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The Great Divide: Elite and Mass Opinion about Social Security

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Abstract

Often called “the third rail of American politics,” Social Security was once seen as untouchable. This paper shows that this political wisdom has changed and uses the theoretical framework of competitive counterframing to describe the breakdown in consensus among elites during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidential administrations. Has this breakdown in consensus at the elite level weakened the long-standing support of the public? And has the increasing economic inequality between the wealthy in the U.S. and the less affluent been translated into distinctive policy preferences by income? Overall, the researchers find that the public at large remains supportive of Social Security, but the small, yet widening, gaps between the views of the affluent and low-income Americans bear watching carefully.

Politicians in the United States used to have a saying about the politics of Social Security: "Touch it and you die." Often called "the third rail of American politics," Social Security was seen as untouchable. Although policymakers had no difficulty proposing incremental *expansions* to the program, criticisms of the program and suggestions to contract it in any way were considered political suicide. This political wisdom has changed. The discussion about Social Security at the elite level has gone from the politics of consensus in which there was considerable support for Social Security and relatively few publicly expressed differences to what we call the politics of dissensus where disagreement is heated.

In this chapter, we first discuss the breakdown in consensus among elites during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations and then ask whether the break in consensus at the elite level has weakened the long-standing support of the public. These questions about Social Security policymaking address two important theoretical questions concerning the relationship between elite opinion and public opinion. The first has to do with how *competitive political rhetoric* at the elite level affects citizens' ability to form stable and coherent preferences. The second has to do with whether the increasing economic inequality between the wealthy in the U.S. and the less affluent has been translated into distinctive policy preferences, especially having to do with Social Security, and if so, what that might mean for politics and policy change.

In regard to the role of political rhetoric, a framing effect occurs when a communication changes people's attitudes toward an object (e.g., a policy or program) by increasing or decreasing considerations about that object (Druckman, 2001, pp. 226-231). Research has shown that changes in the way issues are framed can have powerful effects on people's opinions (Chong and Druckman, 2007). However, political scientists are just beginning to explore what happens to citizens' views when frames about policy issues are in *competition* with each other, countering each other – a condition that we show has occurred in regard to Social Security.

A counterframe is a frame that opposes an earlier effective frame, and Chong and Druckman's theory of counterframing effects holds that a counterframe comes later in time than the initial frame, advocates a position on the issue that is contrary to the earlier frame, and comes into being because opponents to the initial frame have an incentive to counterframe to change the original opinions on the issue (Chong and Druckman, 2013). Recent research shows counterframing effects depend on the extent to which people hold strong or weak opinions. We shall show in this chapter that over the course of the last two decades Social Security has been the object of competitive political rhetoric and counterframing. Despite this, as we shall show, for now, at least, citizens' support overall has been surprisingly stable.

The second theoretical issue that we shall address is particularly troubling, and that is whether the increasing economic inequality is related to policy preferences and ultimately, perhaps, to political influence. The Occupy Wall Street movement that began in the fall of 2011 called attention to the growing inequality in the United States at about the same time as reports from the Congressional Budget Office (2011) showed that economic inequality was indeed growing and that the top 1 percent of wage earners more than doubled their share of the nation's income over the last three decades.[1] The question is whether policy preferences of the wealthy are in fact different from those of other citizens and if it matters. In the last decade, political scientists have begun to address these questions and their answer appears to be yes. In a massive study comparing the responsiveness of policy to the preferences of citizens with low incomes, moderate incomes, and incomes in the top ten percent of all incomes, Gilens (2012) found that policy is more responsive to those with high incomes than those with low or moderate incomes.

Given Gilens' findings, a survey by Page, Bartels, and Seawright (2012) is cause for concern. They compared the preferences of the top one percent of income and wealth holders in the Chicago area to those of American citizens in general. They find large discrepancies between the policy preferences of the top one percent and those of Americans in general. In particular, they find that the wealthy – at least those in the Chicago area -- are more likely than the general public to be concerned about budget deficits and to favor cutting social programs, especially Social Security and health care. They conclude that, "if policy makers do weigh citizens' policy preferences differentially based on their income or wealth, the results will not only significantly violate democratic ideals of political equality, but will also affect the substantive contours of American public policy" (p. 68).

Democracy, it is said, should represent the responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens (Dahl, 1961). But these studies challenge the practice of this notion in the United States. We will examine not only the views of the public in general but also groups within the public by income and ask whether support for Social Security has changed over time among those at different income levels. We point to some evidence that support among those with high incomes, though still high, appears to be waning – and waning more than support among other subgroups defined by ideology, party identification, and age.

From Consensus to Dissensus among Elites: Frames and Counterframes

Social Security, officially Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI), is clearly an important program. It paid benefits to some 57 million people in 2012 and is the major source of income for 52 percent of aged beneficiary couples and 74 percent of single aged beneficiaries (U. S. Social Security Administration, 2013, p. 8). The asset reserves of the combined OASDI Trust Funds increased by $54 billion in 2012 to a total of $2.73 trillion (OASDI Trustees, 2013). The program currently has a short-term funding surplus but a long-term budget deficit, and that divergence is what some analysts call "the policymaking dilemma at the heart of Social Security politics" (Weaver, 2012, p. 127). Specifically, according to the 2013 OASDI Trustees Report, until 2033 Social Security can pay 100 percent of benefits, but beginning in 2033 it can only pay 77 percent of benefits if Congress does not act before then. Policy elites disagree about how severe the problem is and about what should be done so that in 2033 the program can pay 100 percent of benefits. Social Security opponents see the projected funding imbalance as a hook on which to hang a major overhaul of the Social Security program, while Social Security proponents see the projected funding imbalance as cause for some small incremental reforms to make the program sound for the rest of the century.

Support for Social Security is often said to rest on two pillars of public opinion: (a) a belief in the purpose of the program and a commitment to it and (b) a belief that it is an affordable public expenditure (Marttila, 2005; Cook and Barrett, 1992). Critics often underpin their arguments for change on the charge that the public is losing confidence in Social Security and that the lowered confidence will produce erosions in public support, reflecting a loss of belief in the purpose of the program. Claims of bankruptcy further buttress their arguments for change. Economist Paul Krugman (2013a) cites the work of Polish economist Michal Kalecki to explain how some policy elites have used “confidence” as a tool of intimidation to put a “fear factor” into public discourse about policy issues. In fact, reducing confidence was part of the so-called “guerilla warfare” strategy proposed by Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation analysts Stuart Butler and Peter Germanis (1983) to undermine support for Social Security, a strategy that the two organizations appear to have followed since then.

Their aim was to replace Social Security with private accounts, and their strategy was to *re-frame* the image of Social Security by presenting it as a political problem. Thus, they set out to alter the political dynamics around support for it, realizing that this would take time. They first acknowledged that there was a “firm coalition” behind Social Security that would have to be divided and then outlined a new coalition that would need to be put in its place. To translate their strategy into action, they laid out four steps: (a) detach current and upcoming beneficiaries from the coalition behind Social Security by assuring them their benefits would be paid; (b) add young people to the new coalition against Social Security by educating them about what a bad deal Social Security is for them and thus undermine their confidence in it; (c) expand the IRA system to make it a private prototype of Social Security, thus demonstrating how people could better use their payroll taxes; and (d) convince the business community and financial institutions that they stand to gain by privatizing Social Security.

Since 1983, Social Security critics have undertaken each of these steps, some successfully, some not so successfully. Pushes for change have occurred in three major periods: during the Clinton administration, the George W. Bush administration, and most recently, the Obama administration. During each of these periods, politicians and interest groups have competed to frame policies in terms that support their positions, much as the counterframing theory that Chong and Druckman (2013) lay out.

Framing Social Security during the Clinton Administration

Up until the 1980s, the political consensus among both elites and the public around Social Security was strong, buttressed by what David Ellwood (1988) calls its "brilliant" conception that avoided the political "conundrums" associated with welfare: "it managed to reinforce the values of autonomy, work, family, and community" (p. 25) by being universal, by linking benefits to past work, and by being explicitly supportive of families. However, that consensus among elites began to break down during the 1980s, and the competitive framing of Social Security came to a head during the second Clinton administration.

Framing Social Security as a program in crisis, policy elites in Congress began to point to the public's loss of confidence in the future financial viability of the program, especially young people. In fact, Cook, Barabas, and Page (2002) found that the largest proportion of claims by policymakers invoking public opinion about Social Security during the Clinton administration had to do with the public's loss of confidence in the long-term financial viability of Social Security. Why so many claims about falling public confidence? Many policymakers presumably wanted to strengthen calls to action on

Social Security by emphasizing that they were responding to the worries of ordinary Americans. However, what some were also doing, whether they realized it or not, was following the "guerilla warfare" strategy against Social Security laid out by Cato Institute and Heritage Foundations analysts to undermine support for Social Security by undermining confidence in it.

Using the problem of Social Security as a program about to go bankrupt, a number of Republicans proposed privatization as a solution. For example, Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) was particularly forceful: "Personal retirement accounts would harness the power of private markets and compound interest, giving individuals ownership of their retirement savings" (1998).

In line with the strategy they laid out in 1983, the Cato Institute continued its planned attack on Social Security. Cato commissioned a survey, and Cato's Michael Tanner (1996) framed Social Security as a program in crisis and quoted extensively from the results to show that the public wanted privatization: "More than two-thirds of all voters, 69 percent, would support transforming the program into a privatized mandatory savings program. . . . More than three-quarters of younger voters support privatization. As this public support emerges into the political process, Social Security will no longer be the third rail of American politics" (p. 5)

President Clinton mounted a sharp defense of Social Security. He framed the program as much loved and central to the lives of America's families. Clinton argued that it simply had a long range funding imbalance – a dilemma that could be easily solved. As one of us has shown elsewhere (Cook, Barabas, and Page 2002), President Clinton paid more attention to Social Security in his public addresses than any of his predecessors. In 1998, he discussed Social Security in 225 public speeches, weekly radio addresses, press conferences, and so forth, and this high level of attention continued in 1999, when he had something to say about Social Security in 230 separate addresses. Why? One reason was political. The Democrats lost control of both the House and the Senate in 1994, the most disastrous first term loss for a president since Herbert Hoover in 1930 (Barone and Ujifusa 1995). In his first term, his health care plan, economic package, and crime package were liabilities, and he needed a hardcore Democratic Party issue around which to unify the party and the public. Clinton chose to capitalize on Social Security.

A second reason for his increased attention to Social Security had to do with policy proposals and the budget. President Clinton now anticipated a budget surplus, and the Republicans in Congress knew it. They wanted to use the surplus to cut taxes, a popular move. Clinton needed to find a way to co-opt this Republican proposal with a proposal that would garner even more public approval. Clinton's heightened attention to Social Security in the last few years of his presidency can be seen in the promises he made early in his State of the Union Address in 1998:

> "Now, if we balance the budget for next year, it is projected that we'll then have a sizable surplus in the years that immediately follow. What should we do with this projected surplus? I have a simple four-word answer: Save Social Security first. [Applause] Thank you. Tonight I propose that we reserve 100 percent of the surplus – that's every penny of any surplus – until we have taken all the necessary measures to strengthen the Social Security system for the 21st century" (Clinton, 1998).

With those words, President Clinton embarked on a public mission to make Social Security reform a lasting legacy for his administration. In 1998, he held a series of town meetings around the country to discuss Social Security, and in December of 1998, he held the first ever White House Conference on Social Security. In his January 1999 State of the Union speech, Clinton presented a detailed proposal, calling for legislation that would transfer 62 percent of the budget surplus that was then anticipated to occur over the next 15 years to bolster the Social Security trust fund. Second, he said he would go along with Republicans and others who wanted to invest part of Social Security in the stock market but that it would only be the surplus that would be invested. Third, he proposed using 11 percent of the projected surplus to create a program outside of Social Security, Universal Savings Accounts (USAs), "to help every working American build a nest egg to meet their retirement needs." With this last proposal, he demonstrated there was an alternative to the proposals of several Republicans in Congress to revamp the current system by diverting payroll taxes to private accounts. A final element was the elimination of the earnings test for Social Security recipients who want to work.

President Clinton's political difficulties from the Monica Lewinsky affair derailed his major Social Security proposals for the use of the budget surplus and closed the window of opportunity for change. The only one of his proposals to be passed into legislation was the the elimination of the earning tax. And it, of course, did nothing to strengthen the long-term financial viability of Social Security in the way he had hoped by the use of the budget surplus. However, President Clinton *did* succeed in advocating for Americans a very positive frame about Social Security as a successful program that the

Democratic Party prioritizes and would go to great lengths to maintain intact for the future with no “radical” changes like privatization.

Framing Social Security during the George W. Bush Administration

The framing battle continued in the George W. Bush administration. Like President Clinton before him, President Bush waited until his second term as president to make Social Security a centerpiece of his domestic policy agenda. He paved the way with the appointment of the *President’s Commission to Strengthen Social Security* in 2001. The sixteen-member commission included eight Republicans and eight Democrats, but all members who served had to meet Bush’s criteria that they favor partial privatization of Social Security – i.e., at least *partially* replacing Social Security with individual accounts. Not surprisingly, then, the Commission’s central recommendation was a plan to divert a portion of Social Security payroll taxes into private accounts (President’s Commission, 2001).

Despite the Commission’s report in December 2001, Bush spoke infrequently about Social Security in his first presidential term. Part of the reason probably had to do with the stock market decline that had begun in March 2000 and provided a poor context for talk of diverting Social Security taxes into equities. In addition, after September 11, 2001, foreign policy captured his attention.

In the first year of his second term in office, Bush made reframing the Social Security debate and reforming Social Security the major item on his domestic agenda. Why? First, Republicans have long wanted to disassociate Social Security from the Democratic Party. Social Security is one of the most popular programs in the United States and has been associated with the Democrats since its enactment in 1935. For example, when Americans are asked in surveys which political party they have most confidence in to manage Social Security, they say the Democratic Party (Campbell, 2003; Cook and Jacobs, 2001). If Bush could convince Americans that Social Security was bankrupt and could convince Congress to enact his plan to redirect Social Security payroll taxes into individual personal accounts, then he would have radically altered Social Security and put a Republican frame on it.

Second, plans to radically alter Social Security had been under discussion in some Republican circles for many years. As described earlier, the Cato Institute had been following the strategy that called for "guerrilla warfare against both the current Social Security system and the coalition that supports it" (Butler and Germanis, 1983, p. 552).

President Bush's high prioritization of Social Security became clear in his 2005 State of the Union address when he presented what the *New York Times* called his "two big ideas" – "stay the course in Iraq and change the course of Social Security" (p. 26). Bush framed the Social Security system as "unsustainable," "in crisis," and "bankrupt." In his address, he described his Social Security plan this way: "Here is why personal accounts are a better deal. Your money will grow over time at a greater rate than anything the current system can deliver – and your account will provide money for retirement over and above the check you will receive from Social Security." (Bush, 2005a, p. 4). The metaphor he used was the "ownership society" where every citizen owns personal accounts.

Similar to President Clinton after his 1998 State of the Union Address, President Bush went on what was billed as a "60-day 60-city Social Security tour" after his 2005 State of the Union Address in order to sell his framing of Social Security and his vision of public accounts. He even visited the office of the federal Bureau of Public Debt in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and posed next to a file cabinet that contained the $1.7 trillion in Treasury securities that make up the Social Security trust fund. In a speech later that day, he said, "There is no trust fund. Just IOUs that I saw firsthand" (*New York Times*, 2005b; see also Bush, 2005b).

One wonders if the president realized that if the trust fund could not be counted on, neither could the credit of the United States to the many foreign countries that hold United States bonds. An editorial in the *New York Times* chided his derisive comments as irresponsible: "Fortunately, the governments, institutions, and individuals who hold U.S. debt can tell a publicity stunt from a policy statement. Still, casting aspersions on a basic obligation of the U.S. government is insulting and irresponsible" (*New York Times*, 2005, p. 21).

Table 1 shows a summary of the two frames about Social Security that were pitted against each other. President Bush offered a clear counterframe to the Democrats' framing of Social Security – a counterframe that brought together the definition of the problem, the solutions, and underlying values into one package: Social Security is a program that is going bankrupt and that has lost the trust of the American public, but partially privatizing the system by allowing people to divert their payroll taxes into individual accounts will give Americans a sense of ownership, promoting the American values of freedom of choice and individualism.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Although the Bush administration devoted considerable attention to trying to re-frame Social Security, issue counter framing by opponents of the Bush approach were ultimately successful (Weaver, 2012; Campbell and King, 2010). As Campbell and King (2010) have shown, labor unions, AARP, and congressional Democrats stood in unified opposition to individual accounts, and congressional Republicans did not sufficiently support the president. The counter frames emphasized three themes: the riskiness of investing in the stock market, the high administrative costs of diverting payroll taxes into private accounts, and the exaggerated claims and "scare mongering" of the Bush administration (Weaver, 2012). Well funded and aggressive campaigns by both AARP and organized labor hammered home a very different – but very familiar and traditional – framing of the program: Social Security as a successful program that only needs minor incremental changes to strengthen it for the foreseeable future.

Framing Social Security during the Obama Administration

President Barack Obama entered office in 2009 in a quite different fiscal and political environment than his predecessor. Rather than a large surplus, Obama inherited a large deficit; rather than squeaking into office thanks to the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, he was elected president by 53 percent to 46 percent, the biggest presidential victory in 20 years (Barone and Cohen, 2009). However, his substantial electoral victory did not ease his relationship with Congressional Republicans who quickly became the party of "no," with the express aim of making Obama a one-term president (McConnell, as quoted in Garrett, October 23, 2010). They did not succeed in that goal, but they have succeeded in setting up roadblocks to Obama's initiatives (Hacker and Pierson, 2010).

To sidestep dealing directly with the deficit for the first two years of his presidency, Obama appointed a bipartisan deficit reduction commission – the National

Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform -- that would report after the November 2010 election and was headed by Republican Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles. Despite the fact that the Report acknowledged that Social Security did not contribute to the deficit, it recommended several changes: switching to the so-called chained CPI that the Report argued to be a “more accurate” measure of inflation for calculating cost of living adjustments; raising the earnings ceiling on which Social Security payroll taxes are paid; gradually increasing the eligibility age for full Social Security receipt to 68 in 2050 and 69 in 2075; and gradually moving to a “more progressive” benefit formula that slows future benefit growth, particularly for higher earners. The way these recommendations were framed in the report and reported publicly made it appear that the Social Security program was linked to the deficit and responsible for part of it.

The 18-member committee vote did not reach the “super majority” 14-vote threshold required to endorse the plan formally and have it sent to Congress for their consideration. Nonetheless, what has become known as “the Simpson-Bowles plan” received considerable media attention and continues to be discussed as a blueprint for change, including changes in Social Security. Since Bowles and Simpson continued to lead the cheerleading for the plan and helped form two organizations that are working for the plan – the Moment of Truth Project and the Campaign to Fix the Debt, the plan’s recommendations remained very much alive and continue to be debated – in particular, raising the age of eligibility for Social Security and converting the cost of living adjustment (COLA) that has long been used into a chained consumer price index (chained CPI). A chained CPI takes into account alternative purchases people can make in order to avoid good and services whose costs are rising quickly. Thereby, it reduces cost of living adjustments.

Thus, during the Obama administration, Social Security seems to be in the middle of what could be called the *politicization of the deficit* – that is, political and ideological interests shaping the evidence about the deficit in an effort to advance predetermined ideological agendas (Krugman, 2013b). For example, even though, the Bowles-Simpson report was clear that Social Security does not contribute to the deficit, Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) explicitly linked the two: "Everyone knows that we can't solve the debt crisis without making structural changes to our entitlement programs. You know it. I know it. President Obama knows it" (Boehner 2011). The framing about Americans' lack of confidence in Social Security was used to show structural changes were crucial. For example, Representative Jeb Hensarling (R-TX) said on CNBC: "The trustees of Social Security and Medicare say they are going broke; they will not be here for the next generation" (Hensarling, 2010). Governor of Texas Rick Perry made the point even more dramatically, "When you look at Social Security, it's broke. My kids, 27 and 34, they know this is a Ponzi scheme" (Perry, 2010).

In 2013 for the first time, President Obama recommended a change in Social Security that the Congressional Republicans had called for. The President's Fiscal Year 2014 budget contains a switch from the COLA to the chained CPI, a change that reduces annual increases in the cost of living adjustment in Social Security benefits.[2] This was a concession the president made to bring Republicans to the table on new tax revenues and in explaining the introduction of the chained CPI in the Budget, OMB made that compromise explicit (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2013).

Obama's Budget was met with criticisms from both Democrats and Republicans. In speeches on the House floor, many Democrats criticized it as a way to shrink Social Security payments to seniors, and eighty-two House Democrats introduced a resolution (H.Con.Res.34) that rejected the president's proposal (Kasperowicz, 2013). The resolution argues that Social Security does not contribute to the deficit and therefore the government should not be looking to Social Security as a funding mechanism to cut the deficit. Nonetheless, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi stood with the President in his attempt to offer a compromise to the Republicans as a way to reach tax reform as did the highly respected Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2013).

Raising the age of eligibility for full Social Security benefits has not reached the legislative stage, and during his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama said he opposed any further increase in the retirement age (Beland and Wadden 2012). Nonetheless, it remains on the policy agenda for discussion, and in May 2013 it was discussed in a hearing on Social Security held by the House of Representative's Ways and Means Committee (2013).

At this writing, it is not known whether the final 2014 Budget will include Social Security or not, but it is clear that Social Security has been put on the table as a part of a grand bargain with Republicans. What is much less clear is whether even that would be enough for the Republican Party – especially its Tea Party wing – to compromise on tax reform; whether it is wise for President Obama to play politics in this way with Social Security; and whether or not casting Social Security into the politicization of the deficit hurts the image of Democrats as the party who can most effectively handle Social Security. The larger question for the rest of this chapter is the effect on public opinion of two decades of political wrangling about Social Security between the Republicans and Democrats and the increasing politicization of Social Security during the Obama administration in the quest to reduce the deficit.

Support for Social Security

Social Security has often been called one of America's most successful and popular programs, and standard political science textbooks often use it as the poster child for a government program that draws high levels of support (Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, 2012, pp. 470-1). After more than two decades of debate and competitive counterframing about Social Security, has that support weakened? Has the level of confidence in the future of Social Security declined? Given the various changes proposed to deal with the long term funding imbalance in the program, which changes, if any, do Americans support?

Using data from NORC's General Social Survey, we operationalize public support as believing that we are spending either the right amount or too little on Social Security. Specifically, the question asked of a representative sample of the public was: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on Social Security?"

As can be seen in Figure 1, tremendous support exists for Social Security. Since 1984, 90 percent or more of respondents report that the United States spends too little or about the right amount on Social Security. In 2012, the most recent year in which the question was asked, 92 percent of respondents favored maintaining or increasing program funding. When we separate the support variable and raise the threshold by considering only whether Americans think that we spend too little on Social Security, we find that the majority of Americans think that we do not spend enough on this program. In 17 of the 19 years in which the question was asked since 1984, the majority of respondents said too little was spent on Social Security.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In the introduction to the chapter, we asked whether the increasing economic inequality between the wealthy and the less affluent in the United States has been translated into distinctive policy preferences about Social Security. To answer that question, we reanalyzed NORC's biennial General Social Surveys from 2006 to 2012 and broke down the income data into five categories that run from under $30,000 to over $150,000. The $150,000+ is the top-coded category in the GSS data and represents the top 8 to 9 percent of income groups in the U.S. Although this is quite high by the usual standards of general-population surveys, it is not the top 1 percent that Page, Bartels, and Seawright (2012) studied in Chicago; nonetheless, the data in Table 2 allow us to begin to see the extent to which the view of very affluent Americans are deviating from others at lower income levels.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

First, Table 2 shows that in each of the years we examined, affluent Americans are significantly less likely than those in other income groups to think that too little is being spent on Social Security. In 2012, 40 percent of affluent Americans said too little is being spent compared to 64 percent of those with incomes under $30,000. Second, the affluent are significantly more likely to report that too much is being spent. They are three times as likely as low income Americans to say too much is being spent. Third, the percentage of affluent Americans saying too much is being spent is higher in both 2010 and 2012 than in 2006. Despite these trends, it is important to keep in mind the bigger picture that Table 2 shows: a majority of the affluent – four out of five -- still support Social Security as measured by those who say that either too little or the right amount is being spent. On the other hand, these divergences by income – divergences that appear to be growing -- are cautionary in that they may be an indication that the priorities of the rich are beginning to change and should be watched.

How about other subgroups of Americans as divided by age, ideology, and party identification? Have differences by other subgroups diverged as much as they have by income between affluent Americans and those with lower incomes? As reported earlier in this chapter, one of the multiple prongs of the Cato Institute's and Heritage Foundation's 1983 "guerrilla warfare" strategy against Social Security was to reduce young people's confidence in the future of Social Security (Butler and Germanis, 1983), and they appear to have succeeded in that aim (Cook, Barabas, and Page, 2002). However, the question is: Has young people's lowered confidence been translated into their withdrawal of support for Social Security? The first panel of Table 3 (see *Age*, 2006-2012) shows that the answer is *no*. In 2012, 86 percent of young people aged 18-29 said that too little or the right amount is being spent on Social Security with a majority (55 percent) even saying that too little is being spent. However, it is also true that 14 percent say too much is spent, a sign of non-support, and this percentage has grown a bit since 2006 when only 8 percent voiced these negative views.

[Insert Table 3 about Here]

One of the most dramatic changes recently revealed by political scientists has been empirical evidence of the increase in the polarization of the political system between Congressional Republicans and Democrats (Bonica, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2013). As McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) have shown, since the early 1980s, the ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress have widened while moderates have vanished from Congress. Most of the polarization both in the House of Representatives and the Senate has been produced by a sharply more conservative turn among Republicans. To what extent do we see this polarization within the general public between liberals and conservatives and between Republicans and Democrats in their support for Social Security? The second and third panels of Table 3 show that (1) conservatives are less supportive of Social Security than liberals, (2) Republicans are less supportive than Democrats, and (3) levels of support among conservatives and liberals declined somewhat since 2006 among those who said too much is being spent. The biggest decline is among those who believe too little is being spent; many of those now say spending is about right. Despite these changes from saying "too little" to "about right," the vast majority of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans – 89 percent -- and of liberals, moderates, and conservatives – 89 percent -- continue to support Social Security and say that the right amount or too little is being spent. Compared to other policy issues on which Democrats and Republicans disagree, this amount of agreement is striking.

Not surprisingly, given all the talk about Social Security going "bankrupt," Americans are very worried about it. Table 4 shows that since 2005, about half of all respondents to a Gallup survey say that worry about Social Security "a great deal" and another 25 percent say they worry a fair amount. Less than a quarter say they worry only a little or not at all.

[Insert Table 5 about Here]

Regardless of whether policy elites frame Social Security's financial shortfall a crisis or not, many agree that it would be wise to act sooner rather than later. There are basically three options: (1) raise taxes (either increase the payroll tax above the 6.2 percent that both the employee and employer pay or raise the ceiling on which people pay payroll taxes, $113,700 in 2013), (2) reduce benefits (either lowering the COLA by, for example, changing to the chained CPI, or reducing benefits for affluent recipients), or (3) change eligibility requirements (e.g., by raising the age of eligibility for receiving full Social Security benefits above age 67 or increasing the early eligibility age above age 62). In addition to these incremental reforms, there has been debate over privatizing or partially privatizing Social Security to include individual investment accounts by allowing people to divert a portion of their payroll taxes into the stock market, a proposal that President Bush pushed. Although it failed in 2005, the proposal is not dead, and in fact former Congressman Newt Gingrich proposed it when he was running for the Republican nomination for president in 2011-12 (*The Week*, 2011).

Table 5 shows which of the incremental options members of the public support and the year and month in which they reported their views to pollsters. Regarding increasing taxes, respondents are not in favor of increasing the payroll tax, but they would support raising the earnings ceiling on which payroll taxes are paid. In fact, a majority of respondents have been in favor of this option since the question was first asked in 1998. Regarding reducing benefits, respondents are opposed to lowering the

COLA (by 55 percent to 39 percent in 2013), a position they have reported since 1998 each time the question has been asked; however, they favor reducing benefits for the wealthy. Finally, when asked about changing eligibility requirements, support and opposition were about equally divided on increasing the early retirement age when the question was last asked but it has not been asked again. Although opposition to raising the age of Social Security eligibility has been consistently negative every time the question has been asked, the opposition has narrowed. The gap between those opposed to those in favor has shrunk from 51 percent in 1998 to 11 percent in 2013 (i.e., in 1998, only 23 percent favored raising the eligibility age and 74 percent opposed it, whereas in 2013 43 percent were in favor as compared to 43 percent opposed).

During the Clinton and Bush administrations, pollsters asked Americans numerous questions about their support for some version of partially privatizing Social Security. Two patterns of support were seen. When not reminded about the risks associated with stock market investments and with the costs of transitioning to a privatized system, more citizens support partial privatization (i.e., being able to invest a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts) than oppose it. However, when people are told more about privatization – either that it represents a change to the Social Security system or that risks are involved – their support declines (Cook and Czaplewski, 2009). Although some thought that partial privatization was dead as a policy option, the debates among Republican candidates in 2011 and 2012 before the 2012 Republican presidential primary revived the proposal. Consequently, pollsters began to survey the public. A typical question asked registered voters in fall 2011 was phrased this way: "When it comes to Social Security, some (2012 presidential election) candidates have proposed shifting some of this tax money away from government Social Security and into private investment accounts, controlled directly by each person. What they get at retirement would depend on how well they did investing. In general, do you support or oppose shifting Social Security money into private investments? (If favor/oppose, ask): Is that strongly or somewhat strongly?" (Univision News, October 21-November 1, 2011). Thirty-three percent of the respondents said they supported shifting Social Security money into private investments (19 percent strongly and 14 percent somewhat strongly), and 55 percent said they were opposed (12 percent somewhat and 43 percent strongly).

On Social Security, the public supports a series of policy reforms that are often mentioned by experts as options on the policy menu – including raising the base on which payroll taxes are paid and reducing benefits to the affluent – and they are opposed to others including increasing the payroll tax, reducing the cost of living adjustment, and raising the age of eligibility. The question is: Will Social Security policymaking be responsive to the views of the public?

Since its enactment in 1935 during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration, Social Security has been seen by the public as a program that Democrats launched and could be trusted to maintain. However, Figure 2 suggests a gradual narrowing of the Democratic Party's advantage over the Republican Party in the public's eye for its job of "protecting" or "dealing with" Social Security. Between 1990 and 2013, a series of separate surveys have asked the public some variant of the question: "Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job protecting the Social Security system." During the first Bush administration, the Democratic Party's advantage was a glaring 21 to 23 percentage point gap, and there was a return to that gap after the second President Bush's attempt to partially privatize Social Security (in 2006, only about 22 percent of the public said they could trust the Republicans with Social Security). Since then, the gap has risen and fallen, but in 2011, 2012, and 2013 the trust gap shrank to 9 percent.

Why does the gap appear to be narrowing? It may be because policymakers have somehow inserted Social Security into the rhetoric of reducing the deficit even though Social Security had no role in creating the deficit, but we cannot know for sure. However, the narrowing gap between the public's trust in the two parties might imply that Democrats can no longer count on monopolizing the public's trust as protectors of Social Security. The actions of both parties during the remainder of the Obama presidency will determine whether the Republicans succeed in stealing a previously "Democratic issue" as they want to do or if it stays in the Democratic fold.

[Insert Figure 2 about Here]

Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter has shown that Social Security has been a political football during the administrations of the last three U.S. Presidents, the subject of what has been called competitive counterframing. Clinton used Social Security to thwart Congressional Republicans' plan to use the upcoming budget surplus to cut taxes. His dramatic call to "Save Social Security first," his town meetings on Social Security across the country, his White House Conference on Social Security, and his detailed proposal to use the budget surplus to strengthen Social Security derailed the Republicans' proposals to partially privatize Social Security. To judge Clinton's success in framing Social Security, we can use the public's assessment of which party they trust to do a better job with Social Security. Figure 2 showed that in 1999, the year Clinton made his Social Security proposals, 54 percent of the public said they trusted the Democrats to do a better job handling Social Security as compared to only 22 percent who trusted Republicans.

In the end, of course, Clinton's proposals were not enacted into law, and the new Republican president George W. Bush saw his chance to resurrect his party's plan to partially privatize Social Security and thus make what had long been seen as a Democratic program into one with a Republican stamp. Framing Social Security as a program in crisis that is not a good deal for either current or future beneficiaries, Bush proposed diverting a portion of each person's payroll taxes into the stock market that would, he said, grow over time. Like Clinton's proposal, Bush's plan failed, but for quite different reasons – the counterframes presented by Democrats, interest groups, and organized labor were strong, and Bush was simply unable to convince the American public and the U.S. Congress of the feasibility of the diversion of payroll taxes into personal accounts.

It is doubtful that Social Security would have been high on President Obama's policy agenda given other pressing domestic and foreign policy issues if it were not for two things – first, his Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform (the so-called Erskine-Bowles Commission) made recommendations about Social Security in the context of proposals to deal with the deficit and, second, Congressional Republicans' insisted that entitlement programs be considered in dealing with the deficit. And in fact, Obama's 2014 budget included a switch to the chained CPI that would reduce the past levels of increase in cost of living adjustments to Social Security. By acceding to the

Republicans' insistence, Obama -- wittingly or not -- inserted Social Security into the political battle about the deficit. The competing counterframes presented in Table 1 remain in competition during Obama's second term in office – i.e., an unreliable program going bankrupt versus a reliable program in no crisis but having an easily fixable long range funding imbalance. As Figure 2 shows, the nine percent gap in the public's views about which party can be trusted to handle Social Security has never been narrower.

Clearly, Social Security has been the target of competitive counter framing over the last two and half decades. What effect has it had on public support? To answer that question using the gold standard of research methodology, we would need to conduct an experiment with random assignment and pre- and post-tests. We have not done that. Instead, we described the competitive counterframing in the last three presidential administrations, and then we examined support for Social Security before, during and after these administrations (Figure 1). If we saw declines in support, we would conclude that competitive counterframing adversely affected support. However, over the entire period, support for Social Security remained surprisingly stable. There appeared to be a very small uptick in support after Clinton's State of the Union with his call to "Save Social Security First" and his proposals in 2009 to do just that, and there appeared to be a small downtick after Bush's 2005 push to partially privatize Social Security. There also appeared to be a small downtick in support during the second half of Obama's presidency. However, these are tiny variations, and the major take home point is stability in public support.

Why is it that the claims and counter claims have not affected public support? Counterframing theory offers one possible explanation; it posits that counterframing effects depend on the extent to which people hold strong or weak opinions (Chong and Druckman, 2013). On Social Security, people's opinions are strong. Most adults have some connection to Social Security; they contribute to it through their payroll taxes and they either know someone who receives it or receive it themselves. Therefore, since citizens have strong opinions regarding Social Security, their support for it is stable.

The second issue we examined is whether increasing economic inequality is related to policy preferences about Social Security. Our findings show that respondents with household incomes over $150,000, representing the top 8 to 9 percent of wage earners, are less likely to support Social Security than those at lower income levels. Although we showed that a majority of the highly affluent continue to believe that too little or about the right amount is spent on Social Security, they are significantly less likely than lower income groups to think that too little is being spent and significantly more likely to think that too much is being spent. Why does this matter? The research of Gilens (2012) and Bartels (2008) shows that the preferences of high income Americans are much more likely to be reflected in policy outcomes than are those of lower income citizens. This is because they are more likely than others to be politically engaged, to vote, to attend political meetings, and most important to contribute large amounts to political campaigns. At this point, our findings are not alarming for Social Security since a majority of all Americans are supportive, including the affluent; however, the increasing gaps between the views of the affluent and low income Americans bear watching carefully. Part of Social Security's success has been its universality and its appeal to young and old, rich and poor. The guerilla war against Social Security that Butler and Germanis laid out in 1983 aimed to separate group from group, especially the young from the old and the rich from the poor, and our subgroup analyses reported in Tables 2 and 3 show some emerging gaps that indicate that the guerilla tactics may be beginning to bear some fruit.

The public supports a series of policy reforms that are often mentioned by experts as options on the policy menu – e.g., raising the base on which payroll taxes are paid and reducing benefits to the affluent and they are opposed to others including partial privatization, raising the eligibility age for receiving Social Security, and reducing the cost of living adjustment. The two proposals that regularly garner majority support would affect Americans with high incomes. If the findings of Gilens (2012) and Bartels (2008) are correct that policymakers listen to the wealthy and make policy decisions accordingly, then they may pay little attention to general citizens' preferences

Will Social Security policymaking follow the views of the public or will it follow the direction seen in a number of policy areas of declining government responsiveness to public preferences? Fundamental changes in American politics over the past two decades have reversed the myth that politicians "pander" to public opinion by tailoring their decisions to polls (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Gilens, 2012). The influence of the wealthy, party activists, campaign contributors, interest groups, and other forces have increased, raising the risks to policymakers who defy the preferences of these forces in an effort to respond to what majorities of Americans prefer. A quick list of policies on which government officials defied large majorities of Americans would include gun control, job creation, and limits on campaign spending Two or three decades ago, when these new forces in American politics were less influential, policymakers were more responsive to public opinion. The situation is much different today than in the past:

Instead of polls and public opinion helping to shape policy decisions, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) show how public opinion research is used to identify the frames -- words, arguments, and symbols -- which seem most likely to manipulate public opinion to support what policymakers and their supporters most desire.

Is Social Security still the so-called third rail of American politics that kills you if you touch it? This chapter has shown that perhaps the answer is no. President Bush proposed a dramatic revision of Social Security by diverting a portion of payroll taxes into private individual accounts. His proposal was rejected, but politically President Bush remained very much alive after his foray into Social Security policymaking, and the notion of partial privatization is not dead. Until Republicans and Democrats can come together, listen to the public on their support for Social Security and their suggestions for changes, and make decisions about how to tackle the long-term financial shortfall in Social Security, Social Security will continue to be subjected to the game of competitive counterframing that we have seen over the last two decades.

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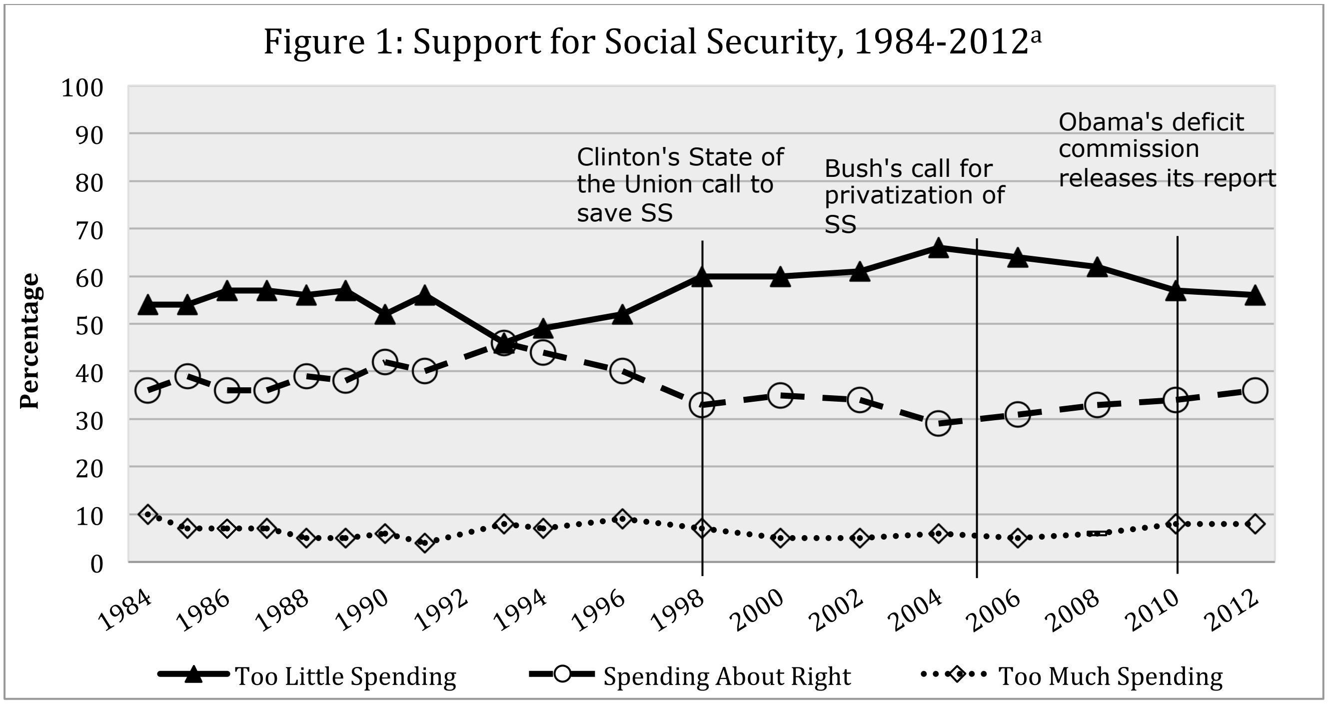
Table 1: Competing Counterframes About Social Security		
	Republican Frame	Democratic Frame
Problem	Crisis: Social Security bankrupt	No crisis: a long range funding imbalance
Solution	Radical change: partial privatization by diverting a portion of SS taxes to individual private accounts	Incremental changes
Values	Individualism (“ownership society”) Freedom of choice Getting money’s worth	Community Shared Security



[a] "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount on Social Security?" From the General Social Survey (NORC).

Table 2. Support for Social Security by Income, 2006-2012[a]				
		Too Little	About Right	Too much
2006	<$30,000	68.67	27.49	3.84
	$30,000-$49,999	66.15	29.38	4.47
	$50,000-$74,999	64.1	31.08	4.82
	$75,000-$149,999	60.56	34.49	4.95
	$150,000+	41.55	49.42	9.03
2008	<$30,000	66.63	28.23	5.13
	$30,000-$49,999	67.01	25.17	7.82
	$50,000-$74,999	65.38	27.91	6.71
	$75,000-$149,999	60.01	35.29	4.71
	$150,000+	48.63	41.13	10.24
2010	<$30,000	64.73	28.35	6.93
	$30,000-$49,999	60.84	33.05	6.11
	$50,000-$74,999	55.11	35.36	9.53
	$75,000-$149,999	50.71	40.03	9.26
	$150,000+	39.75	42.12	18.13
2012	<$30,000	64.29	29.24	6.47
	$30,000-$49,999	64.41	30.85	4.74
	$50,000-$74,999	53.8	39.76	6.43
	$75,000-$149,999	53.48	38.25	8.26
	$150,000+	39.69	43.36	17.04

[a] "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount…Social Security." From the General Social Survey (NORC). Original statistical analysis completed by the authors.

Table 3. Support for Social Security by Age, Ideology, and Party Identification, 2006-2012[a]					
			Too Little	About Right	Too Much
AGE	2006	18-29	59.03	33.37	7.6
		30-49	69.52	25.03	5.45
		50-64	66.46	31.39	2.15
		65+	51.2	46.14	2.66
	2008	18-29	60.51	29.71	9.78
		30-49	63.7	29.97	6.33
		50-64	66.87	29.47	3.65
		65+	48.79	48.28	2.93
	2010	18-29	49.64	37.85	12.51
		30-49	64.03	25.91	10.06
		50-64	62.01	32.4	5.59
		65+	44.15	51.13	4.71
	2012	18-29	54.57	31.79	13.64
		30-49	59.16	32.75	8.09
		50-64	60.41	33.34	6.25
		65+	44.01	50.94	5.05
IDEOLOGY	2006	Liberal	64.61	33.64	1.74
		Moderate	70.26	25.99	3.75
		Conservative	56.06	35.91	8.02
	2008	Liberal	64.03	31.38	4.59
		Moderate	67.38	28.99	3.63
		Conservative	52.74	38.2	9.06
	2010	Liberal	56.34	38.14	5.53
		Moderate	65.65	28.52	5.83
		Conservative	47.72	38.41	13.88
	2012	Liberal	59.21	35.65	5.13
		Moderate	58.58	33.71	7.7
		Conservative	50.04	38.52	11.44
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	2006	Democrat	68.53	28.86	2.61
		Independent	67.28	28.6	4.12

[a] "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount…Social Security." From the General Social Survey (NORC). Original statistical analysis completed by the authors.

		Republican	56.01	36.65	7.34
	2008	Democrat	68.67	27.77	3.56
		Independent	59.76	33.51	6.73
		Republican	52.63	39.18	8.18
	2010	Democrat	60.73	34.23	5.04
		Independent	63.63	29.82	6.55
		Republican	50.21	36.81	12.98
	2012	Democrat	62.33	34.11	3.56
		Independent	56.13	31.91	11.97
		Republican	47.14	41.47	11.4

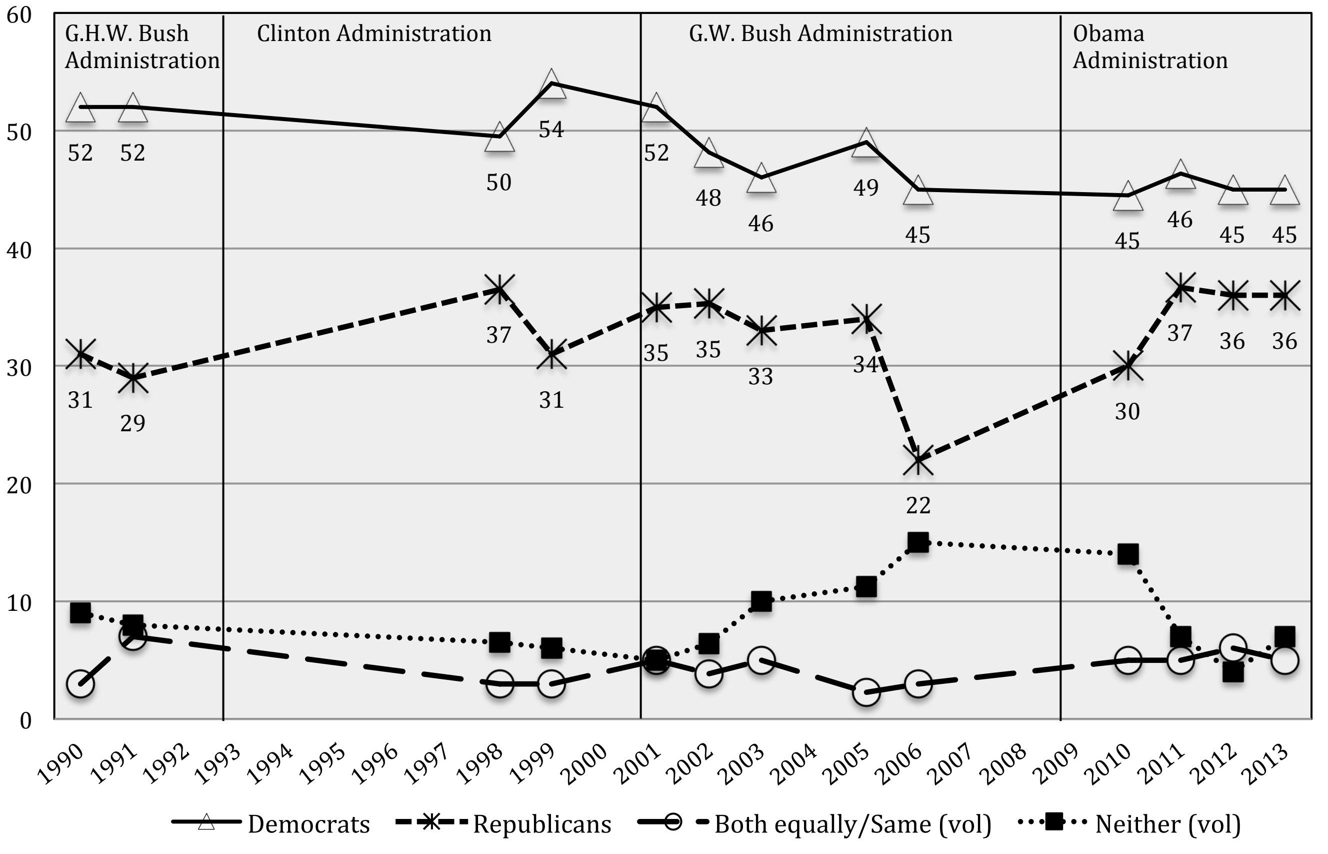
Table 4. Worry and Concerns about Social Security Among the Public, 2005-2013[a]

		Great Deal	Fair Amount	Only a Little	Not At All
Year	2005	48	24	20	7
	2006	51	29	14	6
	2007	49	27	16	7
	2008	46	29	16	8
	2010	53	26	14	7
	2011	51	26	15	7
	2012	48	30	14	7
	2013	50	25	24[b]	

[a] "(Next, I'm going to read a list of problems facing the country. For each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all.) How much do you worry about...the Social Security system?" From Gallup.

[b] 2013 question combined "only a little" and "not at all" categories.

Figure 2: The Public's Assessment of Which Party They Trust To Do a Better Job with SS, 1990-2013[a]



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[a] Question wording varies across years, but always similar to: "Who do you trust to do a better job of handling Social Security, the Democrats or the Republicans?" From ABC/*Washington Post*; Princeton Survey Research Associates; Gallup; Roper; *Los Angeles Times*.

Table 5. Public Support for Incremental Changes in Social Security

			1998	1999		2005	2010		2011			2012	2013	
			Aug.	Feb.	May	Feb.	Feb.	July	Jan.	Mar.	Sept.	Nov.	Jan.	Apr.
Raise Taxes	Increase Payroll Tax	Favor	40	44	44	38	41							
		Oppose	54	50	50	56	55							
	Raise Earning Ceilings	Favor	60	59	61	60		67		53	56	66		
		Oppose	29	28	29	33		30		43	35	29		
Reduce Benefits for Participants	Reduce Benefits for the wealthy	Favor	54	54	58	58		63			53			
		Oppose	40	40	37	36		35			42			
	Lower COLA	Favor	34	37	40	30							39	
		Oppose	61	56	53	64							55	
Change Eligibility Requirements	Raise Age of Social Security Eligibility	Favor	23	24	22	25			32	42	39	38		43
		Oppose	74	74	74	72			59	57	59	56		54
	Increase Early Eligibility Age	Favor	47	43	46									
		Oppose	47	52	48									

End notes

[1] Specifically, the Congressional Budget Office found that from 1979 to 2007, the share of after-tax household income for the top 1 percent of the population more than doubled, climbing to 17 percent in 2007 from nearly 8 percent in 1979. The most affluent fifth of the population received 53 percent in 2007 up from 43 percent of after-tax income in 1979. People in the lowest fifth of the population received about 5 percent of after-tax household income in 2007, down from 7 percent in 1979.

[2] The budget does not include means-tested programs in the switch to the chained CPI (i.e., specifically not the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, means-tested veterans benefits, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and child nutrition programs) (OMB 2014).