

Critical Thinking Resources for Social Security  
[American Enterprise Institute](#)

The AEI describes itself as dedicated to “limited government, private enterprise, individual liberty and responsibility, vigilant and effective defense and foreign policies, political accountability and open debate.”

The AEI does not disclose donors but says that in 2003 it received 36 percent of its funding from individuals, 35 percent from foundations and 23 percent from corporations.

The link on the website to short publications leads to the organization’s briefer research reports and findings; visitors can also find resources classified by research area.

Comments: Its standards for factual accuracy are high, though its reports have a distinctly partisan tilt.

Political Leanings: Pro-business

[Brookings Institution](#)

Brookings is the oldest and one of the best-known of the Washington-based “think tanks,” tracing its origins back to 1916 and founder Robert Somers Brookings, a wealthy St. Louis businessman. Its scholars generally have very strong academic credentials.

Reports from the institution and its scholars can be viewed by research programs, policy centers and research projects. They fall mainly into the categories of competitiveness, education, migration, health care or energy security.

Brookings says it is funded by “foundations, corporations, and individuals, and to a lesser extent by endowment income.”

Comments: Brookings has a well-earned reputation for scholarly excellence. Its reports are, for the most part, clearly written and can be fine guides to understanding how government programs work, or don't work. It has a reputation for leaning slightly to the left.

Political Leanings: Liberal

[Cato Institute](#)

The Cato Institute describes its work as broadening public-policy debate on “individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace.” For the last decade, Cato has supported Social Security reform through private accounts and championed deregulation of the drug industry. Cato was founded in 1977 by Edward H. Crane, a chartered financial analyst and former vice president of Alliance Capital Management Group. Most of Cato’s funding comes from private foundations and individuals, with only a small

amount from corporations.

Cato is thought of as a libertarian think tank, and its scholars tend to argue for free markets and against taxes and government regulation. They also strongly reject government infringement on individual rights.

Cato's publications and reports can be explored by research area, which include defense and national security, constitutional issues, and a variety of domestic issues. The institute hosts a separate site focusing on Social Security.

Comments: Cato's research is thorough and well-documented, and advances a libertarian agenda.

Political Leanings: Libertarian

### [Center for American Progress](#)

Founded in 2003 by former Clinton White House Chief of Staff John Podesta, the Center for American Progress describes itself as “progressive.” Many of its experts once worked in Democratic presidential administrations or for Democrats on Capitol Hill. According to its website, the center seeks to “combine bold policy ideas with a modern communications platform to help shape the national debate, expose the hollowness of conservative governing philosophy, and challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter.”

The center's focus covers a wide range of issues, including energy, health care, the economy, civil rights, immigration, welfare and others.

Unlike many think tanks, the center has a lobbying and advocacy offshoot, called the Center for American Progress Action Fund. The Action Fund describes itself as “the sister advocacy organization of the Center for American Progress.”

Comments: The center's website reflects its strong liberal bent.

Political Leanings: Liberal

### [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities says in its mission statement that it works “at the federal and state levels on fiscal policy and public programs that affect low- and moderate-income families and individuals.”

The center's website includes links to reports classified by issue area, such as Social Security, taxes and health policy. It also offers a section analyzing state and local policy.

Comments: The center generally argues for more spending for social programs (or fewer cuts) and against cutting taxes or raising military spending. The facts it cites in support of

its arguments are generally solid and well-documented, though sometimes one-sided.

Political Leanings: Liberal

### [Congressional Research Service](#)

The Library of Congress houses the Congressional Research Service, “the public policy research arm of the United States Congress.” The CRS performs independent, nonpartisan and objective research for members of Congress and their staffs on a nearly endless array of issues. The Librarian of Congress appoints the director of the CRS, which has a large, knowledgeable staff and receives a sizable budget.

The CRS no longer releases its reports to the general public, but many can be found fairly easily online. The U.S. State Department and independent groups including the Law Librarian’s Society of Washington, D.C., and the National Council for Science and the Environment post the full text of some CRS reports relating to each group’s area of interest. The Open CRS Network website has a search engine that combines the resources of several, though not all, of these sites. The public can also purchase reports from some websites. And if time permits, individuals can request paper copies of specific reports directly from their senator or representative.

The CRS is acclaimed for its objective and thorough analyses. Authors are aware that they are writing for an audience that includes both Republicans and Democrats, and they are meticulous about avoiding partisanship.

### [Economic Policy Institute](#)

Founded in 1986, the EPI says it aims to broaden the economic policy debate “to include the interests of low- and middle-income workers.”

Although “nonpartisan” for tax purposes — it is a public charity — the EPI’s board includes presidents of several large labor unions that regularly back Democrats for election. The EPI says it gets about 30 percent of its funding from labor unions, 60 percent from foundations, and a small amount from individuals and corporations.

The EPI releases its well-known State of Working America report annually, and the organization offers both extensive statistical data and short summaries of domestic economic conditions.

Comments: The EPI tends to highlight any indication that workers and the poor are suffering, while ignoring any evidence to the contrary.

Political Leanings: Liberal, Pro-labor

### [Employment Policies Institute](#)

The Employment Policies Institute focuses on labor issues and, especially, the debate over the minimum and living wages. Its studies nearly all conclude that raising the minimum wage would be detrimental to low-income workers and to the economy generally. The group further maintains that the “living wage campaign” amounts to “an organized effort to force employees to inject a welfare mentality into the workplace.” The name and acronym of the group are very similar to those of the much older, more liberal Economic Policy Institute, but its ideology couldn’t be more different.

The Employment Policy Institute’s publications are fully searchable, though new publications appear somewhat infrequently.

Comments: The EPI's conclusions are consistently sympathetic to business interests.

Political Leanings: Conservative

### [FactCheck.org](#)

According to its website, FactCheck.org is a “nonpartisan, nonprofit ‘consumer advocate’ for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics.” Its staff monitors factual accuracy in American politics, looking at what’s being said in TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and the like.

The website has three main outlets for its work: Articles, the FactCheck Wire (for shorter items or ones of less national interest) and Ask FactCheck (in which the group’s staff members answer questions sent in by readers, often about chain e-mails on political subjects). The group debunks myths, falsehoods and exaggerations by politicians and outside groups involved in election campaigns and public policy debates. Examples of FactCheck.org’s work include stories about misinformation spread during public policy debates such as the one on overhauling the health care system, and inaccurate claims made during election campaigns such as John McCain’s position on Medicare or Barack Obama’s birthplace. The group’s work is often cited by other media organizations.

FactCheck.org is funded by, and is a project of, the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which was established by the Annenberg Foundation with a \$20 million endowment in 1993. The Annenberg Foundation also made additional grants to support FactCheck.org’s work. The APPC accepts no funding from business corporations, labor unions, political parties, lobbying organizations or individuals. In 2010, FactCheck.org began accepting donations from individual members of the public. It does not accept any funds from corporations, unions, partisan organizations or advocacy groups.

Political Leanings: None

### [Heritage Foundation](#)

The Heritage Foundation, one of the nation’s best-known think tanks on the right, says its mission is to “formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles

of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.”

Heritage scholars generally argues for lower taxes, less spending for social programs and less government regulation of business. When Heritage criticizes Republicans it is often for being too liberal: It supported President Bush’s first-term tax cuts, for example, but criticized his expansion of Medicare to cover prescription drugs.

Comments: Facts cited by Heritage are generally solid and well-documented, though quite often they reflect only one side of an ideological debate.

Political Leanings: Strongly conservative

### [Librarians’ Internet Index](#)

Librarians’ Internet Index is a compendium of links and descriptions of websites that have been selected by a team of librarians. Publicly funded by the states of California and Washington, the site includes more than 20,000 entries that focus on a host of topics, from politics and legal issues to film and sports. LII is produced by six paid consultants who are assisted by more than 40 librarian contributors.

Started by a reference librarian in the early 1990s, LII is now under the management of the Peninsula Library System, a consortium of public and community college libraries in California. In 2002, the site launched a more limited partnership with Washington State Library, and it offers numerous websites of interest to those two states. Most of LII’s money comes from the California State Library, but site managers have been exploring other funding sources.

Users can subscribe to a free weekly newsletter that highlights various websites. It’s also possible to search the site or browse the links by 14 main topic areas and hundreds of subtopics. Visitors can narrow each list of sites by clicking on additional topics. The websites that LII features must meet various criteria, which include whether information is available for free and whether it’s credible.

Comments: LII is a valuable tool for researching any number of topics. The sheer volume of vetted websites is impressive. The amount of material, however, sometimes leads to rather eclectic lists of sites for a given topic and some misclassification. Specific searches yield the best results.

Political Leanings: None

### [National Academy of Social Insurance](#)

The National Academy of Social Insurance is a nonprofit organization that evaluates economic security programs for people out of work due to disability, unemployment or retirement. It says its mission is “to promote understanding and informed policymaking

on social insurance and related programs through research, public education, training, and the open exchange of ideas.” The NASI’s work is funded by foundation grants; contributions from corporations, labor unions and individuals; and membership dues. The board of directors is made up of former Social Security Administration officials, academics, actuaries, and government and private sector experts.

Visitors can search the NASI’s website by subject. The main page links to specific areas focusing on Medicare and Social Security.

Comments: The NASI has no political agenda. While its scholars have personal policy preferences, its papers adhere to the highest standards of objectivity.

Political Leanings: None

### [Regulations.gov](#)

Regulations.gov was set up in 2003 to better equip citizens to find, view and comment upon the vast array of federal regulations.

After Congress passes laws, federal agencies are responsible for enforcing them. They use regulations to accomplish that task, spelling out in detail how specific statutes are to be implemented. Each new proposed regulation must go through a notice-and-comment process, meaning that an agency must publicly announce a proposed regulation and then allow citizens the chance to weigh in. Keeping track of these draft rules once was a daunting project, as there are thousands of federal regulatory agencies. Regulations.gov simplifies the process by collecting proposed regulations from each federal agency and offering a forum for submitting comments on them.

The site also catalogs existing federal regulations, so that anyone wanting to check the wording of rules that were issued to implement, say, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act can find them here.

The site can be searched by keywords, phrases or rule numbers. A short glossary of regulatory terms is provided, as is an extensive user guide. The site also includes an RSS feed that provides up-to-the-minute notice of new federal regulations.

Comments: The basic keyword search is straightforward, but the most powerful search functions require considerable knowledge of the regulatory process. If you know what you are looking for, Regulations.gov offers one-stop shopping. It is less useful for casual browsing and novices.

### [Social Security Administration](#)

Within the SSA, the office of the chief actuary analyzes the financial health of the Social Security trust funds and makes an estimate of when the funds will be exhausted. The office is run by a career professional rather than a political appointee, and its research and

analysis is used and respected by those on all sides of issues related to Social Security.

Each year, the Trustees of the Social Security and Medicare trust funds offer an account of the status of those funds. The 2009 report can be accessed [here](#), and reports from previous years are also available. The chief actuary's office also provides detailed studies of some of the various proposals for addressing the question of Social Security's long-term solvency. Visitors to the site can even find a list of the most popular baby names, which can be sorted by year and searched.

Comments: While some materials generated by the SSA have come under fire for seeming to endorse certain approaches for changing the Social Security program, the Trustees' reports and research generated by the chief actuary offer respected and insightful analysis.

Political Leanings: Neutral

### [Urban Institute](#)

The Urban Institute says it is a “nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization” focusing on “the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation.” It has its roots in the Great Society era of government anti-poverty programs; it was chartered by a blue-ribbon commission assembled by President Lyndon Johnson to examine problems and issues faced by the nation's urban populations.

The Urban Institute's website offers detailed information, organized both by topic and by policy center, which are research arms within the Institute that focus on specific areas. The Issues in Focus section offers summaries of the group's research, along with links to more in-depth reports relating to specific areas of policy disputes, such as Social Security reform, immigration and education. The institute also maintains a Policy Decoder section, which is a helpful glossary of the more technical terms used in debates about public policy and social programs.

Comments: Though liberal in its leanings, the institute's scholarship is widely respected.

Political Leanings: Liberal

### [USA.gov](#)

USA.gov calls itself “the official U.S. gateway to all government information.” The U.S. General Services Administration's Office of Citizen Services and Communications oversees the website, which offers a library of links to government agencies, information about particular laws and regulations, and data and statistics. Visitors can get pertinent links classified by topic and access links to state and local governments as well.

Comments: USA.gov can be a good place to begin for researchers who are unsure of where to look first.

## Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia where articles may be written or edited by any user who creates a free account. It offers a vast amount of easily accessible information; the English version contained more than 3.2 million articles as of March 2009. But it can't guarantee accuracy and sometimes has been dramatically wrong.

Individuals who write and edit articles for Wikipedia are volunteers. In theory, they bring a vast collective knowledge to bear and quickly discover and correct any biased or inaccurate entries. Advocates say this bottom-up approach produces a product that rivals traditional, top-down encyclopedias in which articles are written by individual experts chosen by professional editors. Indeed, a study in the December 15, 2005, journal *Nature* reported that in a sample of 42 entries on scientific topics, its experts found 162 errors in Wikipedia compared with 123 errors in *Britannica*. However, *Britannica* later challenged the *Nature* study as "fatally flawed" and filled with "flagrant errors."

The weakness of Wikipedia's anybody-can-edit policy was demonstrated dramatically when a false biographical entry on John Seigenthaler Sr., former editorial director of *USA Today*, went uncorrected for four months in 2005. It claimed Seigenthaler had a role in the assassinations of former President John Kennedy and his brother Robert. Those false claims were the work of a 38-year-old employee of a Nashville delivery service, Brian Chase, who had posted the libels as a joke and who later apologized to Seigenthaler. Numerous other instances of false Wikipedia entries have come to light since.

Wikipedia's own founder, Jimmy Wales, publicly cautions students against citing it as an authoritative source. In June 2006, at a conference sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, he said that he gets about 10 e-mails a week saying, "Please help me. I got an F on my paper because I cited Wikipedia." Wales said those comments make him think to himself: "For God sake, you're in college; don't cite the encyclopedia."

Wikipedia is "pretty good," Wales said, "but you have to be careful with it. It's good enough knowledge, depending on what your purpose is."

Comments: Wikipedia is a useful resource when beginning research on an unfamiliar topic, but it's not always reliable. Information needs to be checked against original sources, but this is often difficult due to a frequent lack of footnotes.

Political Leanings: None