



NATIONAL ACADEMY
OF SOCIAL INSURANCE

Social Security at 90:

A Bipartisan Roadmap for the Program's Future

A Survey with Trade-Off Analysis
January 2025

National Academy of Social Insurance
AARP | NIRS | U.S. Chamber of Commerce



Executive Summary

As it marks its 90th anniversary, Social Security has become the foundation of economic security for almost all Americans, providing a suite of insurance that protects workers and their families in the event of retirement, disability, or death.

However, Social Security faces a long-term financing gap. According to the 2024 trustees report, Social Security will have sufficient funds to pay all scheduled benefits until 2035. While lawmakers have never failed to act to ensure that legislated benefits are paid in full, if Congress does not act, the trustees project that revenues coming into the system from worker and employer contributions and from beneficiaries' income taxes on benefits would cover just over 80 percent of scheduled benefits that year. All current and future beneficiaries would see an across-the-board benefit reduction sufficient to cover the projected shortfall in 2035.

This study explores Americans' preferred approach to addressing Social Security's financing gap. The National Academy of Social Insurance, AARP, the National Institute on Retirement Security, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce collaborated with Greenwald Research to conduct a survey in October and November of 2024. Unlike the vast majority of existing public opinion research on Social Security, this survey included trade-off analysis to capture a more holistic picture of Americans' views on how lawmakers should address the program's finances.

Key Findings

Social Security is the Cornerstone of Americans' Retirement Security

A key finding is the importance of Social Security to Americans' retirement security. Across income and education levels, political lines, and generations, virtually all respondents who are not currently receiving benefits (81 percent) stated that Social Security will be important or very important to their monthly income when they retire; just 4 percent said it would not be important.

Americans Want to Strengthen the Program's Finances by Raising Revenues

This survey's primary finding is that Americans overwhelmingly want to see Social Security's financing gap closed by bringing in more revenues—and are willing to contribute more to strengthen the program's finances. When asked which statement comes closest to their view, 85 percent of respondents selected either that we should ensure benefits are not reduced, or that we should increase benefits, even if it means raising taxes on some or all Americans. Only 15 percent of respondents selected the response that we shouldn't raise taxes on any American even if it means benefits are reduced. This broad preference for raising revenues versus reducing benefits cuts across political, income, education, and generational lines; among Republicans, more than 3 in 4 prefer increasing revenues to benefit reductions, with more than 9 in 10 Democrats and more than 8 in 10 Independents sharing this preference.

Of all the policies tested, respondents most strongly preferred lifting the payroll tax cap. Respondents also strongly supported increasing the payroll tax rate from 6.2 percent to 7.2 percent for both employers and employees, to ensure solvency and maintain current benefits. Changes that would result in lower benefits, such as raising the retirement age or adopting cost-of-living adjustments, had little support.

Americans Prefer a Package of Changes That Eliminates the Financing Gap and Makes Targeted Improvements to Benefits

The trade-off analysis finds that, compared with the status quo, 82 percent of respondents prefer a package of changes that increases revenues, pays for targeted benefit improvements, and

eliminates the financing gap. Trade-off analysis is a market research technique often used to learn which combinations of product features – or in this case, policy changes – consumers prefer *and* are willing to pay for.

The preferred package would:

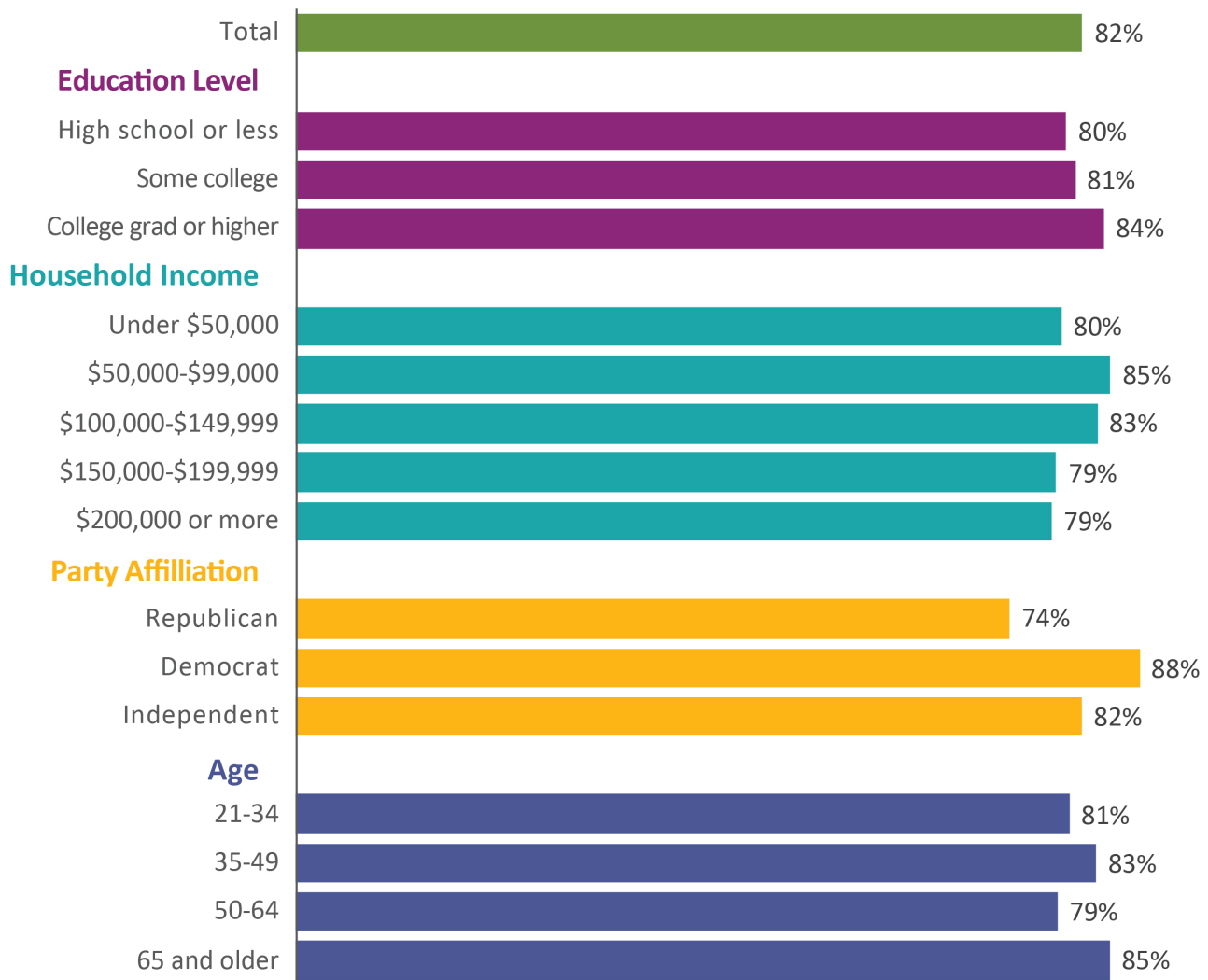
- ***Eliminate the payroll tax cap for earnings above \$400,000.*** The existing cap, currently at \$176,100, would be preserved, while those making more than \$400,000 per year, and their employers, would contribute to Social Security via payroll taxes on wages above that amount. Those affected would not receive additional benefits. This policy option was the most popular of all policy options tested.
- ***Gradually raise the payroll tax rate from 6.2 percent to 7.2 percent for both employers and employees.*** A worker earning \$50,000 per year would contribute an additional \$42 per month. This policy option was nearly as popular as reforming the payroll tax cap.
- ***Adjust the annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to more accurately reflect inflation and the spending habits of older Americans.***
- ***Provide a caregiving credit*** for people who take time out of the workforce to care for children under 6— a group of workers who receive significantly lower benefits than other workers under current law.
- ***Provide a bridge benefit for older workers with a history of physically demanding work,*** to protect them from Social Security’s early retirement reduction.
- ***Reduce benefits for beneficiaries with higher incomes in retirement.*** The preferred package also included an option to reduce Social Security benefits for beneficiaries whose retirement incomes, not including Social Security, are \$60,000 or more per year, or for married couples, \$120,000 or more per year.

These changes together would eliminate Social Security’s projected long-term financing gap, restoring a small surplus. This package is preferred over the status quo by 8 in 10 respondents across political lines, generations, income, and education.

The preferred package included no increase to the retirement age, no across-the-board benefit bump for future beneficiaries, and no change to the current taxation of benefits.

Notably, while the preferred package does include reducing benefits for beneficiaries with significant retirement incomes from non-Social Security sources, that was by far the least popular option in the overall package, and there is an almost even split of opinion on it. It is likely that people opted to reduce benefits for those with higher incomes in retirement to create a package that solved the entire financing gap; without that option, the package described above would not have fully closed the gap. This underscores the value of trade-off analysis: it forces respondents to weigh the costs of options holistically versus considering individual options in isolation.

Figure 1. Support for the Preferred Package of Policy Options in Trade-Off Analysis



The Preferred Package included the most popular policies within each category. These results show the percent selecting this package when compared to 'No Changes'.
Source: National Academy of Social Insurance Survey, January 2025

Certain Changes Have a Strong Impact on the Appeal of Policy Packages

The trade-off analysis shows that the following specific changes strongly increase the appeal of a package:

- Applying payroll tax on earnings over \$400,000 that are taxed for Social Security.
- Gradually increasing the Social Security tax rate from 6.2 percent to 7.2 percent.
- Keeping Social Security's full retirement age at 67 instead of further raising it.

By contrast, the following options strongly decrease a package's appeal:

- Not changing the tax cap.
- Decreasing the cost-of-living adjustment by basing it on a different calculation that increases the amount more slowly than the current method.
- Increasing benefits by \$250 a month for all new beneficiaries.
- Increasing the full retirement age from 67 to 69.

Americans Value and Want to Strengthen Social Security’s Disability Protections

This survey finds that Americans understand that Social Security is more than a retirement program and that they strongly value its disability insurance protections. The overwhelming majority of Americans (90 percent) say that Social Security’s disability insurance would be important to their income if they experienced a work-limiting disability, with just 2 percent saying it would not be important.

The Social Security system also includes a second program, not funded by the trust funds, which provides modest income support to very low-income individuals who are 65 and older and/or disabled and who have very limited resources: Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This survey also finds broad, bipartisan support for reforming SSI’s asset limits, marriage penalties, and income rules, which have not been updated in decades.

A Clear Message to Policymakers

Nearly four generations of Americans—98 percent of the U.S. population alive today—have never lived without Social Security as a bedrock of economic security. The program has never missed a payment in over nine decades. Social Security’s reputation of being the “third rail” of American politics has led to the widespread perception that there is no way to move forward because any changes would elicit enormous backlash. However, this National Academy of Social Insurance survey finds the opposite.

At a time when the nation seems deeply divided about the appropriate size and role of government, it is notable that Americans are united across political, income, education, and generational lines when it comes to their views on Social Security—and their preferred path for the program’s future. This survey finds not only strong bipartisan support for the program itself but also overwhelming agreement that lawmakers should act to close the system’s financing gap by raising revenues needed to keep it on strong footing for the long term. ***The message to Washington is clear: rather than see the gap closed by reducing benefits, Americans want to see Social Security secured through revenue increases, and they are willing to pay more to strengthen the program’s finances.***

“Social Security is one of the most dependable things that we have. You know the first time that you got the Social Security check that it would come again the same time. Right now, I know the second day of every month, it is there.”

Elizabeth R, Virginia, Age 84
