



## Fearing Backlash, Republicans Backpedal on Social Security and Medicare Cuts

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In 2022, Senator Rick Scott (R-Florida) called for Social Security and Medicare to sunset every five years. The senator's 12-point plan to "rescue America," as he grandiosely put it, would subject all major benefits programs, including those upon which tens of millions of seniors rely, to congressional review. The plan also raised the possibility that these bedrock benefits could be drastically cut, or that a conservative Congress could raise the age at which Americans become eligible for them.

Scott's ideas, which have long been popular with libertarian think tanks such as the Cato Institute, unsurprisingly ran into a buzzsaw of opposition. Everyone from Joe Biden to Donald Trump piled onto the proposal.

In mid-February of this year, facing relentless criticism from Democrats — who saw Scott's quest as a vast political gift to their party — as well as criticism from members of his own party, Scott backpedaled, taking Social Security and Medicare off the list of benefits that he hoped to sunset.

Scott hasn't, of course, suddenly had an ethical epiphany; he's as essentially hostile to the social safety net in 2023 as he was in 2022. So, too, is the GOP as a whole. But, they have been forced to bow somewhat to the political realities. And those realities are pretty straightforward: while GOP voters, who are disproportionately older, tend to like the idea of making poor people work for benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps, despite how dramatically these programs serve the GOP base, many GOP voters loathe the idea of putting popular benefits like Social Security and Medicare — which are enjoyed by older people at all income levels — on the line, and would likely shift their political allegiances to stop such proposals from taking effect.

Nearly two decades ago, in 2005, President George W. Bush proposed privatizing Social Security and letting individuals invest their Social Security accounts in the stock market — and the idea was met with strong opposition from most voters. The party quickly dropped its plans, though, even a decade later, Mitch McConnell was still telling people that he regretted that the idea hadn't reached fruition.

Republicans claim they don't want to cut Social Security — but they're working behind the scenes to do just that.

These days, three-quarters of American adults, and nearly 7 out of every 10 GOP voters, tell pollsters that no cuts should be made to Social Security.

In 2011, the newly empowered Tea Party majority in Congress, led by Paul Ryan, pushed to convert Medicare into a voucher-based program. But even at the high water mark of the Tea Party's support, in an era when opposition to the Affordable Care Act and to government involvement in the health care system was most pronounced, a plurality of voters still favored keeping the Medicare system as it was. The voucher proposal went nowhere.

Since then, support for government involvement in the provision of health care has only grown, the Affordable Care Act has become a core — and broadly accepted — part of the social safety net, and more than a third of Americans have come to support single-payer health care.

At last week's dueling conservative conferences, the Club for Growth and CPAC, the GOP previewed how it may go to war with itself over how best to balance the budget. The star attraction at the Club for Growth was Florida governor Ron DeSantis, long a close ally of Senator Scott, and someone who, as a Freedom Caucus congressman, long supported sweeping cuts to all parts of the safety net system. The star of the show at CPAC was ex-president Trump.

Over the past year, DeSantis and Trump have repeatedly tried to outbid each other on who can swing furthest to the right on a range of culture war issues, on immigration, on the COVID-19 crisis, and many other political litmus test issues for the Republican base. But on Social Security and Medicare, Trump has been more than happy to position himself as more of a centrist than his Florida rival, repeatedly assailing him for voting, while in Congress, to raise the eligibility age for Medicare.

DeSantis needs groups like the Club for Growth to back him, and that organization has long supported Scott and his willingness to fight what it terms "reckless spending in the U.S. Senate."

Trump warred against the Club for Growth, and its unwillingness to defend core benefits for the elderly, in 2016. He now repeatedly attacks it for being an elitist organization. As such, the DeSantis-Club for Growth nexus might just be a perfect foil for him. Earlier this month, Trump posted on his social media platform Truth Social that DeSantis "voted THREE TIMES to cut and destroy Social Security," that he supported increasing the retirement age to at least 70, and that he voted to "radically CUT MEDICARE."

There is, of course, nothing particularly principled in Trump's defense of Social Security and Medicare. He is, after all, a grandmaster of political opportunism when it comes to the safety net.

Indeed, during his presidency, Trump repeatedly pushed for extreme cuts to food stamps. In fact, in his last budget proposal before he left office, he advocated \$180 billion in cuts to the program over 10 years, representing a nearly 30 percent cut, and urged Congress to impose work requirements on recipients. He signed a "proclamation" barring immigrants from entering the country if they could not prove that they could pay for their own health care. He made it all but

impossible for noncitizen immigrants already living in the U.S. to access any public benefits. He pushed a work requirement for Medicaid. He proposed limits on workers comp for workers injured on the job. And the list goes on.

In all of those cases, Trump was beating up on groups that the GOP base loves to despise: on immigrants, on unions, on unemployed people who rely on public benefits programs, and so on.

If Trump thought that the GOP base wanted cuts to Social Security and to Medicare, it seems clear that in a heartbeat he would pivot and advocate those cuts. But in this instance, Trump appears to understand that the GOP base has no stomach for such cuts, and he is probably right.

For Dean Baker, co-founder of the D.C.-based Center for Economic and Policy Research, this reflects an ongoing political struggle within the GOP. “The mainstream of the Republican Party had for years pushed for cuts to Medicare and Social Security, and got their asses kicked for it repeatedly,” he told me. “Protecting Social Security and Medicare was [Bill] Clinton’s re-election campaign. Trump did an about-face and said that he was going to protect them, and of course, cleaned up in the 2016 primaries.”

Baker believes that “there are still plenty of traditional Republicans who would like to cut these programs, but they have to go against Trump and his army to make the case. That makes it very hard for them to do, but they are not about to give up.”

All of this should make for interesting politics in the next several months. The GOP is tying itself in knots trying to work out a budget proposal that meets the balanced budget requirements set by the party’s hard right, while not touching Social Security and Medicare and not raising any taxes. As the country inches closer to a catastrophic debt default, with McCarthy’s House members unwilling to vote to raise the debt ceiling without harsh cuts to government programs, disputes over what can and can’t be cut will likely continue to take center stage in GOP policy debates. And looming over it all will be Trump, angling for any opportunity to paint his primary opponents as weak on Social Security and Medicare protections.