

## WHAT AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL SECURITY

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Social Security was signed into law by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1935. Since then, it has grown into the program we know today, which provides almost all older Americans with retirement pensions that are regularly adjusted to meet the rising cost of living. Social Security also helps the disabled and survivors of workers who die in mid-life. During most of its life-span, Social Security enjoyed widespread bipartisan support and has been periodically adjusted without modifications to its basic structure.

As of 2012, the Trustees of the Social Security Trust Fund project that full benefits can be paid until 2033 and the program needs only modest adjustments to meet a 25% shortfall after that. But bipartisan comity has broken down, and many critics now call for drastic cuts in future benefits or even for breaking up Social Security into private investment accounts.

Experts on all sides of ongoing debates make claims about public opinion – not always accurate claims. What do Americans in general think about the purposes and fiscal health of Social Security? To find out, we have analyzed trends in the answers to thousands of questions posed in representative national surveys since the 1970s and 1980s.

### Most Americans Cherish Social Security

When Americans are asked how well informed they think they are about Social Security, most say they are very well or fairly well informed – and this percentage has increased since 1982 when the question was first asked. People have experience with the program and opinions are broadly shared across partisan lines.

- Since 1984, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has asked Americans whether they think too much, too little, or just the right amount of money is being spent on Social Security. In each of 18 surveys 90% or more of the public said they think too little or the right amount is being spent on Social Security (with over 50% saying too little is being spent in all but one year).
- In five surveys between 1994 and 2010, interviewers asked respondents how important various programs were to themselves and their families. In each year, two thirds or more of Americans said that Social Security was extremely or very important; most of the rest of the respondents said it was “somewhat important.”
- Another way to gauge how important Social Security is to the public is to ask whether it should be a priority for the President and Congress. In recurrent surveys since 1994, three-fifths or more of the public said that making Social Security financially sound should be a top priority. In January 2012, 68 percent said that it should be a top priority for President Obama and the U.S. Congress.

## Do Americans Think the Program is Fiscally Sound?

Americans may cherish the goals of Social Security, but do they think the program is fiscally sound and likely to be there for future generations?

- In a dozen surveys conducted between 1997 and 2011, Americans were asked whether they think Social Security is in crisis, has major problems but is not in crisis, has minor problems, or has no problems. Over this entire period, a majority has said that the program is “in crisis,” or is experiencing “major problems” or “serious trouble.” By 2011, almost three-quarters said that Social Security is in crisis or has major problems.
- Back in 1975, more than three-fifths were very or somewhat confident about the future of Social Security; but by 2010, 62% were “not too confident” or “not at all confident” – a complete reversal in public views.

## Americans Want Cautious Reforms to Preserve Social Security

Policymakers are debating three broad types of changes to put Social Security on a new fiscal footing: raising payroll taxes paid by employed people, reducing benefits to future retirees and others who rely on Social Security, and changing eligibility requirements. At least five surveys have asked respondents about some variant of these options and the results have been surprisingly consistent.

- Social Security payroll taxes are currently set at 6.2% – but only on wages and salaries up to \$110,000 a year. To get more revenue into the Social Security trust fund, we could either raise the 6.2% level of the payroll charges on all workers or lift the ceiling on which payroll taxes are currently paid. Since 1999, less than a majority of Americans (between 38% and 44%) have favored raising the payroll tax for everyone. But people are strongly in favor of raising the earnings ceiling. Since the question was first asked in 1998, a clear majority has been in support – and by 2011, more than two-thirds of all Americans wanted to raise the earnings ceiling, asking better-off employees to pay on more of their earnings.
- When asked about ways to lower benefits, a majority of Americans has consistently opposed reducing the cost of living adjustments that allow Social Security benefits to keep up with inflation. About two-thirds opposed this idea in 2011. But a slight majority of Americans favors reducing Social Security benefits for the wealthy.
- Americans oppose increasing the age of eligibility for full Social Security benefits, but the margin of opposition has declined. In 1998, 70 percent of Americans opposed raising the age of eligibility to 70 years; but by 2011 opposition dropped to 57%.

The survey results summarized here show that rising worries about fiscal sustainability have not undermined public support for Social Security. Americans want the President and Congress to make minor adjustments – with at least as much emphasis on increasing revenues as on trimming future benefits. For decades, Social Security has long had a strong hold on the hearts and minds of Americans and their families. People want Social Security strengthened, not scrapped.

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Read more in Fay Lomax Cook and Meredith Czaplewski, “Public Opinion and Social Insurance: The American Experience,” in *Social Insurance and Social Justice: Social Security, Medicare, and the Campaign against Entitlements*, edited by Leah Rogne, Carroll Estes, Brian Grossman, Brooke Hollister, and Erica Solway (Springer Publishing Company, 2009).