficits have burdens, these burdens depend on the size of the debt *relative* to the size of the economy.

	Total Public Debt	Relative Debt Debt/GDP
United States	\$27.5 Trillion	97.4%
Greece	\$0.215 Trillion	170%

## Re)lative Debt and Deficit



## Relative Debt and Deficit



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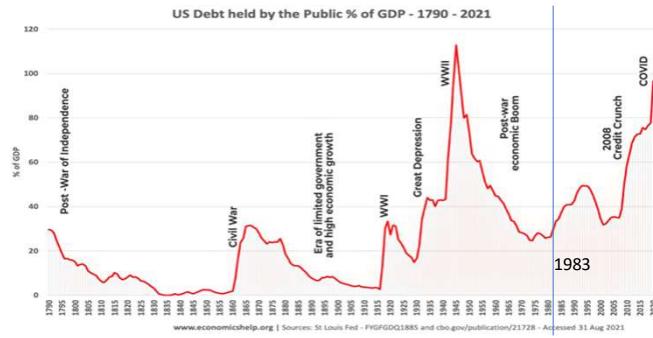
## Two Measures of the Deficit

- (1) Primary deficit = current programmatic outlays – revenues
- (2) **Total deficit** = primary deficit + interest
- **Interest on the debt is**
  - The part of the total deficit that is due to past deficits.
- **This distinction becomes important for understanding:**
  - The future course of relative debt.
  - The costs borne by future generations because of the debt.

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## Key Points About US Relative Debt



1. Relative debt peaked during World War II, followed by a long decline.
2. Prior to 1983, relative debt rose purposefully (wars and recessions) and then fell.
3. Relative debt has been and is expected to rise for the next 30 years w/o a strategic purpose.



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## Debt Dynamics

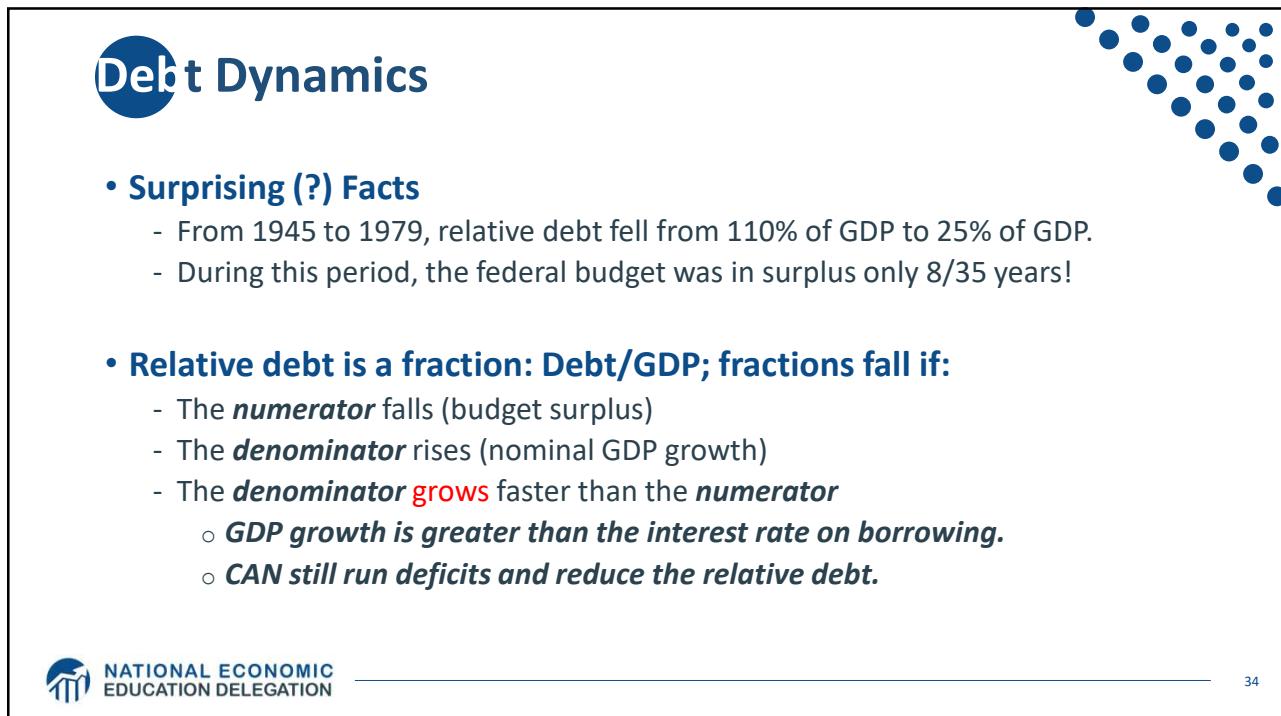
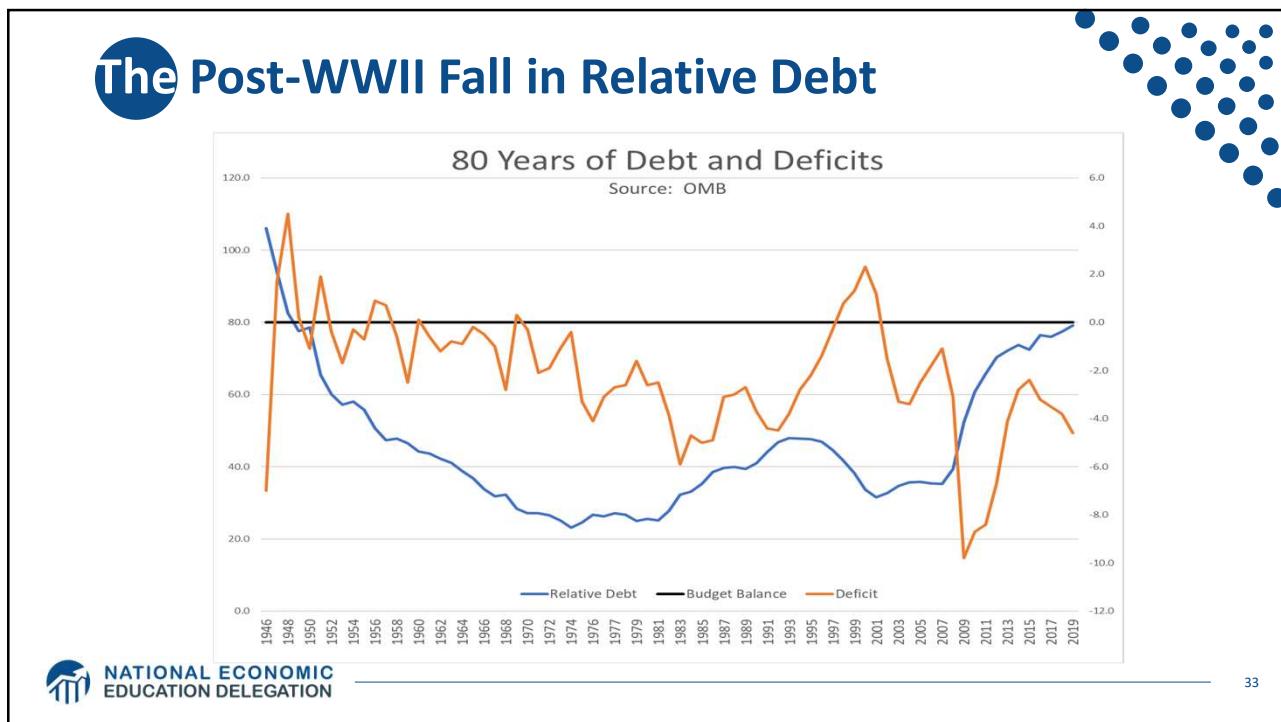
### • Surprising (?) Facts

- From 1945 to 1979, relative debt fell from 110% of GDP to 25% of GDP.
- During this period, the federal budget was in surplus only 8/35 years!

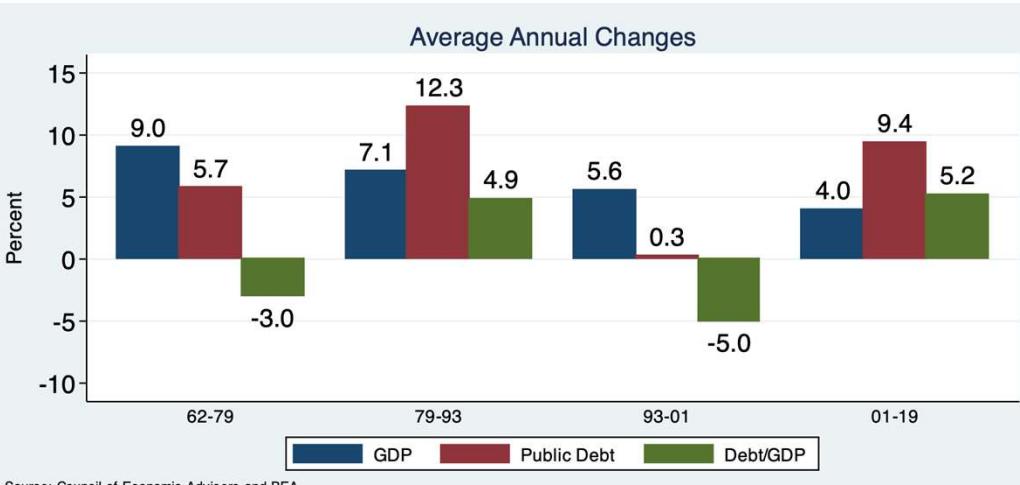


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## The Arithmetic of Changes in Relative Debt



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## An Almost Free Lunch

- If the interest rate is *less* than the growth rate of GDP, then the contribution from the primary budget can be positive, hence...
- Debt to GDP can be stabilized with a (small) primary *deficit*.



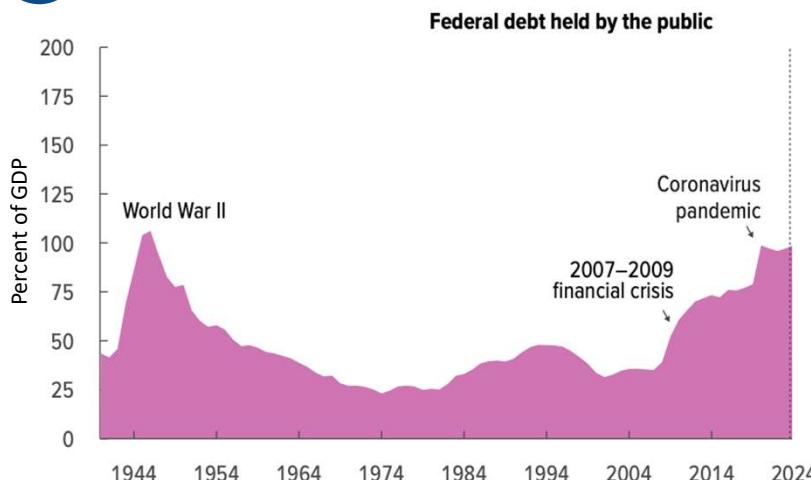
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## Is Stabilizing Relative Debt Good Enough?

- This means that the absolute level of the debt would continue to increase.
- Yes, it probably is good enough.
  - It is a reflection of the economy's ability to support the debt.
  - Stability will avoid bond market scares.

## But Let's Think About Today



Data source: Congressional Budget Office. See [www.cbo.gov/publication/59711#data](http://www.cbo.gov/publication/59711#data).

# Why Has the Federal Debt Risen So Much?

- **Expenditures UP:**

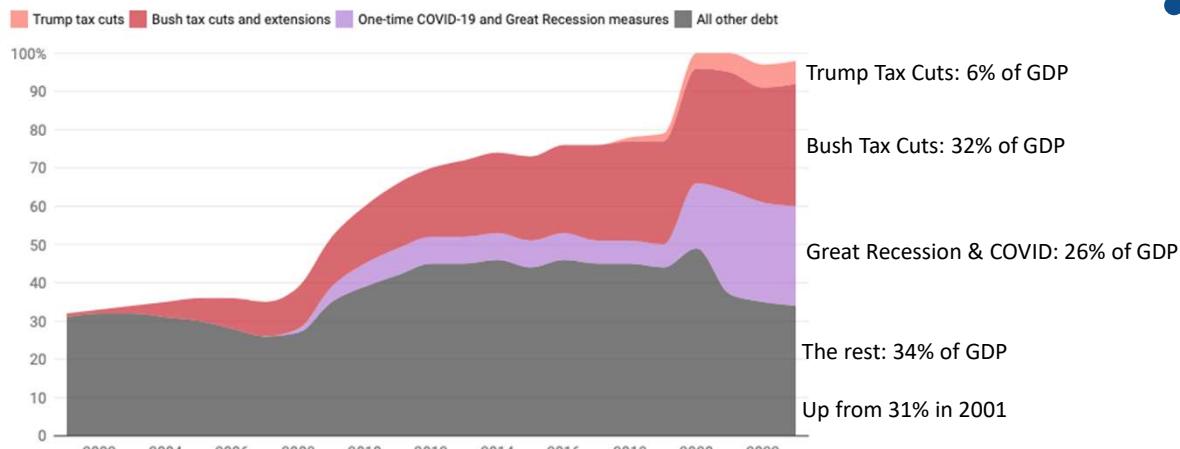
- Social Security
- Health-care costs
- Economic stimulus
  - **In particular, during the Great Recession & COVID.**
- Military engagements overseas

- **Revenues DOWN:**

- Declining income tax revenues
  - Stagnant wages
  - **Tax cuts**
- Social security
  - Declining revenues

# Tax Cuts Have Driven The Debt Increases

Debt held by the public as a percentage of gross domestic product, 2001–2023



## Thinking About Today....

- Do we have:

- A spending problem?
- A revenue problem?
- Both?



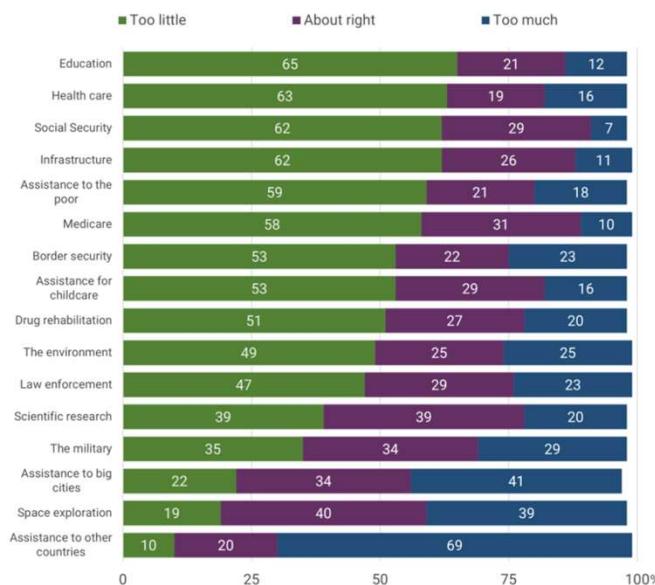
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There is very little enthusiasm for cutting anything.

Overall, the public is dissatisfied with the way the government is spending in key public policy areas.

Percent of adults



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Source, NYTimes, Paul Krugman, "Why We Should, but Won't, Reduce the Budget Deficit"

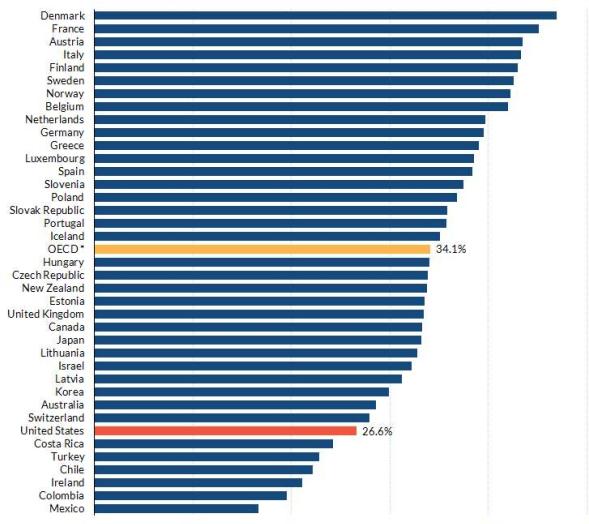
## Thinking About Today....

- Do we have:
  - A spending problem?
  - A revenue problem?
  - Both?
- Not much support for it being a spending problem.



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Total Tax Revenue for OECD Countries  
Percentage of GDP, fiscal year 2021



Source: OECD, Revenue Statistics, Comparative Tables: Tax Revenue (retrieved 06.07.2023).  
Notes: Data includes tax revenues for federal and sub-national governments. Data for Australia and Japan are for 2020. Data for

\*OECD\* is an unweighted average of all 38 OECD members.

Source, Tax Policy Center <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/fiscal-fact/tax-revenue-share-gdp-oecd-countries>



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## How To Address the Debt?

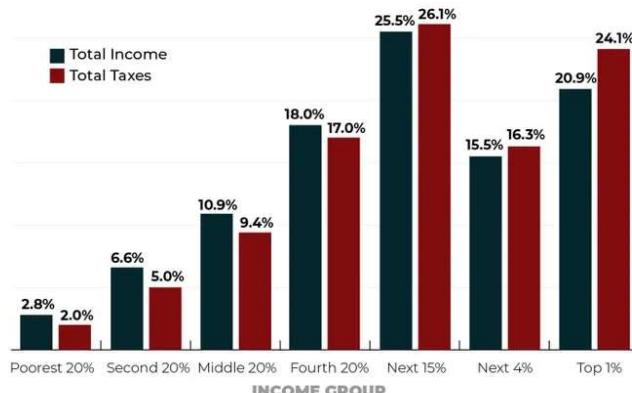
- The question isn't taxes vs spending cuts.
- The question is:
  - Who should bear the burden of solving the problem?
    - Spending cuts will mean primarily lower-income households.
    - Tax increases will mean primarily high-income households.
    - Soc Sec benefit cuts (age limit, actual payments, etc.) will mean primarily lower-income households.



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## What? It's not 40%? No, it's 24.1%.

Shares of Total Taxes Paid by Each Income Group  
Compared to Shares of Total Income in 2019



The 400 highest income households:

Paid an average tax rate of 8%.

Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP) Tax Model, April 2019



<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/fact-check-richest-1-dont-pay-40-of-the-taxes.html>

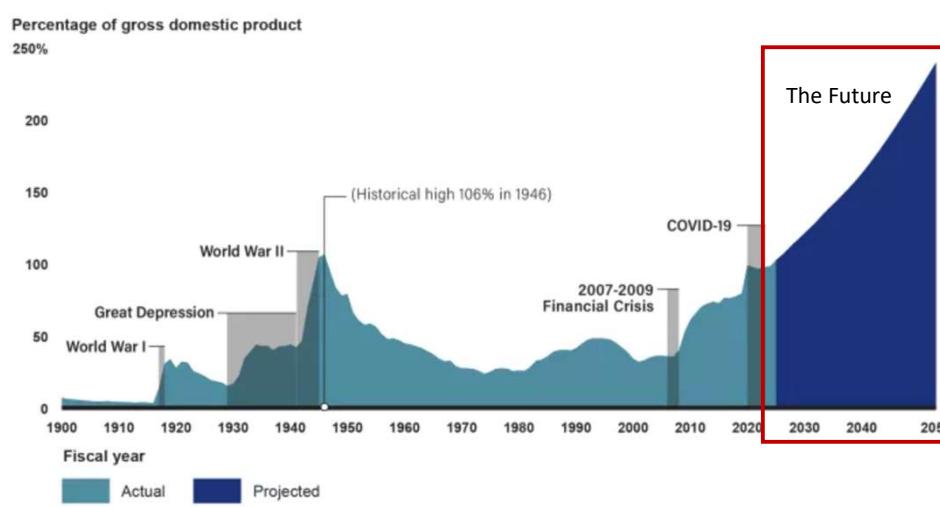
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## IV. Can't Stop...Thinking About Tomorrow

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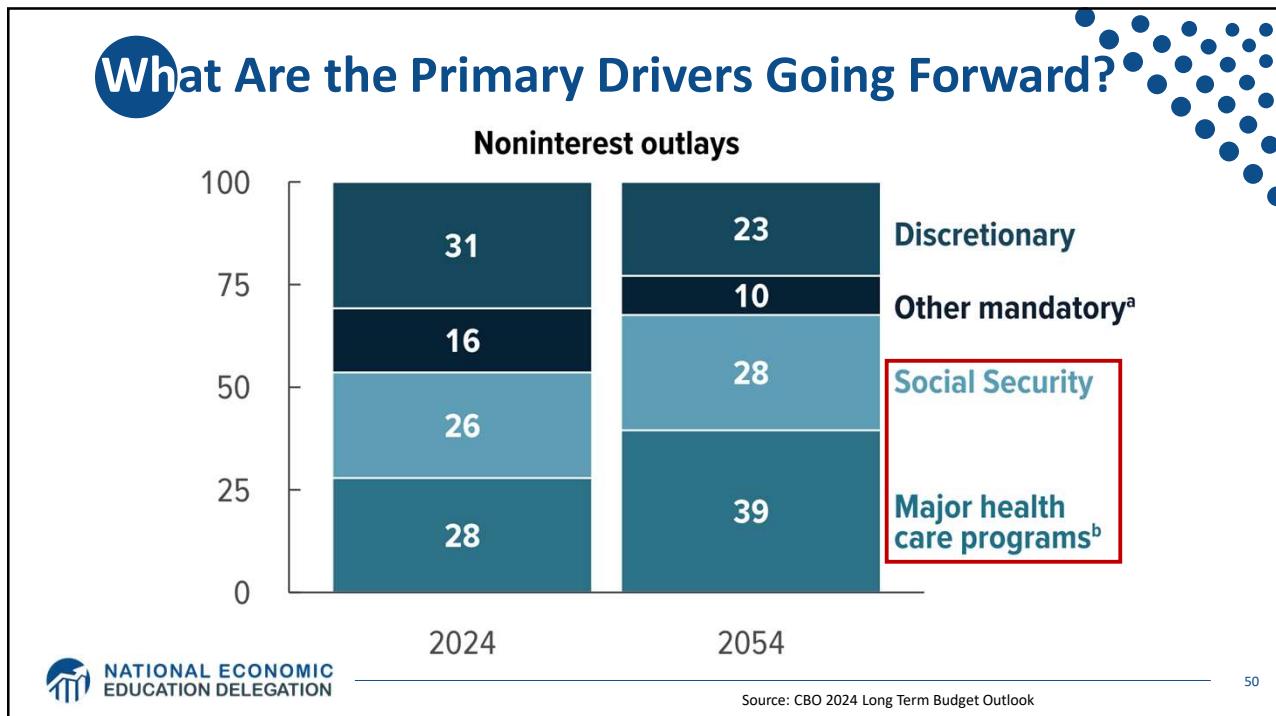
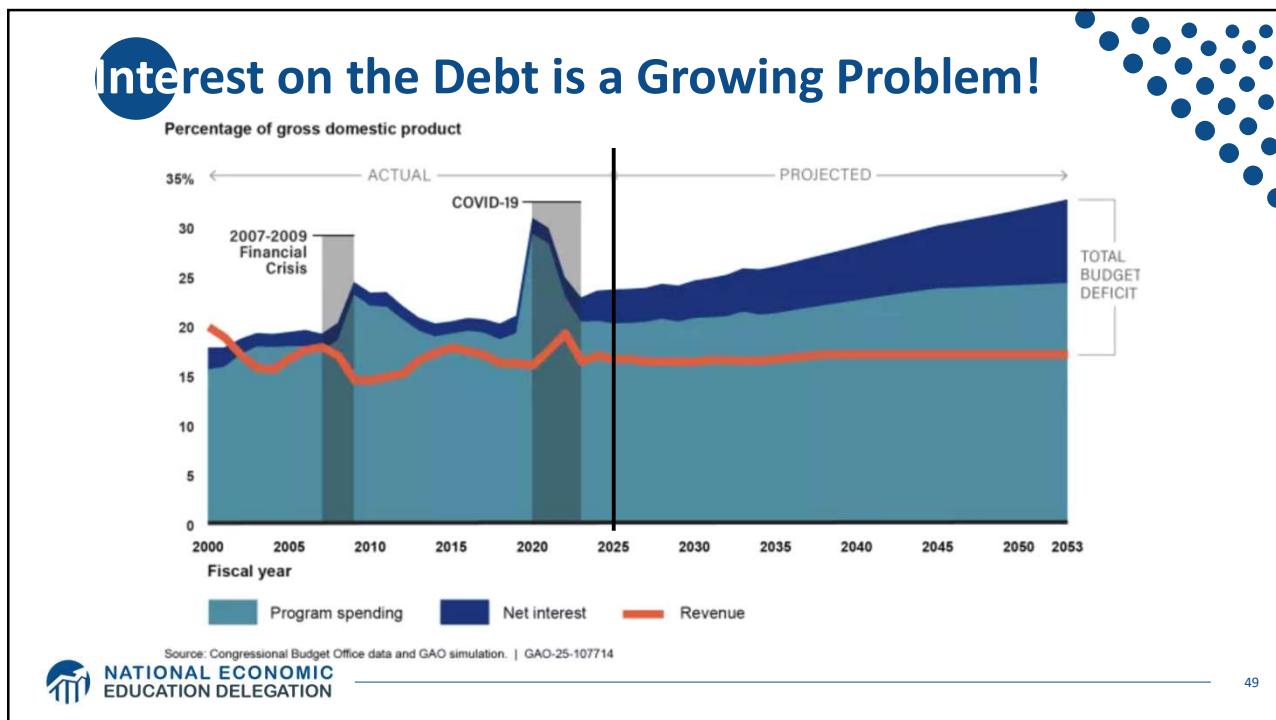
### Now Let's Think About Today and the Future

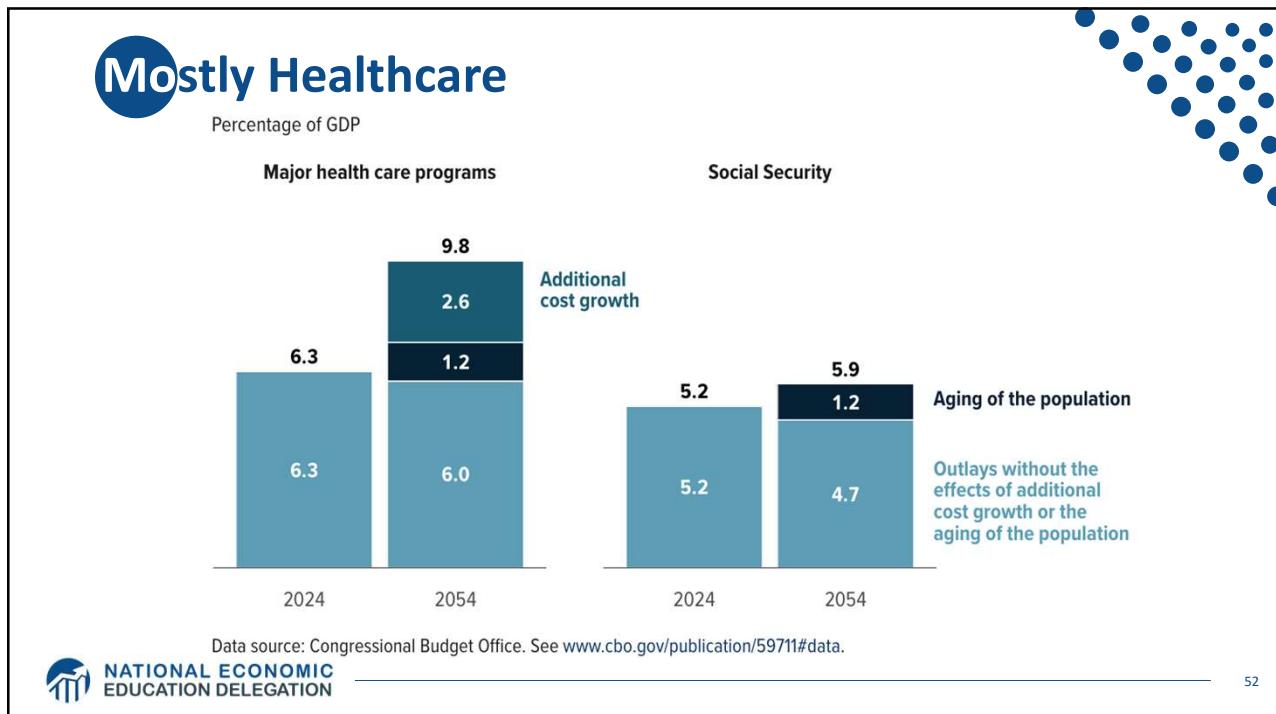
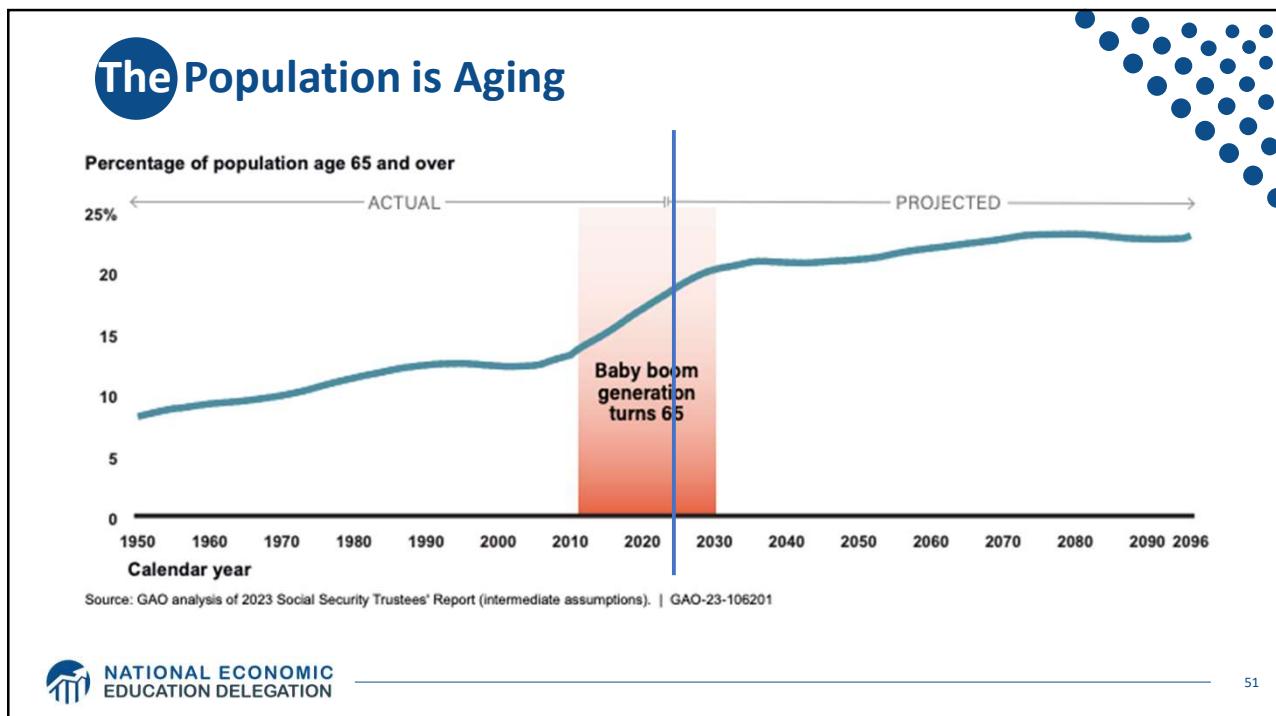


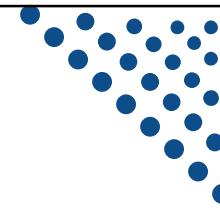
Source: Congressional Budget Office data and GAO simulation. | GAO-25-107714

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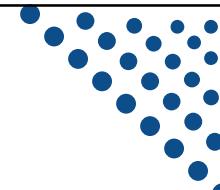
## V. How to Think About the Debt



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### Perspectives on Increased Debt



- **Does debt impose a burden on future generations?**
  - Does it inevitably have to be paid off? No!
- **Government borrowing crowds out private capital and investments.**
  - Weakened by the ability to borrow from other countries.
- **In time, debt service might crowd out other government spending.**
  - Diminishing policy priorities in the budget.
- **Is it reasonable to borrow at low interest rates for investment?**
  - For example, for infrastructure.



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## Not All Borrowing Is Bad!

- **Two good reasons to borrow:**

1. During a temporary crisis
  - Recession
  - War
  - Pandemic
2. Productive public investment
  - Infrastructure
  - Education



- **These deficits did not and do not permanently increase relative debt.**

- Great Depression, WWII, Great Recession, COVID
- Public investment expands GDP and tax revenue



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## Is The Debt a Problem Today?

- **Federal government borrows each month with little difficulty.**

- **Very little evidence of "crowding out."**

- **Interest rates had been low the past decade, but higher now (but coming down) – this is becoming a concern.**

- **So, no, other than the debt ceiling, it's not a problem today.**



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## So, Why Worry About it?

- **If debt becomes too high:**

- Investors might start questioning the creditworthiness of the US government.
  - Problem: Nobody knows how high is too high.
- It becomes more difficult to borrow in times of crisis.
  - War, severe recession
  - “Fiscal space”
    - Impossible to measure how much we have.
    - Clearly, we have less now than in 2007.
- Could start to crowd out investment by consumers and businesses.
  - Not currently a problem. No idea if/when it might become one.
- Could be inflationary.

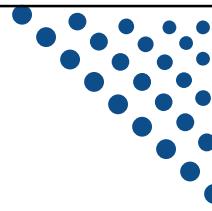
## So, Why Worry About It?

- **If debt continues to grow:**

- Interest payments will grow with it.
  - 13% of spending in 2024.
  - 23% of spending in 2054.
  - Less room for using the budget for policy priorities.
  - 30% of payments go to other countries.
- The longer we wait to address it, the harder and more disruptive addressing it will be.
- Interest rates are increasing.

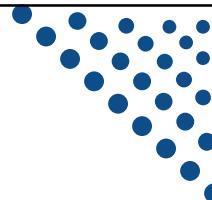


## Growth in Relative Debt



- **Can be scary to....**
  - International investors
  - Bond markets

## Fiscal Crisis, or a Run on the Dollar



- **With an exploding relative debt, what happens if foreigners lose confidence in the stability of the dollar?**
- **CBO (*Federal Debt: A Primer, March 2020*):**  
because the United States currently benefits from the dollar's position as the world's reserve currency and because the federal government borrows in dollars, a financial crisis—similar to those that befell Argentina, Greece, or Ireland—is less likely in the United States.  
Although no one can predict whether or when a **fiscal crisis** might occur or how it would unfold, the risk is almost certainly increased by high and rising federal debt.
- **Crises of confidence, in addition to being unpredictable, happen very quickly.**

## What Is a Fiscal Crisis?

- Increased perception of risk in government debt.
- Potential manifestations:
  - Sudden significant increase in interest rates
  - Plunging exchange rates
- Why?
  - Increased expectation of default
- Potential results:
  - Dramatic budget reforms may be quickly necessary to stave off actual default.
  - Recession from declines in:
    - investment (interest rates)
    - consumption (interest rates)
    - Government spending
  - Higher interest bill on existing debt

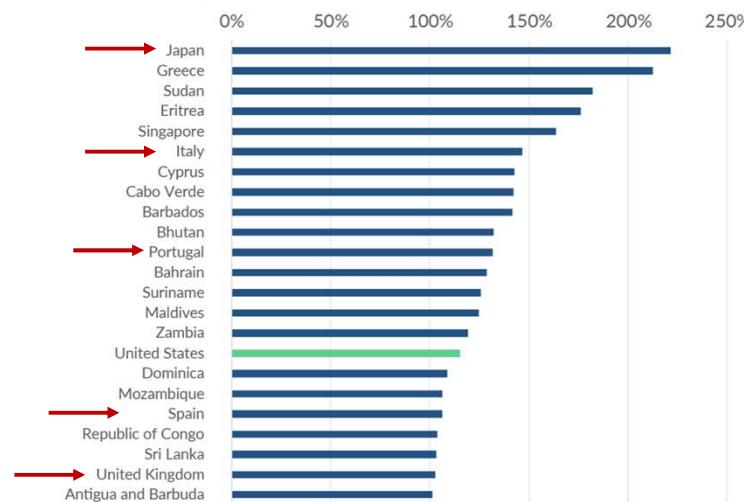


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## Other Countries Have Higher Debt Levels

Most Indebted Countries as of 2021



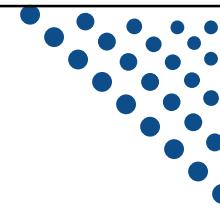
Source: IMF, "Central Government Debt as Percent of GDP"



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Source: <https://taxfoundation.org/blog/us-debt-compares-to-other-countries/>



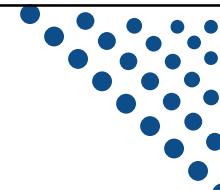
## VI. Summary



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### Major Takeaways: Talking Points



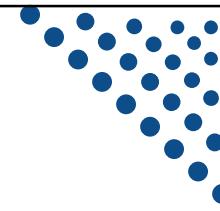
- **The debt is not currently a significant problem.**
- **The current trajectory for the federal debt is unsustainable.**
  - The primary drivers are an aging population, healthcare costs and interest.
- **We must enact plans to reduce the future (primary) deficits.**
  - These are driven by Medicare and Social Security spending.
- **The longer we postpone action, the greater the probability of a “fiscal crisis.”**



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## Bottom-Line Takeaways



- **But high debt levels should not deter:**
  - Productive infrastructure investment.
  - Fiscal responses to crises:
    - “When the house is on fire, you don’t worry about being in a drought; you just put it out.”

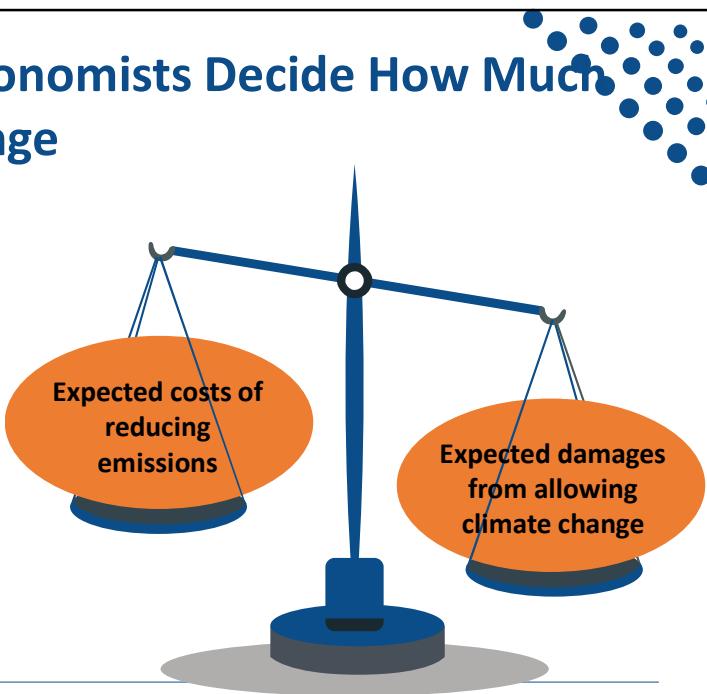
## Bottom Bottom Line

- Question is not **WHETHER** the US will have to act...  
but **WHEN**.
- Some combination of the following **WILL** be necessary:
  - Raising taxes
  - Cutting spending
  - Reining in health-care costs
- **The longer we wait, the harder it will be!**



## Next Week: How Economists Decide How Much to Fight Climate Change

Abating greenhouse gas emissions is costly...  
 ... but without action, climate change damages are even more costly.  
 Goal is not zero emissions, but efficient level that achieves a balance.



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### Thank you!

### Any Questions?

[www.NEEDEcon.org](http://www.NEEDEcon.org)

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