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Donald Trump Promised Not To Cut Social Security, But His Transition Team May Have Other Ideas

The President-elect has surrounded himself with Republicans who have backed privatizing the program.

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President-elect Donald Trump said during his campaign that he did not want to cut Social Security benefits, but the Republicans he has hired to manage the program have made no such commitment.

Tom Leppert, the Trump transition team's point person on Social Security, has in the past advocated for privatizing and cutting the popular retirement program. Leppert offered detailed policy positions that included raising the Social Security retirement age and partially privatizing the program when he ran for U.S. Senate in Texas 2012.

“Trump’s Social Security transition team is stacked with people who want to cut and privatize the system,” said Nancy Altman, co-director of the group Social Security Works, which opposes benefit cuts, in an emailed statement. Trump said he didn’t support cutting benefits, she noted.

“If he meant what he said, he needs to renounce and replace the Social Security appointees immediately,” Altman said.

Trump repeatedly said during the campaign that he didn’t want to mess with Social Security benefits, which keep millions of older Americans out of poverty.

“It is my intention to leave Social Security as it is,” he said in March at a Republican primary debate.

Social Security will not be able to pay out full benefits in 2034 if Congress does nothing to boost the program’s finances. Broadly speaking, progressives favor raising revenue to close the long-term funding gap, while conservatives prefer benefit reductions.

Trump implied on the campaign trail that reducing fraud and growing the economy would be enough to shore up Social Security’s finances. Experts on all sides agree that neither of those techniques would be nearly sufficient to address the problem.

At least two other figures assigned to manage the Social Security Administration transition are also long-time proponents of privatization and other benefit cuts.

Mike Korbey, who is heading the SSA transition, according to an organizational chart of top transition officials, is a former lobbyist who has advocated privatizing Social Security.

While lobbying for the conservative United Seniors Association in the mid-1990s, Korbey called Social Security “a failed system, broken and bankrupt.”

Korbey went on to serve as a senior adviser to SSA’s deputy commissioner in the George W. Bush administration, where he promoted the then president’s plan to privatize the program.

Dorcas Hardy, a commissioner of the SSA during the Reagan administration, is on the Trump administration’s SSA transition team, according to an email The Intercept obtained. Hardy called for privatizing Social Security while at the libertarian Cato Institute in 1995.

The Social Security Administration, the federal agency that processes Social Security claims and sends out benefits, does not have the power to reshape the program. It’s up to Congress and the president to make changes such as change benefits.

But as Korbey’s 2005 activism shows, SSA’s political appointees can use their perch to advance a sitting administration’s agenda for the program. Naming officials like Leppert, Korbey and Hardy suggests that the Trump administration does not consider Social Security cuts off limits, no matter how many times Trump promised not to touch it on the campaign trail.

The Trump transition did not respond to a request for comment on whether Leppert, Korbey or Hardy’s roles indicated that Trump would not be keeping his campaign promise.

And Republicans in Congress have long embraced cutting benefits, including by raising Social Security’s retirement age, tinkering with the benefit formula, or privatizing the program. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and Vice President-elect Mike Pence both supported George W. Bush’ privatization push in 2005. The effort fizzled amid tepid popular support and Democratic charges that it would leave seniors vulnerable.

For his part, Ryan has said he wants to prioritize privatizing Medicare, indicating that addressing Social Security is less urgent.

That is not stopping Democrats and their allies, however, from sounding the alarm about the threat a Trump administration poses for Social Security as well.

Brad Woodhouse, director of Americans United for Change, an advocacy group that supports Democrats, said in an email the transition team makeup indicated Trump would favor cutting Social Security.

“If Trump’s new ‘point man’ on shaping policy for the Social Security Administration is any clue, the American people will be surprised with a plan they didn’t vote for to privatize the system and let Wall Street gamble away their hard-earned benefits, just as President Bush did in 2005,” Woodhouse said.