

# Deficit Reduction: the States' Priorities

**W**hat's at stake here to me is the future of our country," said Colorado Senator Ellen Roberts. With states already having to cope with balanced budget requirements, they don't need Congress exporting national budget issues and tough policy choices to them, she said.

"The federal government is going to have to reduce the deficit, and we all know where that typically lands—on the states."

Legislators and staff, members of NCSL's bipartisan Budget Deficit Reduction Task Force, came to the nation's Capitol in September to lay out the states' priorities and urge members of the congressional "super committee" working to find \$1.5 trillion in savings not to merely shift the financial burden to the states.

"We're here on Capitol Hill to articulate the perspective of state legislators. This is serious business with tremendously negative consequences if we don't succeed," said New Hampshire Representative Terie Norelli, co-chair of the task force. "Everything has to be on the table."

The NCSL delegation urged members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to examine all possible areas—discretionary spending, entitlements and revenues—for help in reducing the deficit.

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson, who co-chaired the president's Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, shared his insights on achieving comprehensive federal fiscal reform with the task force before its congressional meetings. He offered advice on how states can be an effective and recognized voice in the debate.

States' priorities include no new unfunded federal mandates, relief from Medicaid maintenance of effort requirements along with more flexibility, and passage of the Main Street Fairness Act.

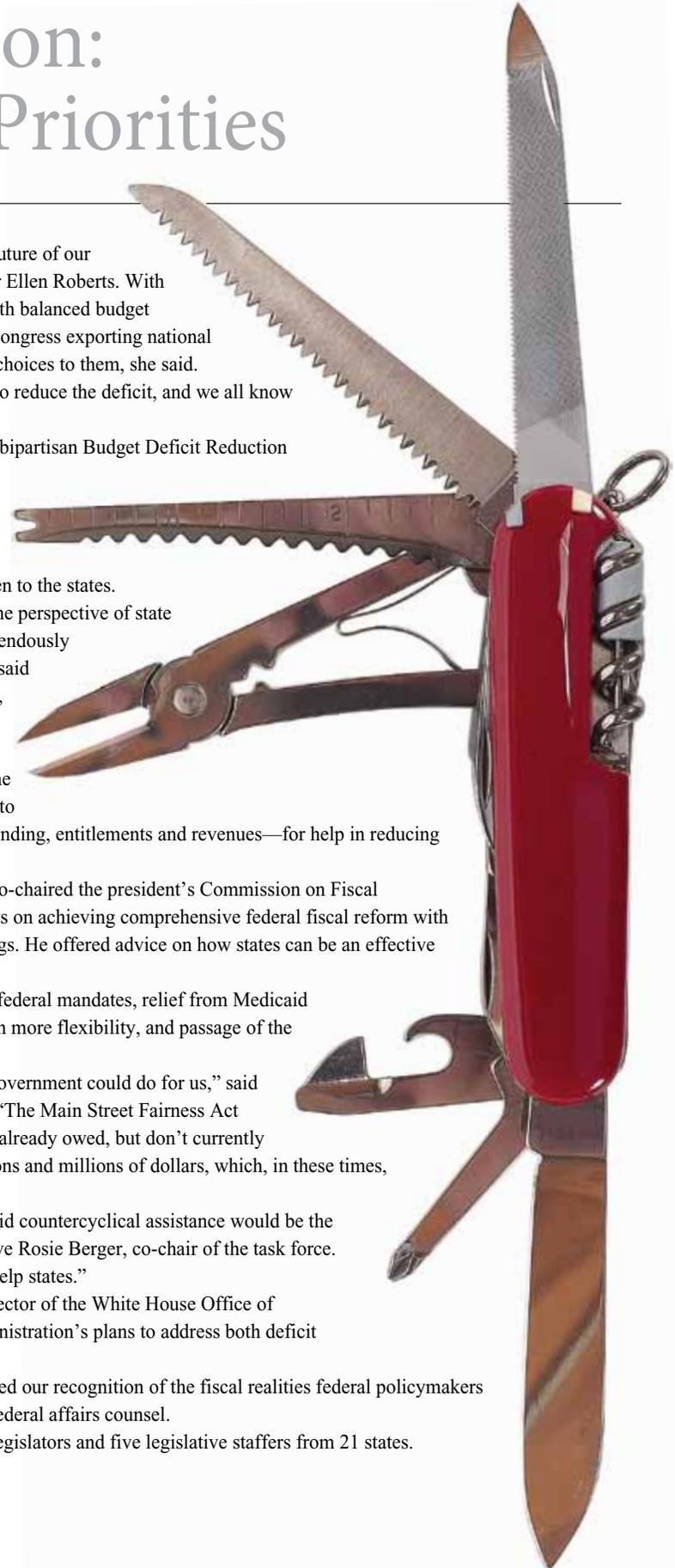
"It's perhaps the easiest thing the federal government could do for us," said Massachusetts Representative Jay Kaufman. "The Main Street Fairness Act will allow us to collect the revenue states are already owed, but don't currently have authority to collect. We're talking millions and millions of dollars, which, in these times, would be extremely helpful."

"The Main Street Fairness Act and Medicaid countercyclical assistance would be the real gets for us," said Wyoming Representative Rosie Berger, co-chair of the task force. "These are two things Congress could do to help states."

The task force also met with Jack Lew, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, to discuss the administration's plans to address both deficit reduction and job creation.

"He understood our message and appreciated our recognition of the fiscal realities federal policymakers are up against," said Michael Bird, NCSL's federal affairs counsel.

NCSL's task force is made up of 23 state legislators and five legislative staffers from 21 states.



# Vote Centers Come of Age

**V**ote centers are cropping up all over the country. Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Utah now permit counties or jurisdictions to use or experiment with them.

What are they? They are an Election Day alternative to neighborhood-based polling places. Unlike a traditional precinct polling place, voters can choose which vote center they'd like to use, regardless of where they live.

Scott Doyle, county clerk in Larimer County, Colo., came up with the idea and the term in 2000, when legally registered voters showed up at the wrong precincts, and were directed to the courthouse as a last recourse. A line formed, and police barred the door at 7 p.m., leaving motivated voters without a ballot.

Doyle, on behalf of the Colorado County Clerks Association, went to the legislature, explained the new concept, and got the innovative idea passed in 2002. The next year, the inaugural 31 vote centers replaced the traditional 143 precincts in Larimer County. By most accounts, the new system worked. Voters didn't need to know their precinct location; fewer poll workers (and thus fewer dollars) were required; and no one was turned away and sent to the courthouse.

Now, eight years after that first experiment in Colorado, many states are embracing the concept. In the world of election policy, that's lightning-fast acceptance.

Why are vote centers so popular? Because they offer these advantages: "convenience, convenience, convenience," says Senator Ron Alting of Indiana, who sponsored successful legislation this year to permit all Indiana counties to use them. Besides convenience, Alting adds that, for local government, "it offers them huge savings."

Among the various election reforms—voter ID requirements, pre-Election Day voting, same-day registration—vote centers seem to be the only nonpartisan reform. "Vote centers have been a huge success," says Alting. "We had unanimous support with Democrats and Republicans. ... It was somewhat of a shock to the General Assembly that something could be so good on both sides."

In addition to greater convenience and significant savings, Rice University political scientist Robert Stein says his research has shown centers increase voter turnout. "Of all the election reforms that have been adopted, this is the only one anybody's been able to find that has an effect on both turnout and cost," he says.

For vote centers to work, counties must have networked electronic poll books that allow workers to look up a voter's registration, get the proper ballot and enter data. And that can add costs. When the right equipment and technology are on hand, however, costs should go down.

The Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute conducted a county-by-county economic analysis of vote centers and found that, compared with precinct voting, vote centers are expected to be cheaper by 29 percent to 54 percent, depending on the county.



## More Credit to Them

Standard & Poor's downgraded the federal government's credit rating for the first time last August from AAA to AA+. S&P defines its AAA rating as "extremely strong capacity to meet financial commitments." Currently, 13 states hold the top AAA rating:

**Delaware**  
**Florida**  
**Georgia**  
**Indiana**  
**Iowa**  
**Maryland**  
**Minnesota**  
**Missouri**  
**Nebraska**  
**North Carolina**  
**Utah**  
**Virginia**  
**Wyoming**

### SL ONLINE

Learn more about vote centers at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).

# Commission Tackles Nuclear Waste

**T**ens of thousands of tons of spent nuclear fuel are stored at more than 70 sites throughout the country. What to do with this fuel, and other highly radioactive waste, is a question that a recently released draft report from the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future attempts to answer.

The report—requested by President Obama in 2010 and set to be finished early next year—calls for a new, independent corporation to carry out a permanent nuclear waste disposal strategy. This would include the development of underground disposal areas and interim storage facilities to collect and house the waste until ready for permanent disposal.

The report recommends that the federal government work closely with state governments and local communities to decide where to build these facilities. To pay for this work, the report calls on Congress to release the \$24 billion now sitting in the Nuclear Waste Fund. This money comes from contributions by state utility ratepayers over the last couple of decades, which has yet to be tapped for waste storage or disposal.

In September, Maryland Delegate Sally Jameson praised the draft report's recommendation that states be involved in all crucial stages of nuclear waste management. Jameson urged the federal government to develop a program for the long-term treatment and disposal of radioactive waste and highlighted the important role state legislatures can and do play in developing nuclear energy policy.

The commission will conduct public meetings on the draft report in October in Boston, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis, and will accept public comments on the draft report through October.



## SL ONLINE

Read State Legislatures' earlier story about the problem of nuclear waste at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).

# Should I Stay or Should I Roll?



**H**ave you ever waited at a red light while on a motorcycle or bicycle wondering if the traffic signal will ever change or if it even knows you're there? This is a common problem for two and three-wheelers, since traffic signals need a fair amount of metal to detect the need to switch.

Since 2002, when Minnesota passed a law allowing bicycles and motorcycles to proceed through stoplights if the traffic control signal is not detecting their presence, grass-roots groups have championed legislation to clarify what can be an unsafe and confusing situation for riders.

Eight states—Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin—have followed Minnesota's lead and now have similar laws that allow a motorcycle, bicycle, scooter, moped or three-wheeled vehicle to go through a red light after a certain amount of time if the intersection is clear. Kansas and Virginia passed their laws this year. North Carolina's law covers only motorcycles. Illinois will become the 10th state if the bill, which has passed both chambers, is signed by the governor.

California and Washington have taken a different route by requiring that traffic signals be able to detect bicycles and motorcycles. The Washington law applies to all future signals, and encourages intersections to mark where riders need to stop to be detected. California's law is similar.

In Ohio, officials at the state Department of Transportation felt the issue did not need to be addressed legislatively, concerned that seeing a two- or three-wheeled vehicle go through a red light would confuse other motorists. They created a hotline to field calls from riders sitting at lights that were not registering their presence.

# Wisconsin Votes

**T**he push to recall the largest number of state legislators in the nation's history—special Wisconsin elections that forced six Republicans and three Democratic senators to face voters back home—cost two Republicans their seats. The midsummer political drama cost more than \$40 million, but it didn't realign Capitol power. Republicans still control the governor's office and both houses of the Legislature.

Public- and private-sector unions spent millions of dollars on ads and get-out-the-vote efforts to oust the six Republican senators who voted for GOP Governor Scott Walker's legislation. It stripped most public employees of the ability to bargain collectively for anything but pay raises tied to inflation, made payment of union dues optional, and increased what all public employees must pay for pensions and health care.

The four Republican senators who survived the Aug. 9 recalls won by an average margin of 54 percent. The three Democratic senators, targeted for recalls because they blocked a vote on Walker's changes by fleeing to Illinois, won recalls by an average margin of 57 percent.

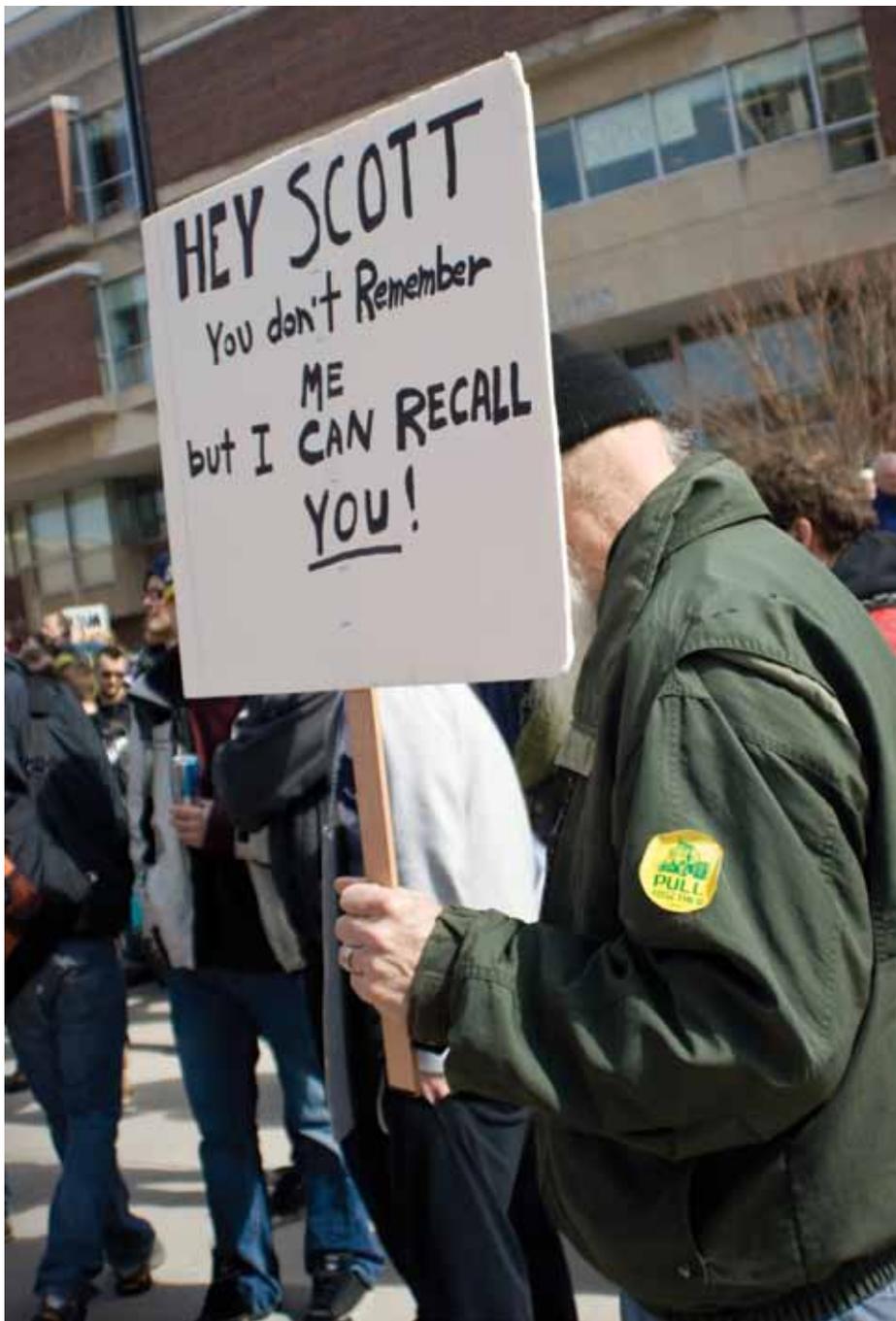
One of those Democratic senators, Jim Holperin, made history. He became the only Wisconsin lawmaker to survive two recalls. He was targeted as a state assemblyman in 1990 in a dispute over tribal spear fishing rights in northern Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, a nonprofit group that monitors campaign spending, estimated \$44 million was spent by all sides, including candidates. They said their messages were drowned out by the tidal wave of negative third-party radio, TV and direct-mail ads, many of which tried to link Republicans to Walker.

The outcome had both parties meekly claiming victory: Democrats claimed angry middle-class voters recalled the two Republicans—Dan Kapanke of La Crosse and Randy Hopper of Fond du Lac. Republicans said the “silent majority” kept them in control of the Senate, although by a slim 17-16 margin.

For his part, Walker vowed to work with Democrats on a fall legislative agenda. But Democratic leaders said the first-term Republican governor hasn't compromised on any of the major changes he pushed through since taking office on Jan. 3. Walker is trying to avoid his own possible recall election next year, something that would occur if 540,208 signatures are filed after the required one-year waiting period.

Meanwhile, up to 50 anti-Walker protesters—dubbed the “Solidarity Singers”—form a noon circle in the Capitol's famed rotunda on weekdays. Their first song? “We Shall Overcome.”



## SL ONLINE

Read State Legislatures' earlier story about the battle in Wisconsin over collective bargaining at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).