

Social Security Takes Center Stage in Tight Races

By [Jesse Zwick](#) 10/21/10 9:18 AM

In the Pennsylvania Senate race, where Rep. Joe Sestak (D) and former Rep. Pat Toomey (R) are locked in a virtual tie in the polls, the two candidates debated last night and exchanged a number of blows over the issue of Social Security. Sestak [accused](#) Toomey of wanting to “take the security out of Social Security” by “risking [it] on the stock market,” while Toomey shot back that “Joe has no solutions for this,” besides raising taxes and cutting benefits.

Sestak’s insistence on the issue is part of a growing trend among Democratic candidates, who appear to have finally gained some traction by going on the attack against the plans of some Republicans to privatize or otherwise alter the popular entitlement program. He’s among the most recent Democratic candidates to sign a pledge on the issue at [SocialSecurityProtectors.com](#), a campaign launched by the Progressive Change Campaign Committee.

PCCC co-founder Stephanie Taylor says the campaign is a part of a broader mission of “saving the Democratic Party from itself. Progressive are working with bold candidates and members of Congress to show party leadership how to go on offense, run progressively, and win — especially on issues like Social Security, where the public is so clearly on our side.”

And while Toomey and other Senate candidates like Nevada’s Sharron Angle, who famously told Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to “man up” about the issue last week, appear unfazed by the Democrats’ new counterattack, [a number of House GOP candidates I spoke to about deficit reduction](#) do seem to be taking it to heart:

“I don’t think it’s realistic to believe that Congress is going to make those cuts to Social Security,” said [Steve] Chabot of Ohio. “It’s not going to happen, so to act like it’s going to happen is just going to scare seniors, which is what Democrats do in every election.”

Meanwhile, other GOP House candidates who advocate overhauling the program were careful to insert many caveats into their plans:

“We do need to look at entitlements, realizing of course that there are a lot of people who rely on our current system,” said the campaign manager for Tom Reed, who is favored to win the open House seat in New York’s 29th District. “So a promise made must be a promise kept, but for future generations we need to look at what levels they’ll be at down the road.”

“I’m in favor of personal [savings] accounts,” said Benishek, “but [I want to] guarantee that they don’t lose any money.”

Steve Griffin, who is leading the House race in Arkansas’ Second District, proposes reforming entitlement spending on his campaign website but also opposes privatizing social security or raising the age at which one qualifies for benefits. (He did not respond to repeated requests for more details about his plan.)

That’s a “have your cake and eat it too” kind of plan for Social Security, says Tad DeHaven, budget analyst at the Cato Institute, but it illustrates the political difficulties faced by Republican candidates who want to see real reform but also must run for re-election.


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