

Goldwater, Bush, Ryan and the Failed Attempts by Conservative Republicans to Reform Federal Entitlement Programs

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Abstract: *Social Security and Medicare are federal entitlement programs that represent the current of modern liberalism in the United States. The countercurrent of conservatism has been represented by some Republican politicians who have tried to reform these programs. 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater suggested making Social Security voluntary. In 2005 President George W. Bush made partial privatization of Social Security a key component of his second-term domestic agenda. From 2010 to 2012 Congressman Paul Ryan advocated a reform of Medicare in which the federal government would give seniors vouchers to buy private insurance. Each of these proposals backfired. When conservative Republicans propose detailed alterations to the pillars of some of the Democratic Party's main legislative accomplishments in the 20th century, they disaffect moderates and independent voters, and they fuel the liberal base of the Democratic Party. The proposals are a liability for Republicans in national elections because Americans fear that entitlement reform will jeopardize the benefits they receive.*

Keywords: *Social Security reform, Medicare reform, Barry Goldwater, George W. Bush, Paul Ryan*

Introduction

Social Security and Medicare are two of the most widely respected federal programs in the United States. These programs symbolize the rise of the

welfare state and epitomize the legislative accomplishments of liberals in the Democratic Party during the 20th century; they are key components of the current of modern liberalism in American politics, developed by Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and advanced further by Lyndon B. Johnson and Barack Obama. This is a current of reform that is characterized by several laws of the last hundred years that have sought to reduce poverty and make American society more just. Among these laws are the federal income tax (the 13th Amendment) during the Progressive Era, collective bargaining rights for Labor during the New Deal, Head Start and Community Action Programs during the time of Johnson's Great Society, and the Affordable Care Act during the Obama presidency.¹

Many senior citizens are highly dependent on Social Security and Medicare. For more than one third of retirees, Social Security benefits are at least 90 percent of their income, according to the Social Security Administration (Edsall, "Obamacare"). The retirement of the baby boomers pose considerable financial challenges for these programs because young workers must support an increasing number of retirees. Firstly, according to a 2013 report by the Social Security Board of Trustees, the combined trust funds of Social Security will be exhausted by 2033 if no policy changes take place, and the program would be able to pay three-fourths of the scheduled benefits (Ruffing). Secondly, Medicare's Hospital Insurance will only remain solvent until 2030. Yet the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities points out that President Obama's Affordable Care Act has "along with other factors, significantly improved Medicare's financial outlook" (Van de Water).

Politicians of both parties and conservative Republicans in particular have remained worried about the sustainability of Social Security and Medicare, and there have been repeated, unsuccessful attempts by conservative Republicans at reforming these programs. These conservatives arguably represent the main countercurrent in American political history. This countercurrent dominated American politics during the Gilded Age of the late 1800s. This was a time of unfettered capitalism and a high level of inequality. The countercurrent of conservatism later opposed new laws during the New Deal and Great Society. It succeeded in preventing the enactment of President Bill Clinton's health care reform in the 1990s, tried

1 My argument that liberalism is the current and conservatism is the countercurrent in American political history is inspired by my interpretation of the argument the historian Richard Hofstadter makes in *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*

to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and has proposed changes to Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security.

Conservative Republicans have repeatedly failed to garner enthusiasm for reforms of Social Security and Medicare among moderates and liberals in Congress. Firstly, the 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater suggested making some payments to Social Security voluntary in order to save the system from going bankrupt, which he feared could happen (Goldwater, *With No Apologies* 169). Secondly, in 2005 President George W. Bush advocated ideas developed by Congressman Paul Ryan and other conservatives to partially privatize Social Security. Political scientist Mitchell A. Orenstein argues that attempts at privatization of pensions is a transnational phenomenon in a time of globalization. Finally, Paul Ryan's recent proposal of premium support, referred to as vouchers, in Medicare gained national attention when Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney picked him as his vice-presidential candidate in 2012. All these attempts backfired and arguably contributed to making the Republican Party vulnerable in subsequent elections.

This article argues that even though the federal entitlement programs will face challenges in terms of solvency and there appears to be a need for reform within the next two decades, conservative Republicans should avoid specific proposals of entitlement reform that could jeopardize the sum of the benefits that retirees receive. White Americans near or in retirement are voters the Republican Party depends on in order to win elections, and plans to reform these entitlement programs arguably alienate these voters and galvanize the Democratic Party's liberal base. The author shares the view of Nancy J. Altman and Eric R. Kingson who in their 2015 book *Social Security Works: Why Social Security Isn't Going Broke And How Expanding It Will Help Us All* criticize attempts by conservatives to change this important entitlement program.

A 2011 public opinion poll from NBC News and *The Wall Street Journal* found that large majorities opposed "significantly cutting the funding" for Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Meanwhile, 62 percent of those who responded thought that means-testing Social Security and Medicare was either "totally acceptable" or "mostly acceptable." 37 percent of the respondents were in opposition to this (Roy). Similarly, in a 2013 Kaiser Family Foundation/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health survey, 58 percent of respondents did not support any cuts in Medicare and Social Security benefits in order to reduce the deficit (Carey).

Opposing collectivism

Why do some conservatives want to reform Medicare and Social Security when these programs are so popular among voters? A main reason for opposition to the nature of the federal programs of Social Security and Medicare is rejection of the idea of collectivism. This rejection is an essential component of the ideology of the libertarian strand of conservatism. Libertarianism has often been associated with, among others, Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek and the Russian-American author Ayn Rand. Hayek's 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* became highly influential due to its criticism of planned economies. Rand's novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) inspired many politicians and have had a renaissance with the rise of the Tea Party Movement during the first presidential term of Barack Obama.²

Opposition to collectivism has deep historical roots. In *The Man Versus the State* (1884), the English philosopher Herbert Spencer developed a theory of social Darwinism and coined the term "the survival of the fittest" (Heywood 18). This idea was dominant during the Victorian Era in Britain and the Gilded Age in the United States in the late 1800s when opposition to government intervention in economic activities was strong. William Graham Sumner is another scholar whose views epitomized the social Darwinism of the Gilded Age. He was a sociologist at Yale University and an influential intellectual in the late 19th century. In 1883 he published the essay "What Social Classes Owe To Each Other" in which he argued that classes did not owe each other much. He opposed government aid to the poor, claiming that "[i]t was not at all the function of the State to make men happy. They must make themselves happy in their own way, and at their own risk" (Gage).

The ideas of Spencer and Sumner struck a responsive chord among conservatives in the postwar era. Their arguments are echoed in the political message of Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona) and Congressman Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin). Both Goldwater and Ryan denounced collectivism and expressed their ideologies in written documents. Most significantly, Goldwater outlined his views in his 1960 political manifesto *The Conscience of a Conservative*, whereas Paul Ryan has presented his views in Republican budget proposals in the House of Representatives that have been referred

2 For an analysis of Ayn Rand's influence on the contemporary Republican Party see Gary Weiss, *Ayn Rand Nation: The Hidden Struggle for America's Soul* (2012). See also Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012).

to as the “Roadmap to America’s Future” and “Path to Prosperity.” The similarities between the ideologies of Goldwater and Ryan are particularly strong on the issues of personal responsibility and freedom in economic policies. In *Conscience of a Conservative* Goldwater claims that “if we take from a man the personal responsibility for caring for his material needs, we take from him also the will and the opportunity to be free” (Goldwater, *Conscience* 77). Similarly, in the 2010 “Roadmap for America’s Future,” Ryan writes that: “[o]nly by taking responsibility for oneself, to the greatest extent possible, can one ever be free.” And “only a free person can make responsible choices – between right and wrong, saving and spending, giving or taking” (Ryan qtd. in Lizza).

The suggestions for entitlement program changes by both Goldwater and Ryan were initially rejected by the leadership of the Republican Party. Establishment politicians were afraid of alienating important groups of voters and knew that these programs were particularly popular among the elderly. However, the ideas of Goldwater and Ryan gained considerable attention and legitimacy as the conservative wing of the party became increasingly stronger within the Republican Party.

Barry Goldwater’s suggestion on Social Security

Senator Barry Goldwater had a reputation for being an honest politician who stated his positions clearly, regardless of the type of audience he addressed. Elected to the Senate in 1952, he remained a vocal critic of President Dwight Eisenhower’s inability to cut federal spending significantly. Some conservatives in the Republican Party wanted Goldwater to run for president already in 1960, but the Arizonan was not prepared at that time. After he finally decided to do so in 1963, encouraged by the so-called Draft Goldwater movement, the senator had hoped to take part in an engaging campaign against President John F. Kennedy. He believed that the campaign would focus on ideological differences between the candidates and political solutions to problems. Goldwater had great respect for President Kennedy and regarded him as a friend. He was troubled by the assassination of Kennedy and realized that the campaign against Lyndon B. Johnson would be very different and less cordial. The Arizona senator despised Lyndon B. Johnson but realized that he would not be able to defeat the Texan, because the United States would not be ready for three presidents in a little over a year (Goldwater, *With No Apologies* 161, 164).

In his 1988 memoir, Goldwater acknowledged having made mistakes in the presidential campaign on the issue of Social Security. He pointed out that it was a mistake to discuss the financial crunch of Social Security in Florida (Goldwater, *Goldwater* 200). In another state, New Hampshire, Goldwater's views on Social Security were distorted by the media. He wanted to make some changes in Social Security, including making some contributions voluntary, but he had not developed a proper policy proposal. The next day the *Concord Monitor* had the headline "GOLDWATER SETS GOALS: END SOCIAL SECURITY" (Goldwater, *Goldwater* 203). Goldwater noted that he had voted to increase Social Security benefits in 1956, 1958, and 1964. The senator justified his reform plans for Social Security by noting that the ratio of workers to retirees had fallen remarkably compared to the situation at the time when the program was established, and that members of both parties had suggested that something be done to the program (Goldwater, *Goldwater* 203).

It is difficult to persuade the public that changes are necessary to programs they depend on themselves. Thus, Goldwater's minor suggestions for changes to Social Security became campaign meat for the Democrats. As the historian Rick Perlstein points out, Social Security was the topic of their advertisement that was aired most frequently. In the advertisement, two hands tore a Social Security card in two, which was an exaggeration of Goldwater's position on the Democrats' behalf. According to Perlstein, there was "no such 'voluntary plan'; the subject had barely crossed Goldwater's lips since the primary in New Hampshire" (Perlstein 434). By running such an advertisement, Democrats sought to appeal to the perception of their party as the preserver of the safety net and welfare state that Franklin Roosevelt had created. The Republican Party was thus perceived as the party of risk and instability on Social Security. The historian Mark Nevin argues that "Goldwater's opposition to Social Security was a major liability during the 1964 campaign." The senator's "disparaging remarks stuck and hurt his chances in the general election" (Nevin).

After Barry Goldwater's massive electoral defeat in November of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted major pieces of liberal legislation. He built on the work of Franklin D. Roosevelt by implementing Medicare and Medicaid. These programs were key aspects of the Great Society, and Medicare helped reduce poverty among retirees. As with Social Security, Medicare became widely accepted, and the rising popularity of these programs made them increasingly untouchable for politicians.

As an example, like Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan was critical of the way Social Security was organized by the federal government. In 1975 when the former California governor campaigned to challenge President Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination in 1976, Reagan suggested making participation in the program voluntary. Reporters Tom Hamburger and Peter Wallsten argue that “[t]o a significant degree, [Reagan’s] criticism of the program cost him the chance to run for president in 1976” (Hamburger and Wallsten 196). After becoming president, however, Reagan realized how central the program was, and he cooperated with the Democrats and “even signed tax increases to make Social Security more secure” (Dionne 238). Reagan must have been afraid of disaffecting moderates and independent voters who generally support the current Social Security system. The Social Security system remained intact during the 1980s and 1990s, and there were no specific efforts to enact reforms.

George W. Bush’s quest for Social Security reform

The reelection of President George W. Bush in 2004 together with Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress was clearly one of the most euphoric moments for the conservative movement. Bush had continued the work of Ronald Reagan, cutting taxes significantly in 2001 and 2003. Emboldened conservatives believed the election results provided a unique opportunity for Social Security reform, and in early 2005 President Bush made this the centerpiece of his domestic agenda. He felt he had earned political capital through his 2004 reelection, and he famously said that he intended to spend this capital. Thus on paper he was in a much better position to be able to reform Social Security than Barry Goldwater had been. One of Bush’s visions was to create the so-called Ownership Society that would empower individuals to make more decisions themselves. Social Security reform was a pillar of the Ownership Society, and it was the issue Bush prioritized in the early months of 2005. Social scientist Terry Weiner argues that based on the history of presidential agenda-setting it was surprising that Bush would focus on such a major initiative when the congressional majority of his party was so slim (Weiner).

Bush had wanted to advance Social Security reform for a long time. According to William Galston of the Brookings Institution, already in his 1978 congressional campaign Bush had argued that Social Security could not be sustained unless people would be allowed to invest the payroll taxes

themselves (Galston). In his campaign for the presidency in 2000, Bush had “touted a rough proposal to encourage private investment accounts” (Hamburger and Wallsten 187). On January 3, 2005, Peter Wehner, White House Director of Strategic Initiatives, wrote in an internal memo that was leaked to the press that it was possible to win the Social Security battle for the first time in six decades. In doing so, the Bush Administration could “help transform the political and philosophical landscape of the country” (Hamburger and Wallsten 201).

In January 2005 Bush traveled extensively to promote his plan for Social Security. The plan, he assured, would not affect the benefits of current recipients, and people close to retirement could also depend on the same system (Hamburger and Wallsten 194). Republicans were afraid of offending seniors, who could turn against them in future elections. After all, Republicans had courted seniors before the reelection by expanding Medicare with prescription drug coverage. On Social Security, Bush expressed a certain amount of flexibility in order to finance the overhaul. He was open to suggestions of raising the retirement age and limiting benefits for retirees. Bush talked at length about Social Security in his 2005 State of the Union Address. Assessing the speech, Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* argued that the only option he “explicitly ruled out was raising payroll taxes” (Balz).

Bush had some support for these proposals among conservatives in Congress. Ryan Lizza of the *New Yorker* has noted that Congressman Paul Ryan was among the people who persuaded Bush to prioritize Social Security after the 2004 reelection. Ryan had originally advocated that workers invest about half their payroll taxes in private accounts. The amount Bush eventually decided to support was lower than this (Lizza).

Like Paul Ryan, the libertarian Cato Institute has been a key proponent of privatization of Social Security. In 1999 Cato issued a report that concluded, not surprisingly, that private accounts would be more popular among people in America who owned stocks than among those who did not. Since a majority of Americans owned stock in 2000, advisers of Bush believed the time was finally ripe for their reform plans (Hamburger and Wallsten 197). However, they chose to wait until after the 2004 reelection.

Liberal Democrats were vocal in their criticism of Bush’s reform suggestions, since it was important for them to be viewed as the protectors of economic stability for seniors. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) repudiated Bush’s proposal in his televised response to the president’s State of the Union Address. He claimed that “the Bush plan isn’t really Social Se-

curity reform; it's more like Social Security roulette. Democrats are all for giving Americans more of a say and more choices when it comes to their retirement savings, but that doesn't mean taking Social Security's guarantee and gambling with it. And that's coming from a senator who represents Las Vegas" (Reid). Other Democrats expressed similar concerns and a number of Republicans feared the consequences of the changes, since the transition costs to the new system would be high.

During the winter of 2005 there was a massive campaign both for and against the proposal. One of the main groups advocating Bush's plan was the Coalition for the Modernization and Protection of America's Social Security (COMPASS). This group joined forces with several corporations and the Business Roundtable. These organizations repeatedly met with the Republican National Committee. Bush adviser Karl Rove met with lobbyists and explained that Social Security was the president's "top domestic priority" (Hamburger and Wallsten 201-202, 204).

Conservatives faced strong opposition from left-of-center groups, however. Among the most active opponents of reform were labor groups such as AFL-CIO and senior citizen organizations (Hamburger and Wallsten 201-202). The effort of these groups possibly affected the views of some business associations because doubts began to emerge. Companies were less enthusiastic about private accounts than Bush and Rove had envisioned. One of the founders of COMPASS, the Financial Services Forum, left the organization due to disagreement regarding private accounts (Hamburger and Wallsten 205). Moreover, public opinion polls remained against the plans of the Bush Administration, and it proved impossible to sway the opinions of lawmakers. It did not help that Republicans had a majority in both chambers of Congress. When Hurricane Katrina struck, the issue of Social Security reform was overshadowed by the media's portrayal of the incompetence of the Bush Administration in responding to a large natural disaster.

In retrospect, President George W. Bush spent his political capital unwisely by investing so much energy on an issue that the American people did not support. He obviously underestimated the hurdles his plan faced. He had been reelected mainly because he had kept the nation safe and had prevented a new 9/11 and because of opposition to gay marriage in key states such as Ohio. Still, a majority of voters did not want to alter a key component of their safety nets. However, as journalism professor and leading political analyst Thomas Edsall has argued, "George W. Bush demonstrated

a willingness to absorb a short-term defeat to put [Social Security] squarely into the public arena and to show that a Republican president could touch the ‘third rail’ of American politics – challenging a mainstay of the New Deal and a program of great importance to millions of Americans” (Edsall, *Building Red America* 43).

Bush’s failure to enact Social Security reform was the beginning of the downturn of his presidency. Hurricane Katrina and the sectarian warfare in Iraq were among the most difficult challenges for the president in the first part of his second term. Moreover, as with Social Security, Bush failed to achieve immigration reform during his second term. He finally left the White House at the peak of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.

Paul Ryan’s Medicare reform proposal

Paul Ryan became a congressman after the 1998 elections and became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee in 2015. He is a protégé of former Congressman Jack Kemp of New York, who was Bob Dole’s vice-presidential candidate in 1996 and one of the main advocates of major federal income tax cuts and supply-side economics. During his career Paul Ryan has been eager to reform Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. He advocates decentralization of power from the federal to the state level. An example of a successful reform that decentralized power that conservatives often highlight is the 1996 welfare reform where Aid to Families with Dependent Children was replaced by Temporary Aid to Needy Families. In this program people would receive support for a lifetime maximum of five years and be required to enter job programs. President Bill Clinton had vetoed two welfare bills that the Republican-controlled Congress had sent him, but he ultimately signed a third bill.

Paul Ryan’s plan to restructure Medicare was similar to George W. Bush’s Social Security plan in that it would not affect current retirees or people close to retirement age. Ryan’s plan would only affect people who were 55 years or younger. There would be no changes until 2023. From then onwards “the age of eligibility for Medicare would increase by two months every year until it reached 67 in 2033” (Wyler). The plan’s key component is that beneficiaries would receive voucher payments from the federal government in order to purchase private insurance plans. Thus there would assumedly be competition among companies that would offer such

plans “on a new Medicare Exchange similar to the insurance exchange now offered to federal workers, including members of Congress” (Wyler).

As late as 2010, Ryan’s ideas on Medicare had been controversial among Republicans in Congress. Having cooperated with fellow Republicans Eric Cantor and Kevin McCarthy in the House of Representatives, Paul Ryan had articulated his political vision in a manifesto called “Roadmap for America’s Future.” According to Ryan Lizza, Speaker John Boehner had distanced himself from parts of the “Roadmap” and had insured that most Republican congressmen had not embraced Ryan’s plan to change Medicare during the campaign for the 2010 elections. Instead Republican candidates had criticized President Obama for cutting Medicare spending as part of his new health care reform (Lizza).

After the 2010 elections, Ryan exerted a profound influence on the “eighty-seven Republican freshmen who wanted to starve the government but had no clear idea how to do so” (Lizza). Having listened to colleagues, Ryan modified the “Roadmap” and made it slightly less ideological, and presented a budget in April 2011 called “A Path to Prosperity.” President Obama denounced the proposal, but this had little effect on Republican House members. The plan crafted by Ryan passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 235-193. Only four Republicans voted against it (Lizza). This vote illustrated the strength of the new Tea Party faction in the House and signaled how few Republican moderates remained in Congress and how far to the right the Republican Party had moved on issues dealing with personal responsibility and the distribution of wealth.

In his 2012 book *Ayn Rand Nation: The Hidden Struggle for America’s Soul*, journalist Gary Weiss argues that there is a strong connection between the policy proposals of Paul Ryan and the ideas of the author Ayn Rand. As Weiss puts it, “Medicare was on the Rand hit list before the program even existed” (Weiss 19). The way Paul Ryan defended his premium support program in an opinion piece in the *Chicago Tribune* in May 2011 was influenced by the rhetoric of Ayn Rand. Ryan wrote that the plan would let “seniors act as value-conscious consumers in a transparent and competitive market” (Ryan, “The Budget”). Weiss argues that Ryan ultimately wanted to abolish Medicare (Weiss 19). This claim seems to be an exaggeration, however, especially in light of Ryan’s 2013 federal budget agreement with Senate Democrat Patty Murray, which left the entitlement programs untouched.

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson argue that Paul Ryan’s proposal was based on goals of billionaires David and Charles Koch, but not of the

grassroots of the Tea Party. They claim that “[t]here is no evidence that ordinary American citizens who sympathize with the Tea Party were clamoring for the elimination of Medicare in early 2011” (Skocpol and Williamson 176). The organization Americans for Prosperity, which is supported by the Koch brothers, actively persuaded new Republican congressmen to back the proposal.

The Obama Administration began to criticize Paul Ryan’s Medicare reform plan as soon as it became publicly known in 2010. On the White House blog Obama adviser Stephanie Cutter argued that “[u]nder the Ryan plan, the Medicare seniors know and trust would disappear” (Cutter). She referred to an argument by Director of the Office of Management and Budget Peter Orzag that the voucher would not increase to the same extent as the costs of health care, and that this would affect seniors negatively financially (Cutter). President Obama personally attacked the Medicare proposals during the years of 2011 and 2012.

When Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney picked Paul Ryan as his running mate in the summer of 2012, conservatives were pleased and believed this choice would energize the base of the party and attract funding. The selection of the visionary Wisconsinite symbolized the strength of the conservative wing of the party, and attention turned towards Ryan’s Medicare proposal. However, Medicare reform did not become a central topic for the Romney-Ryan campaign. Romney knew well that Ryan had been criticized during public meetings in 2011, and he wanted to avoid alienating senior voters and others who were critical of reform. Instead Ryan asserted in his convention speech that Obama took \$716 billion from Medicare to help finance the Affordable Care Act, often referred to as Obamacare. He proclaimed that the “greatest threat to Medicare is Obamacare” (Ryan, “Address”). As Ryan had initially supported Obama’s savings on Medicare himself, it is ironic that he accused the president of weakening this entitlement program.

The defeat of the Republican presidential ticket in 2012 undermined any immediate chance of a Medicare overhaul. Moreover, the fact that the 2013 budget agreement between the Democrats and Republicans did not include entitlement reform seems to signal that this issue will be postponed until after the Obama presidency ends in 2017. Liberal Democrats are as skeptical of compromise on entitlement programs as conservative Republicans are of taxes, and this skepticism makes a so-called grand bargain highly unlikely. If the Republicans capture the presidency in 2016 and secure a majority

in both chambers of Congress, it is likely that the party will try to reform either Social Security or Medicare or both programs.

Explanations of entitlement reform failures

The successive failure by conservative Republicans to reform entitlement programs may be a sign that Americans are less conservative on economic issues than the general skepticism of government power would imply. Polls often show that a plurality of Americans claim that they are conservative and want to reduce the size and scope of the federal government, but they are critical of reforms of the pillars of the New Deal and Great Society. This ambivalence about the role of government is pointed out by Emory University political scientist Alan Abramowitz in his commentary “The Myth of a Conservative Public.” He refers to the groundbreaking work of Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril in their 1967 book *The Political Beliefs of Americans*. They found that “Americans tend to be ideologically conservative and operationally liberal” (Abramowitz). Abramowitz refers to a Gallup poll from September 2010 that revealed similar patterns as those Free and Cantril had detected more than forty years earlier. Americans adhere to conservative principles in the abstract, but support Medicare and other specific federal programs that address societal problems (Abramowitz).

Social Security and Medicare are more broadly supported than the Affordable Care Act. However, attitudes to the so-called Obamacare reveal the pattern that Republicans need to keep the debate at an abstract level. There is more disapproval of the act per se than the individual components of the law, such as the illegality of preventing people with preexisting conditions from obtaining health insurance and the opportunity to let young adults stay on their parents’ health plan until they are 26 years old.

There are obvious parallels between President Bush’s drive for Social Security reform in 2005 and Paul Ryan’s advocacy of Medicare reform in 2011. Right after a solid electoral victory the party in control may overreach when trying to achieve significant change. The federal tax cuts enacted under Republican presidents in 1981 and 2001 are examples of such change. However, it is different with entitlement programs. Even though Ryan repeatedly underscored that everyone above 55 would not be affected by the proposed changes, people were skeptical of his proposal because they were afraid of losing benefits. A few years after the worst financial crisis since the 1930s and with falling stock prices it is easy to understand people’s fear

of risk. Perhaps Ryan should have learned from Bush's failure in 2005 and downplayed the proposal.

Conclusion

Conservative Republicans play to the Democratic Party's strength when they suggest specific changes to federal entitlement programs. When conservatives propose detailed alterations to the pillars of some of the Democratic Party's main legislative accomplishments in the 20th century, Social Security and Medicare, they run the risk of alienating moderates and independent voters, while at the same time fueling the liberal base of the Democratic Party. Thus Barry Goldwater's suggestion on Social Security was attacked by the media, and he failed to connect with voters on this issue. Similarly, George W. Bush and Paul Ryan struggled to convince both Congress and the American people about the necessity of their own proposals on Social Security and Medicare. Entitlement programs are so strongly tied to the successes of the liberals within the Democratic Party in creating a modern welfare state that reform proposals tend to constitute a liability for Republicans in national elections. These reform proposals can be regarded as counter-reforms since they are based on the ideology of the counter-current of conservatism, which emphasizes self-reliance above government responsibility for preserving a safety net.

Ironically, one might argue that conservative Republicans deserve credit for advancing proposals that could possibly save the programs of Social Security and Medicare and make them financially sound in a long-term perspective, even though Democrats easily dismiss these proposals as attacks against the safety net by the "party of the rich." Given that the financial crisis of 2008 added to the fear of volatile private accounts, issues such as law and order and national security are safer to focus on for the Republican Party than entitlement reform. Yet the rising national debt and the projected exhaustion of the Social Security trust funds will probably make entitlement reform necessary in the future, and ideas by conservatives may then receive more support from voters.

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