

Date: July 21, 2011
To: Interested Parties
From: Stanley Greenberg, James Carville, and Erica Seifert
Re: Brief Report on Social Security

As the public debate moves to serious long-term spending reductions, some budget plans apparently now include changes in Social Security. Whatever the merits of that on policy grounds, we want to underscore based on our surveys how out of touch that is with current voter priorities – and the serious political consequences of getting this wrong. Let us emphasize four points not always considered in these discussions.

- One of the top two reasons people think deficits are a problem is that they threaten the security of Social Security. Let us repeat: voters worry that high deficits will mean the federal government will be unable to meet its Social Security obligations. So, making changes in Social Security to reduce the deficit is totally backwards – and voters deeply oppose a deficit reduction plan with Social Security in the mix.
- When Democrats support a deficit reduction plan *including changes in Social Security*, they lose the argument to the Republicans. Democrats get lots of credit for addressing the deficits when Social Security is not part of their plans. Inclusion of Social Security changes in deficit reduction plans undermines Democrats on both the deficits and Social Security.
- Watching the retrenchment on private pension programs and reduced values, non-retirees are even more determined than seniors to preserve benefit levels. Younger generations are particularly opposed to changes in Social Security that would reduce benefits for those coming into the labor force now.
- The elderly have paid very close attention to what happened with health care reform – and then with Republicans ending Medicare. There is no doubt that that this new interest in changing Social Security is being watched, with corrosive effect. Democrats need to be clear about their commitment to securing Social Security.

This memorandum highlights the surveys that support these observations:



1. Deficits jeopardize Social Security, so keep your hands off of it.

- Social Security is linked to voters' concerns about the deficit—not because it contributes to the deficit, but because voters are concerned that the debt puts the future of Social Security in jeopardy. When we asked voters, “When you think about a large federal deficit, which two consequences do you worry about the most?” Social Security is the second most popular concern (29 percent), second only to “an economy weighed down by debt that can’t grow and create jobs” (34 percent).¹

2. Voters strongly support plans to balance the budget and reduce the deficit *but not when they include changes or cuts to Social Security and Medicare.*

- In our test, including “cutting Social Security benefits and raising the retirement age to 69 over time” cuts support for the deficit reduction plan in half.²
- In head to head match-ups between Social Security and Medicare and the deficit, Social Security and Medicare win hands down.

3. Voters strongly oppose any changes to Social Security—even if it means balancing the budget and reducing the debt.

- At the outset of the new Congress, 35 percent of voters listed “protecting Social Security and Medicare” as their top priorities—double the number who said that “Reducing the federal budget deficit” was a top priority.³
- Among proposals to reduce the budget deficit, reducing benefits and raising the retirement age for the next generation are the least popular. By a margin of 56 to 35 percent, voters oppose reducing benefits for those now entering the workforce. Their opposition is intense-- twice as many voters “strongly oppose” this measure as those who “strongly favor” the plan to balance the budget by amending Social Security for the next generation.⁴
- Raising the retirement age for the next generation is almost as unpopular, with more than half of voters opposing such a plan. By a margin of 55 to 42 percent, voters oppose raising the retirement age to 69 by 2075.⁵

4. Democrats have been losing seniors (65 and older) by worrisome margins in recent elections, and need to reclaim them to win in 2012.

- Democrats need to reverse recent losses and recapture the senior vote in 2012. Democrats won the senior vote in the 1996 election by 7 percentage points and by 3 percentage points in 2000.⁶ However, the margin has been shrinking in recent years, with Democrats actually *losing* the senior vote by 5 percentage points in 2004, 8 points in 2008, and a stunning 21 points in 2010. Democrats will need to reclaim the senior vote in a significant way in the 2012 elections, and protecting Social Security and Medicare is the way to do it.

¹ Democracy Corps/CAF. July 26-29, 2010. 1,000 2008 voters. <http://www.democracycorps.com>



² Democracy Corps/CAF/Women's Voices Women Vote. January 9-12, 2011. 1,000 2008 voters.
<http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/dcor011211fqCAF.pdf>

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⁴ Democracy Corps/CAF/Women's Voices Women Vote. January 9-12, 2011. 1,000 2008 voters.
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⁶ National Election Pool Exit Polls for various years.