



## **Protect senior programs**

### **Candidates won't talk about their plans to cut Social Security and Medicare because they know the public won't support such action**

By Max Richtman

3:31 p.m. EST, February 16, 2012

It's no accident there's been a scarcity of meaningful conversation about what our presidential candidates have planned for Social Security and Medicare. Even in retiree-heavy Florida, details about the candidates' Social Security and Medicare proposals were largely missing in the recent primary election debate. Why? Because plans to privatize or cut Social Security and Medicare under the guise of deficit reduction represent a larger political disconnect between politicians and the average American voter than any other single issue facing candidates in this presidential campaign. These candidates know it — but they won't be able to dodge the real debate much longer.

In poll after poll, it's clear voters of all ages and political persuasions don't support cutting benefits to middle-class Americans who depend on Social Security and Medicare (now or in the future) to repair our ailing economy. There is no other issue that draws this level of nonpartisan support: 94 percent of Democrats, 82 percent of independents and 64 percent of Republicans prefer raising taxes on the richest 2 percent of income earners rather than cutting benefits. Yet, in the very chambers on Capitol Hill where the historic laws to create the health and income security programs for working Americans originated, cutting middle-class benefits remains at the heart of every deficit discussion.

It's not just Republican candidates who will have to address this growing gap between what the vast majority of Americans support and what Washington insiders propose behind closed doors. Democrats have their own explaining to do.

Historically, the Democratic Party has been the party of Social Security and Medicare, and for decades its support among seniors and the middle class reflected that. However, that was then. The erosion of senior support for Democratic candidates has been steady, with Democrats winning seniors' support by just 7 points in 1996 and losing it by 21 points in 2010, according to our polling. The party that created Social Security and Medicare has lost the confidence of many of those Americans who understand, firsthand, the value of these vital programs and who want elected leaders who will fight to strengthen them.

Democrats are losing this battle because, simply put, some of them have signaled they are willing to bargain away earned benefits to pay for Washington's economic mistakes. Democrats have an opportunity in this year's election to regain lost ground by drawing a clear line in the sand in defense of the core American values of hard work, fairness and compassion embodied in our nation's most successful programs. Will they take that stand?

Over the years, some conservatives have also successfully co-opted the debate by promising Americans they'll "preserve" and "strengthen" these vital programs — while actually proposing benefit cuts, Social Security private accounts or vouchers for seniors in Medicare. We don't have to destroy these programs to "save" them, yet that's exactly the strategy wrapped in campaign-speak by candidates like Mitt Romney, who promised Florida seniors he'd "never go after Medicare." Mr. Romney supports proposals like House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's plan, which turns Medicare into a voucher program, destroying traditional Medicare as we know it and sending the bill to seniors. American voters expect more than the double-speak offered by political candidates who say "reform" when they mean "cut" and "preserve" when they mean "privatize."

Our nation's leaders have an opportunity to regain the confidence of American voters by saying what they mean and meaning what they say in a full-throated defense against attacks on America's social safety net. It's a simple argument for fairness and economic reason. Voters are tired of false choices in which benefits for middle-class Americans are traded away in closed-door deals to protect tax breaks millionaires don't need. America's seniors want Washington to get its fiscal house in order, but they also know cutting benefits to those still struggling with skyrocketing health care costs, diminished home values, unemployment, decimated savings and a shaky economy is not shared sacrifice. While some in Washington continue to argue we can't afford Social Security and Medicare, we can't afford to lose these financial stabilization programs. Social Security alone provides \$696 billion to our national economy each year through earned benefits provided to 54 million retirees, disabled workers, survivors and children. It's fiscal folly to cut the very programs keeping millions of average Americans afloat while tax breaks for the wealthy, according to the National Priorities Project, drain \$11.6 million from the Treasury every hour.

Americans still believe in the dream of economic security. They know Social Security and Medicare are vital parts of that dream. What's different in this election year is that middle-class Americans are battle-worn from economic recession and tired of hearing about sacrifice when that's what they've been doing for years. That's why the party that takes up their cause and reassures them that someone is fighting to protect their earned Social Security and Medicare benefits will win this election. Conversely, that means political candidates who hope to use the same distortions to manipulate voters into thinking there is nothing wrong with privatization as "preservation" and benefits cuts as "reform" had better be prepared for a sacrifice of their own come November.

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