

Media Coverage and Public Views of Social Security

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Policy experts and politicians fiercely disagree over Social Security. According to the program's critics, Social Security produces unsustainable national budget deficits and has promised baby boomers benefits that cannot be delivered. The program's defenders counter that Social Security has the funds to honor its promises for a long time—20 to 25 years—and that moderate changes will ensure the program's health for the next 75 years. Further, defenders argue that constant warnings about a future crisis in the Social Security system unnecessarily focuses attention on the program's problems rather than on its sustained contributions to lowering poverty among the elderly and providing disability and life insurance benefits.¹

What do ordinary Americans think about Social Security? The public's understanding of the program is shaped by the source of its information. Because Social Security is directly experienced by most Americans toward the end of life, the public generally does not learn about the program from personal experience. Instead, Americans rely on information provided by organizations or other individuals. Trusted acquaintances, parents or grandparents are obvious sources of information. None of these sources, though, surpass the media. In two Gallup surveys conducted in February and April of 1994 for the Employee Benefit Research Institute, the public identified newspapers and television as their two primary sources of information about Social Security.

Because of the media's dominant role in providing Americans with information on this topic, journalists wield enormous influence on public opinion through their selection and interpreta-

tion of the sharp divisions among policy makers. We therefore conducted a comprehensive study of media coverage of Social Security in order to evaluate the influence coverage exerted on public understanding of the program.

Methodology

The study examined two distinct samples of news stories. One sample focused on trends and patterns in Associated Press (AP) stories between January 1, 1977 and July 8, 1994. AP reports were used because they represent a "neutral" body of media coverage that is used by many journalists. A representative

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sample of 4,000 stories was drawn by randomly selecting items from a total of 18,392 AP stories that mentioned the terms "Social Security" or "Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance" (OASDI).

The second sample was taken from the period between January 1, 1992 and July 1, 1994, containing the coverage offered by *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *USA Weekend*, *Time*, *Fortune*, ABC News and CNN. The objective was to examine variations in the ways different media forums cover the same issue. A representative sample of 5,476 stories was drawn by randomly

selecting items from a total of 7,218 stories that mentioned the terms "Social Security" or "OASDI."

Stories were retrieved from the NEXIS database. The InfoTrend computer program was used to conduct a computer-assisted coding of the stories.² The program identified the paragraphs that contained discussion of Social Security and then searched for nearby combinations of words that would reveal the particular issues and whether there was support for policy change or not. The program relied on customized computer instructions that were developed and revised after extensive reading of the media stories. In addition, the computer coding was thoroughly checked through independent hand coding of large samples of stories.³

The news stories were analyzed at the paragraph level. Measuring coverage in terms of paragraphs makes it possible to identify the precise space given to a particular issue, its directional slant and its source.

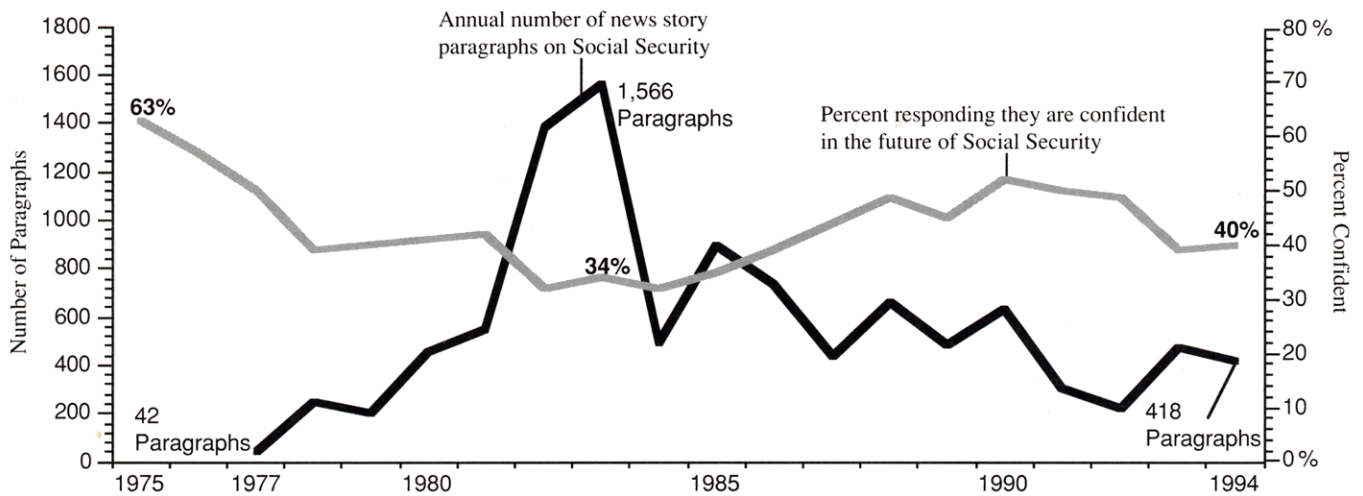
Media Reporting

Media coverage of Social Security is characterized by four noticeable features.

The Social Security Roller Coaster

First, it has fluctuated quite significantly. Figure 1 shows the total annual number of paragraphs devoted to Social Security, and suggests five periods of sustained interest that cluster around the years 1982/83, 1984/85, 1987/88, 1989/90, and 1992/93. The most coverage was given in the early 1980s and then subsequently declined.

**Figure 1 Social Security:
More Media Attention = Less Public Confidence**



Question: How confident are you, yourself, in the future of the Social Security system? Would you say you are very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not at all confident?

Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide for the American Council of Life Insurance, latest that of May, 1994.

Hot Issues

Second, journalists focused their reporting on six distinct dimensions of Social Security: reducing benefits, financial restructuring, reducing eligibility, improving the efficiency of the program’s administration, establishing an independent agency to administer Social Security and making the program voluntary. Rather than covering all six issues equally, the media reported very little on the last two issues. Journalists devoted roughly double the coverage to the topics of benefits and financing rather than efficiency and eligibility.⁴

While the relative attention given these issues has varied since 1977, the issue of benefit reductions was generally the media’s favorite topic. Curtailing benefits dominated reporting during the 1980s and rose into prominence again in 1993, with reports on taxing the wealthiest recipients. The issue of restructuring Social Security’s financing became the hot issue in 1990 on the heels of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s proposed reforms.⁵

Analysis of different media between 1992 and 1994 reveals that television devoted 78% of their coverage of Social Security to benefit and financing issues. In particular, benefit reduction dominated television’s reporting on Social Security, receiving 40% of the coverage. By contrast, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* devoted 61% of their coverage to these issues and gave relatively greater attention to efficiency and eligibility.

Focusing on Problems and Change

Third, the media’s reporting about Social Security generally emphasized the need for changes in policy. In the period since 1977, coverage of Social Security’s problems and the need for reform was nearly double that given to statements favoring the status quo and maintaining the existing program. Figure 2 presents a clear pattern in which the media’s coverage of Social Security’s four main issues has focused on change.⁶

Media coverage favoring benefit reductions dominated during the 1980s, while reports on financial restructuring

peaked in 1990. The media’s coverage of the policy debates regarding benefit reductions sharply differed with public opinion. During the early 1980s, large majorities of the public supported improving Social Security benefits and opposed reductions in Social Security’s cost-of-living adjustments. As Figure 2 shows, news stories overwhelmingly reported support for reducing benefits.

In terms of differences across the various media outlets between 1992 and 1994, television and newspapers both devoted the same percentage of paragraphs to reporting support for change (68%). A higher percent of paragraphs from *USA Today* and magazines reported support for change (76% and 81%, respectively).

Going to Establishment Sources

Fourth, the media regularly went to the President and political party officials when it prepared stories. Republicans were more often used as sources than Democrats, but both parties were presented as favoring reform. Republicans were consistently more likely than

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Democrats to be cited as favoring benefit reductions, while the Republicans were cited less often in stories favoring financial reform. Groups like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) were in a small minority that defended the program, but its defense received relatively little coverage.

Impact on Public Opinion

The media's coverage of Social Security appears to have had a decidedly mixed impact on public opinion. One of the media's primary functions is educa-

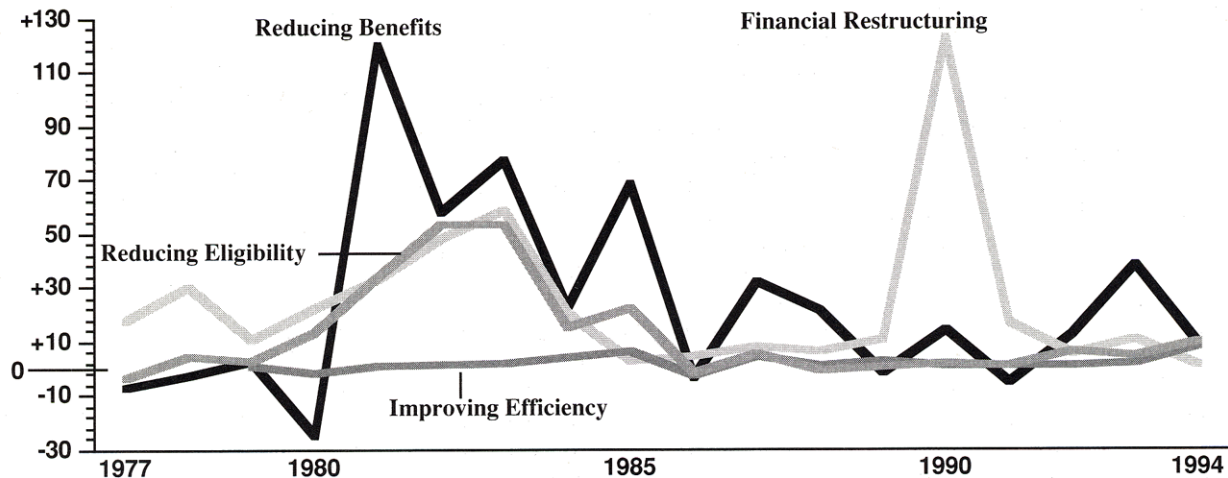
reported knowledge but has done little since to dramatically alter it.

Media coverage shows little impact on how Americans rank national concerns. Two decades of Gallup surveys that ask respondents to identify the country's most important problems fail to pick up significant variations in public concerns about Social Security as compared to other policy issues. Only in 1993 and 1994 did it receive (with Medicare) even passing mention. The media's reporting on Social Security is not apparently pushing it past other policy

when Americans evaluate whether Social Security will be around in the future, they may well be affected by the media's (and, specifically, television's) attention to benefit reductions and the need for financial restructuring because these issues have been highlighted repeatedly.

Figure 1 presents data on Americans' level of confidence in the future of the Social Security system. There is a general relationship between Americans' confidence in Social Security and the media's coverage of the program. When media coverage peaked in the early

Figure 2: Media Support/Opposition for Proposed Social Security Changes



Note: The data represent the net difference between the number of paragraphs focusing on change and the number of paragraphs reporting support for the status quo. Differences above zero represent media coverage favoring reform. Due to low media coverage, stories focusing on "establishing an independent agency to administer Social Security" and "making the program voluntary" have not been presented.

tion. This should be apparent in the public's evaluation of its own level of information. The proportion of respondents who reported that they were very or fairly well informed regarding Social Security shifted from around 50% in the mid-1970s to a nearly stable pattern of 55% to 60% during the past decade or so. Apparently, the media coverage in the early 1980s raised the public's self-

issues to the top of the public's agenda.

Finally, the media may influence the public's overall evaluation of Social Security by the way it frames its reporting. The media's approach to framing Social Security focuses public attention on specific issues, which increase the prominence of those issues when Americans evaluate the program. For instance,

1980s, public confidence bottomed out and then, as coverage fell off, it recovered and reached its highest point in a dozen years by 1990 and 1991. The uptick in reporting in 1993 coincided with another drop in public confidence.

In terms of the public's evaluation of Social Security's future, no news is good news. The media's framing of

Social Security in terms of its problems and continual need for change presumably has had the effect of raising questions about the program's health and increasing Americans' anxiety about whether it will be there for them.

Caught in a Bind

Social Security is caught in a contradictory dynamic. On the one hand, it clearly requires periodic change to maintain the program and public confidence. Even Social Security's most ardent defenders recognize the need for moderate reforms to adjust the program to evolving conditions. The news media have been up to the task of providing ample coverage of proposed reforms. On the other hand, the media's reporting of the program's problems and need for change appear to activate public anxieties.

Journalists' disproportionate attention to Social Security's challenges may be driven by policy debate. But, there are clear cases of media distortion in the coverage of Social Security. One important recent illustration involves the establishment of an independent Social Security agency in 1994. The new agency represented a significant administrative change, yet it received little coverage. The independent agency case suggests that the media did not simply

report real-world events with equal weight. Rather, the media selectively emphasized the negative, zeroing in on the contentious issues of benefit reduction and financial restructuring in the place of reporting about significant administrative change.

The problem is balance. Those committed to maintaining Social Security must wrestle with how to address the program's difficulties without allowing these efforts to define how the media

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and the general public understand the program. Media coverage over the past eighteen years has failed to achieve this kind of balance. Reporters have provided disproportionate coverage of Social Security's problems and a relative undercoverage of the program's strengths and contributions. Focusing on problems and needed change has crowded out stories about Social Security's strengths and stability. The result is that the media have delivered a consistent message to the public: Social Security is very difficult to sustain without constant doctoring.

Endnotes:

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¹ Theodore Marmor, Jerry Mashaw, and Philip Harvey, *America's Misunderstood Welfare State* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

² For further information on this process, see David Fan, *Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988).

³ A more extensive discussion of this study's methodology is available upon request.

⁴ The total annual number of paragraphs of stories on Social Security (displayed in Figure 1) is greater than the sum totals of the six policy issues. This is because the total Social Security count includes all stories that mention the program, while the six policy dimensions were more discriminating, focusing more narrowly on detailed policy reports.

⁵ Legislation in 1983 attempted to put Social Security on a secure financial footing over the following 75 years, but unintentionally created a funding scheme that would have accumulated a very large reserve during the next four or five decades, which would be used up during the subsequent two or three decades. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan led a charge to move back to pay-as-you-go financing in order to end the unintentional accumulation of a very large reserve.

⁶ Because of the relatively small number of cases, the study's analysis of the media's coverage against changing the financing structure and administrative efficiency is not reliable; nor is coverage that favors change to improve administrative efficiency.



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