

## Politics Threatens Deficit Compromises

Difficulty:

**A**VERAGE

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### *Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson*

Today's report is about discussions in the U.S. Congress over how to address the question of the federal deficit. What options are being explored? Why are lawmakers having such difficulty finding a solution? How happy are Americans with the Congress?

### *Extension discussion topics*

#### **A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text**

*Introduction = How are lawmakers trying to reduce the deficit? Why are they finding it so difficult to find a compromise solution? Who did we hear from in the report, and what did they say? How do Americans feel about Congress and their inability to solve this problem?*

1. What are the main ways that lawmakers are proposing to reduce the deficit? Which political party is associated with each of the two main ways? Why is it so difficult for them to find a compromise?
  - Cutting spending - the preferred method of the Republican Party for reducing the deficit.
  - Increasing taxes - the preferred method of the Democratic Party for reducing the deficit.
  - Each side really believes very strongly in its position.
  - Lawmakers are afraid of the implications of compromise now, on next year's election.
2. What people do we hear from? What is each person's main message?
  - Kent Conrad (Democratic Senator): Congress really needs to find a solution. The world economy is depending on it.
  - Taylor Nash (university student): Members of Congress on both sides need to compromise.
  - Diane Lim Rogers (Concord Coalition): Americans think lawmakers should be able to work it out.
  - Stuart Rothenberg (political analyst): It's difficult for lawmakers to compromise because they have deep ideological disagreements over what they think is best, and the election coming up next year is not helping. Lawmakers are afraid to compromise in a way that their base will disagree with.
3. What do we learn about Americans' opinions of the job Congress is doing? What is historic about how people feel right now?
  - Congress's approval rating is only at 9%.
  - That is an all-time low. (People have never been so unhappy with Congress.)

What do you think lawmakers can do to make more people happy?

## B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Sovereign (national) debt.*

1. National budget deficits and sovereign debt have been in the news a lot lately. What countries have you heard about in particular? (Greece, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Portugal) What concerns are being discussed in relation to the debt of these countries? Why are other countries worried? (collapse of the eurozone, where the euro is used as currency) (See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European\\_sovereign\\_debt\\_crisis#Greek\\_government\\_funding\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_sovereign_debt_crisis#Greek_government_funding_crisis))
2. What types of solutions are generally proposed in very serious cases of sovereign debt? (Drastic cuts in government spending, serious tax increases, debt restructuring) How do these actions affect the people of a country? Have you seen the reactions of people in Greece, for example?
3. Do you know your own country's level of sovereign debt? Is it a serious problem in your country? If so, how do you think things got to where they are? If not, how has your country avoided this problem?
4. Why do you think so many countries are having trouble with budget deficits right now? Do you think things will turn around if the world economy improves? Are you optimistic that the economic situation will improve?

*OR, Topic = The Supercommittee.*

Find out all you can about the Supercommittee (also written as Super committee) in the U.S. Congress and give an oral presentation of your findings to a partner or to your teacher. (You can start here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supercommittee>)

## C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Reaching a compromise.*

1. Who are the people in your life that you have to make compromises with often? What are the issues that you have to compromise on? How often would you say you make small compromises? Big compromises? What types of issues do you have to compromise on?
2. Do you find it difficult to make compromises with other people? Are there certain people that you find it difficult to make compromises with? Do you know why?
3. What sorts of strategies do you use when trying to find a compromise with someone else? How do you avoid giving up too much in the process of compromise?
4. If you were a politician, do you think it would be difficult to reach compromises with other politicians? Would you use different strategies than the ones that you use in your own life?

## *Audioscript*

Voters flood a congressional hearing room, angered by the prospect of budget cuts to programs that benefit the elderly and the poor.

Lawmakers are struggling to agree on a mix of spending cuts and tax increases to cut the deficit, and failure could have worldwide implications, says Democratic Senator Kent Conrad.

"The world is watching. We know that the economic future of our country and the world rests on decisions that will be made in the next few days."

University student Taylor Nash says it's time for Congress to compromise. "Right now the ideological stances on both the left and the right seem to hamper their ability to come together and make decisions for the country as a whole. It's more of a party war."

He is not alone, says Diane Lim Rogers of the centrist Concord Coalition. "Most Americans look at Congress and they say, 'Hey, just work it out. It's not impossible to work this out. You just have to sort let go of your very ideological positions that you've held onto for the past decade.' "

But deep disagreements over raising taxes and cutting spending have hamstrung the supercommittee, says political analyst Stuart Rothenberg.

"I think people would like the supercommittee to work. The problem is, it's the same problem we've had for many months, is there is, you know, fundamental disagreement between Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, as to who pays the price."

Rothenberg said compromise is difficult because lawmakers are most worried about next year's election.

"If Republicans vote to increase some taxes and their conservative wing gets angry at that, they could have a bloodbath. And if Democrats say 'Okay, well, we will really make significant cuts to Social Security and Medicare', then the liberal wing of the Democratic Party will absolutely start screaming."

Rothenberg and other analysts say lawmakers do have one major incentive to act. A recent public opinion poll found only 9 percent of Americans approve of Congress, an all-time low.

Jim Malone, VOA News, Washington.