Social policy and the internal dynamics of the senior rights movement

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1 We employ the term “senior rights movement” as a composite of what has elsewhere been referred to as the “gray lobby,” “senior power,” and the “senior movement.”

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Introduction

Given the heterogeneity of older Americans as a group and of the various senior organizations that advocate on their behalf, the existence of a senior rights movement¹ is a laudable achievement. The various frames employed by the senior rights movement in attempts to shape policy decisions have sometimes been co-opted by opponents and even resisted by some organizations within the senior movement itself. This demonstrates the movement’s potential for fragmentation. The role of the various components of the senior movement, including the sometimes internally competitive interest organizations in shaping policy debates and representations of seniors, has been given relatively little attention. In our analysis, policy positions taken and conceptions of aging presented will be discussed in the context of the shared goal of advocating on behalf of seniors, including the outcomes of such efforts. Factors such as the social base, size, organizational structure, and resources—that is, the internal dynamics of the groups—will be shown to influence how decisions are made and why actions are taken (or not taken) by these organizations.

Theoretical framework

A constructivist discourse highlights both symbolic and material aspects of aging issues, with political realities defined and enacted by employing widely-resonating frames. Successful framing of issues is crucial to the social action that transforms societal structures. Since “framing itself is an action” and “reframing is social change” (Lakoff & the Rockridge...
Institute, 2006), we agree with those analysts who view many aging policy changes as both a cause and outcome of the senior rights movement. Policy controversies often involve framing contests making use of various interpretative packages; decisions regarding the symbolism employed to promote a given agenda have consequences (Williamson & Watts-Roy, 1999). We understand such contests as being both between opponents and proponents and among interest organizations themselves.

We build on Resource Mobilization Theory in at least two ways: First, we note the importance of ideology for understanding how interest organizations within movements co-exist (Valocchi, 1996). Second, we emphasize the dialectical relationship between cultural representation and social action/events (Ellingson, 2000) by looking at how discourse makes some forms of action and systems of belief possible and legitimate while eliminating others. In this way, we share the view that “relations of force (broadly construed, resource mobilization) and relations of meaning (framing and identity-construction) constitute two levels of analysis in the study of social movements, not competing explanatory phenomena” (Medvetz, 2006, p. 346).

Frames with the widest public appeal are most likely to influence policy and for this reason framing strategies often reflect dominant political values. The various decisions made and actions taken by specific interest organizations are typically less obvious. That is, analyzing movement outcomes allows us to understand the consequences of framing decisions (Giugni, 1998; Skrentny, 2002). Struggles to determine the context of American public discourse about social justice in old age, including prioritizing efforts, mobilizing opinions, and determining the national agenda, are all pivotal in the formation of aging policies. Understanding how the key interest organizations shape the aging agenda, and which framing devices are utilized, is crucial to understanding both direct and indirect effects of the senior rights movement.

Background

During the 1920s, unemployment and the associated poverty became an increasing problem for older American workers who were being displaced by younger workers. When the massive unemployment of the Great Depression hit in the early 1930s, it became impossible for many older members of society to find work. The oldest and least physically fit members of society were most adversely affected. The unparalleled economic and social devastation of citizens overwhelmed the traditional sources of aid available and produced a desperate need for governmental intervention. The depression heightened the sense of crisis and the call for the provision of social “security.” In concert with elder advocates, groups such as the New Deal reformers, the labor activists, and the nascent field of public health advocates pushed economic security to the center stage of national politics (Klein, 2003).

The upheaval of the early 1930s engendered grass-roots political movements, especially those of the aged unemployed. Various cultural symbols and rhetorical strategies were utilized to frame the public debate over social justice in old age. The decision to present such “security” as based on earned rights rather than a means-tested needs-based program was a strategic decision to frame the debate in a manner that would resonate with the largest audience. These social forces helped establish a perceived need for government intervention in ameliorating the social and economic problems associated with aging; both the social issue and the population in question were deemed “deserving.” This perception of need significantly influenced the definition of aging and the life course, as well as the social roles and rights of senior citizens themselves. The use of radicalism and allegations of being anti-aging as motivations for change significantly aided the movement.

The first national old-age security legislation enacted in the United States was the Social Security Act of 1935, which was fueled by a complex interplay of sociocultural, historical, economic, and political, and demographic factors. In western European countries, progressive social welfare systems designed to provide financial assistance to citizens had been established in the early 1900s. These international developments placed pressure on policy makers in the U.S. to provide adequate support for their senior citizens.

The origins of the senior rights movement can be traced to several loosely organized voluntary associations and prominent individuals who advocated for old-age pensions during the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to uniting previously unorganized and depoliticized workers, these groups also brought together blue- and white-collar older Americans in pursuit of a common goal of public income support (Klein, 2003). In many states, the groups developed informal relationships with labor organizations. Organized labor subsequently played an instrumental role in the development of Social Security policy and these early alliances between labor and pensioners proved vital to its eventual success (Klein, 2003; Schieber & Shoven, 1999).

The Townsend movement (1934), by far the largest senior mass–membership organization of the time, marked the beginning of a long line of efforts to organize senior citizens on a national-scale. Retired physician, Francis E. Townsend, of Long Beach, California, proposed a federal pay-as-you-go (PAYG) pension with a monthly benefit of $200 dollars for every retired citizen aged 60 and older based on three eligibility requirements: to be fully retired, to spend the monies within one month, and to have “their past life free from habitual criminality” (Social Security Administration, n.d.). Although “radical” by design, the Townsend Plan was quick to enlist supporters, particularly poor seniors, whose desperation for economic security provided both a face to the issue’s urgency and mass support for dramatic changes.

The Townsend plan’s dual-pronged promise of justice through immediate aid to seniors in need and rejuvenation of the nation’s economy through forced spending generated wide appeal. The plan involved coordination of seniors throughout the country into local “supper clubs,” the backbone of the organization. These clubs orchestrated political action, provided a forum for communication, and helped maintain morale, all of which facilitated the rapid expansion of the movement. At its peak, 2.2 million enlisted members were advocating the Townsend plan as the nation’s old-age pension system (Social Security Administration, n.d.), providing the appearance of a powerful interest group.

For many politicians, voting for Social Security was the only way to avoid appearing “anti-elderly” other than supporting the Townsend plan. In fact, the 1935 Social Security Act may have been the New Deal Government’s attempt to provide a less drastic solution to the pressing issues of the times (Beland,
2005: Mitchell, 2000). The Townsendites were highly successful in demonstrating that senior citizens could be united into a major lobbying constituency capable of generating public attention and exerting considerable pressure on social policy. The plan was influential in developing a senior coalition that framed Social Security as a pro-elderly position. Although it has been argued that the radical Townsend plan never represented a serious policy alternative, the pressures this movement placed on the federal government contributed to the rapid enactment of old-age pension legislation.

Comparing the interest organizations

Despite opposition from conservative adversaries including powerful professional organizations such as the American Medical Association (AMA), who advocated themes of “American self-reliance” (Quadagno, 2005), the pension reformers of the 1930s convinced the American public of the urgent need for old-age security. Although the 1935 and 1939 Social Security legislation afforded seniors significantly more economic stability, these efforts fell short of solving the problem of economic insecurity in old-age. By the late 1940s the Townsend movement was in a state of decline and largely ceased to be a significant political force in the 1950s. The mid-to late-1950s witnessed a relative paucity of interest organizations capable of providing political pressure on the U.S. government to address senior issues. The 1935 Social Security Act co-opted the senior movement and largely silenced the call for a program embodying social change by way of income redistribution. Although the Act can be viewed as a gesture of symbolic reassurance designed to placate pension reformers, the Townsend plan did keep the issue of old age insecurity visible to the public for many years and in so doing reinforced the legitimacy of—and apparent need for—direct federal intervention in connection with the issue of old age security (Béland, 2005, p. 63). Despite changed times and a new crop of interest organizations, the Townsend plan had successfully united seniors (Amenta, 2006).

As policy issues related to aging slowly began to resurface, the Townsendite senior clubs continued to help organize elders into a senior movement. The growing perceptions of social injustice and a shared political identity among seniors engendered a number of influential voluntary organizations of national scope, including the Gerontological Society of America (1945), the National Retired Teacher’s Association (1947), the National Council on Aging (1950), the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, 1958), the National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC, 1961), the National Caucus of the Black Aged (1970), and the Gray Panthers (1970). Bureaucratic structures, such as the Whitehouse Conference on Aging (1961), the Administration on Aging (1965), and the National Institutes on Aging (1974), were also created. With the establishment of these entities, the senior rights movement experienced a reemergence of the gray lobby, fueled primarily by the threats of mandatory retirement under the Social Security Act. The common goal of preventing forced retirement united these groups. This national aging coalition both established a collective senior identity and fostered individual interest organizations. The histories of AARP, NCSC, and the Gray Panthers are of particular relevance to the analysis presented here.

AARP

The National Retired Teachers Association, founded in 1947, originally sought reform of tax and pension policies affecting retired educators. The alliance with Colonial Penn Insurance Company and New York insurance agent Leonard Davis in order to offer group life insurance—and eventually also health insurance—to NRTA members was met with tremendous enthusiasm (Powell, Branco, & Williamson, 1996). Despite both being opposed to any national health insurance scheme which might detract from their business (Ball, 1995), the life insurance option grew so popular that in 1958 the American Association of Retired Persons (since renamed AARP) was founded to extend benefits to persons who were not teachers. AARP is the most widely-recognized interest organization to emerge within the postwar senior alliance. The association’s original purpose was to improve the social image and status of retirees and its pro-aging frame is clear in their mission statement:

AARP is dedicated to enhancing quality of life for all as we age. We lead positive social change and deliver value to members through information, advocacy and service (AARP, 2006).

Its phenomenal popularity rapidly made AARP one of the largest voluntary organizations in American politics. By the mid-1990s, one in every five U.S. voters belonged to AARP, with approximately 8000 persons a day being added (Powell, 1995a). Today, AARP boasts more than 40 million members over the age of 50, half of whom are still actively employed, and hundreds of thousands of volunteers (AARP, 2010). This translates to over 50% market penetration of their target constituency. Structurally, AARP is comprised of at least four entities: a nonprofit business, a membership organization, a public advocacy group, and a charitable organization. This organizational arrangement has become increasingly visible through the recent designations of AARP™, AARP Foundation™, AARP™ Services, Inc., AARP™ Financial, Inc., and AARP™ Global Network on their homepage (www.AARP.org). Despite acknowledging this demarcation, they present a unified front:

While comprised of different legal entities, AARP speaks with one voice—all united by a common motto: “To serve, not to be served.” (AARP, n.d.).

As a result, AARP has wide-ranging responsibilities serving quite disparate interests and diverse constituencies. Decisions, particularly as related to policy stances, are ultimately made by an appointed board of directors who must take precautions to minimize displeasing members and/or falling prey to media criticism, since such attention could alienate current as well as potential members. From this organizational maintenance perspective, AARP must decide which policy choice alienates the fewest constituents (Binstock, 2005).

AARP has long been a savvy lobbying organization with full-time representation in Washington, D.C. With advocacy groups in all 50 states, they maintain a political presence in every U.S. congressional district (Powell, 1995b). In the 1970s, a top-priority of AARP was to eradicate the mandatory retirement age, and in 1978 they played an instrumental role...
in increasing the age from sixty-five to seventy\(^2\) largely by framing seniors as highly productive members of society. Although not a total victory (i.e., the age was raised to 70, but not eliminated), it did represent a major step towards realizing their goal. More recent efforts in this vein have focused on ensuring that retirees will not lose their benefits if they choose to remain working (within specified parameters) (Rand, 2009).

**NCSC/ARA**

The second largest mass-membership group, originally called the Senior Citizens for Kennedy, was transformed into the National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC) in 1961 by the Democratic National Committee and the labor unions. By persuading Democrats that seniors were a significant electoral constituency, NCSC summoned a crucial turning point in the political clout of seniors (Williamson, Evans, & Powell, 1982). Efforts to achieve further old-age policy reforms were strengthened by the formation of a successful alliance between labor organizations, namely the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and the emerging senior organizations. Their strong ties with labor unions fostered a framing of NCSC as a working-class oriented agency. Through alignment with low-income workers, the nationwide network of senior interest organizations coalesced into a potent lobby group by the early 1960s.

Whereas AARP focused on eliminating mandatory retirement, NCSC addressed issues of interest to low-income retirees, such as protection of Social Security benefits and national health insurance. This strategy both increased their membership (to include the working classes) and narrowed their focus (to targeted issues). The NCSC’s fundamental and unwavering commitment to Social Security and its desire to expand the program led to grass-roots lobbying efforts—locally and in Washington—that were prominent both in the passage of Medicare and 1972 Social Security amendments.

Medicare, considered the most far-reaching addition to Social Security, was enacted in 1965 to cover acute care benefits for retired workers and their spouses and previously unqualified seniors (through monthly premiums). Prior to Medicare’s passage, close to half of Americans over 65 were without health insurance (Freidland, 2005). The debates over Medicare were heated, with vehement opposition. In an attempt to respond to the needs of retirees, the AFL-CIO joined efforts to get Medicare legislation enacted (Marmor, 2000). They mobilized their extensive union network of state federations and local chapters, organized a grassroots senior citizens’ movement, and supported Democratic Party members who served on key congressional committees, including the support of hospital administrators and insurance companies. Such efforts increased the “symbolic legitimacy” (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001) of the gray lobby and the AFL-CIO successfully neutralized the AMA (Quadagno, 2005, p. 206). A strategy that proved particularly helpful was the framing of Medicare as social insurance and as a social contract to increase a sense of entitlement and reduce the tendency to associate such programs with charity (Marmor, 2000; Smith, 2002); this rights-based frame echoes the original Social Security legislation of the senior movement that positioned the aged as disadvantaged and deserving (Binstock, 1983).

In addition to the creation of Supplemental Security Income, the 1972 amendments included a 20% increase in benefits, annual cost of living adjustments, comparable male and female benefits, and extended coverage to dependent grandchildren, widowers at age 60, and disabled persons.

Although these policy debates were fundamentally shaped by larger social forces, support for old-age benefits was, in part, linked to the perception of seniors as needy and deserving (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001). Compared to AARP, the NCSC was far more successful in establishing a complete commitment to these major Social Security amendments. This was related to their frame alignment with the working poor and subsequent ties with the AFL-CIO, a much larger and more powerful interest group. Since their combined political strength far exceeded that which the NCSC could have wielded alone, it is plausible that Medicare would never have been successful in combating the attacks and competing alternative plans promulgated by such special interest groups as the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, Life/Health Insurance Associations, and the American Legion without this alliance. This coalition of organized labor, social workers, and old-age activists together ensured Medicare’s passage.

In 2001, NCSC changed its name to the Alliance for Retired Americans (ARA)\(^3\) and positioned itself as a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of retired workers affiliated with the AFL-CIO and “a broad coalition of community-based organizations...[with] one common goal—building the most effective organization to advocate for America’s seniors at the national, state and local levels” (Alliance for Retired Americans, 2001, n.d.). As of 2009, the Alliance had grown from 1.9 to over 4 million members active in 30 states (Alliance for Retired Americans, 2001, n.d.). The ARA’s reframing as the “voice of retired workers,” insinuates that AARP’s affluent membership base prevents them from fighting for middle-class or poor seniors.

In an effort “to make their voices heard in the laws, policies, politics and institutions that shape our lives,” the “progressive grass-roots movement” touts an all-encompassing mission:

> The mission of the Alliance for Retired Americans is to ensure social and economic justice and full civil rights for all citizens so that they may enjoy lives of dignity, personal and family fulfillment and security (Alliance for Retired Americans, 2001, n.d.).

The broad alliances ARA forms with various other organizations demonstrate that coalition building is their key strategy for making decisions and taking actions.

**Gray Panthers**

Initially called the Consultation of Older and Younger Adults, the Gray Panthers originated in the early 1970s as an informal discussion group of retirees and young college students with the motto “age and youth in action.” In less than 10 years, the group had 60,000 members and 90

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\(^2\) Of course, ultimately the mandatory retirement age was eliminated all together.

\(^3\) From here on, NCSC will be referred to as ARA.
chapters nationwide (Kuhn, 1991). Today, the Panthers tally approximately 20,000 members in over 50 local networks “attacking problems from an intergenerational perspective” (Gray Panthers(a), n.d.). The philosophical scope of the interest organization remains intentionally wide-ranging, including a variety of societal concerns and a steadfast commitment to building a coalition to combat ageism. Their activist orientation also allows them to focus squarely on advocating for seniors (Powell, Branco, & Williamson, 1996). The vast membership potential is evident in their mission statement: Work for social and economic justice and peace for all people (Gray Panthers(b), n.d.).

In particular, issues such as nursing home reform, eliminating pejorative media portrayals of seniors, and what is deemed the heartlessness of the American health care system remain the focus of efforts. The movement skillfully adopted framing strategies that positioned ageism and sexism as interrelated, a decision with at least two results: it highlighted other ongoing rights-based movements, such as those concerning race and gender discrimination, and it espoused an emphatically pro-aging sentiment. Additional coalitions included with the disabled and environmentalists. The Panthers historically garnered national media attention through extreme measures, such as chaining themselves to the White House fence in protest against the alleged racism of the White House Conference on Aging (1971), assembling a “Black House Conference on Aging (1971), and holding an “alternative” meeting to the American Medical Association meetings that allegedly failed to address the real problems with health care (1973) all as part of their long-term goal of providing health insurance to all Americans (Sanjek, 2009). Although small in size compared to AARP and the ARA, the Panthers’ unwavering commitment to raising American consciousness about ageism and the problems affecting seniors renders them extremely effective at grass-roots activism.

In contrast to groups like AARP and the ARA, the Panthers historically defined themselves in direct opposition to the political and economic status quo by explicitly differentiating themselves from the proverbial establishment of aging organizations, or the “aging enterprise” (Estes, 1979). Early tactics emphasized local militant action, involving grass-roots efforts to support selected social causes. The Panthers, like the Townsendites, were the outgrowth of a single individual, in this case, Maggie Kuhn. Her leadership was shaped by liberal Protestantism and Christian socialism as well as the highly visible social rights movements of her era, including anti-Vietnam War protests, Black Liberation, and Women’s Rights. As such, emphasis was placed on avoiding hierarchy and fostering social change rather than the incrementalist politics of AARP and the ARA. These strategies increased the frame resonance to younger supporters by evoking the pervasive radical anti-establishment sentiments of the 1960s (Sanjek, 2009).

During the last quarter century, the Panthers have expanded their scope and become more amenable to collaboration with other interest groups and sympathetic politicians. Although the Panthers were for many years known primarily through their charismatic leader, who died in 1995, they maintain a strictly decentralized organizational structure. Such anti-hierarchical aims meant that, unlike AARP and the ARA, the Panthers were not always a consistent, organized lobbying group in Washington, D.C. Rather, their sporadic local accomplishments were qualitatively different than the other groups. The publicized symbolic actions of the Panthers demonstrate a multi-issue focus on increased awareness of aging issues, dignity for seniors, reform to pension systems, eliminating mandatory retirement, opposing federal budget cuts, eradicating poverty, opposing the nuclear arms race, and promoting national health care. The Gray Panthers called for a fundamental redefinition of the proper place of American senior citizens by deconstructing negative stereotypes and replacing them with empowering ones. The Panthers thus earned a reputation as the most revolutionary faction of the senior rights movement, with Maggie Kuhn declaring herself the “wrinkled radical” leading efforts for social change.

Table 1 outlines the major dimensions of difference between the three interest organizations involved in our analysis of the senior rights movement. Although much of the policy decisions and processes surrounding them are unique to aging organizations, there are numerous factors common to interest organizations more generally.

Despite the various divergences outlined in Table 1, the senior groups also have noteworthy similarities. Like the Townsendites, all three organizations use local groups, or clubs, to disseminate information and increase collective identities. Although the specific type and purpose of the groups differ, the collective identity of seniors helps stabilize the individual organizations and the larger movement. All three interest organizations also provide direct benefits to members, which helps to recruit and maintain active membership. Despite varying degrees of services offered, with AARP providing a comprehensive range of resources to its members from the outset, the ARA only later providing direct services, and the Panthers initially focusing primarily for local change, such as wheelchair ramps, providing tangible benefits to constituents is a common strategy for unifying seniors in the post-Townsend era. Both AARP and the

Table 1

Dimensions of difference between interest organizations.

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<th>AARP</th>
<th>ARA/NCSC</th>
<th>Gray Panthers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Scope/range</td>
<td>Narrow,</td>
<td>Broad,</td>
<td>Broad, social</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constituents</td>
<td>incremental</td>
<td>incremental</td>
<td>change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Local, national</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>For seniors</td>
<td>By constituents</td>
<td>By constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>With labor</td>
<td>With women’s movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Grassroots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party lines</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Democratic, liberal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Status Actions</td>
<td>Non profit</td>
<td>Citizen group</td>
<td>Citizen group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>Short-term;</td>
<td>Long-term;</td>
<td>Radical (outside system);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>concrete</td>
<td>Long-term; symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda</td>
<td>Bureaucratic</td>
<td>Neither/Joint</td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Benefits</td>
<td>Less urgent</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
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<td>Numberous</td>
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<td>Few</td>
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ARA have maintained a presence in national politics from inception. In 1985, when the Panthers relocated their national office to Washington, D.C, the senior rights movement’s shared understanding of the importance of the federal government for meeting the goals and aspirations of the gray lobby was confirmed.

**Internal dynamics of the interest organizations**

The internal dynamics of the interest organizations, including resources and constraints, have greatly influenced their impact on policy positions and conceptions of aging. In contrast to the more ideologically liberal ARA and the radical Panthers, AARP has remained relatively nonpartisan in national politics. Historical reasons for this neutrality included the need to maintain the organization’s tax-free status and the benefits of employing a strategy that forces major political parties to compete for its favor. The impact of social base, size, organizational structure, and resources on the strategies chosen and strength exerted are relevant to all three interest organizations.

**Constituents/social base**

Given the professional rather than labor-based origins, AARP historically identified with the interests of white-collar, middle-class retirees. Consequently, critics suggest that it supports not all aging persons, but rather the particular group of (increasingly young) affluent white seniors that comprise the largest percentage of its constituency. In contrast, the ARA has tended to attract working-class individuals. Although the Panthers do not appear to have an obvious class-based appeal, they have historically been predominantly white females. Inevitably, AARP’s vast constituency encourages centrist politics. AARP’s recent extension of membership to younger and younger age groups has led many to question their positioning as a senior group at all. The ARA’s linkage with the AFL-CIO gives them significant diversity and strength, but also risks dissolution when priorities differ. The initial inclusion of working-class members and recent positioning as the “voice of retired workers,” has allowed them to commit themselves entirely to issues relevant to both middle-class and working-class seniors. Although the alliance with younger members and larger rights-based movements increased the influence of the Panthers, their radical stance and range of interests threatens to narrow the constituent base. Having members for whom the “political is personal,” however, also intensifies the commitment level (Sanjek, 2009). While a membership base of primarily older people retired from paid employment and youth not yet in careers/having families arguably increases the time members have to devote, it also potentially reduces the financial backing they are able to provide. Most importantly, the degree of radicalism and commitment allows them to pursue issues that the other two groups would not.

**Size**

The breadth of AARP’s membership (not to mention over 3000 employees) is enormous; covering the entire political spectrum. Despite its potential for influencing the political process and conceptions of aging, its complex, bureaucratic structure makes it difficult to mobilize members or take stances organizationally. Yet AARP lends unrivaled influence to the senior rights movement through its massive membership and political access, which greatly exceeds that of all other aging organizations combined. The ARA wields considerably more power when linked with other influential organizations than is possible on its own. However, its shift away from AARP in 2001 as an alternative voice for retired persons appears to have increased its membership. The radical position of the Panthers has led to a smaller and often more localized organization with greater flexibility. Its anti-establishment approach and small size, compared to the other groups, results in considerably less influence on national level aging policies or on the senior rights movement more generally, but on occasion it is able to exert more intense pressure on specific local issues and topics of social change. Ultimately, the Panthers’ efforts have been largely “defensive” in the policy arena.

**Organizational structure**

Unlike AARP, the ARA (especially since 2001) and the Panthers are interest organizations of the people (i.e., seniors) rather than for the people. That is, AARP is accused of being an interest group with a vested (financial) interest in their constituents as potential consumers of their products. AARP, by far the most institutionalized of the interest organizations, has been quite influential, but its scope and ability to go out on a limb have been consistently narrowing. AARP is more centrist and arguably more bureaucratic than the other groups due to the complexity and size of the association. Thus, they lack the ability to respond with the urgency that the ARA and Panthers have maintained due to their multiple accountabilities and so-called top-down decision making, which may lead them to make decisions that serve organizational needs before those of the larger movement. The ARA’s alliances with other groups also influence the decisions they make and strategies they utilize. The Panthers’ anti-establishment and “go-it-alone” structure means that the non-hierarchical nature of the group makes strategies and decision-making somewhat more democratic and the interests of the larger movement are in direct alignment with their organizational priorities. The devolution of actions to the local level, however, positions the priorities and focus of energies at the whim of group leaders. Unfortunately, it also means that their presence in national debates, particularly in D.C., has generally not been prominent.

**Resources**

AARP’s enormous resource base grants them great potential influence on issues. They are, however, sometimes conflicted when it comes to decisions with implications for profits from the earnings sensitive components of the organization. The complexity of the organization, which includes major income-generating business divisions, is also a source of competing interests among the separate divisions within the organization that slows change and contributes to periodic departures from the goals of the senior movement. The ARA’s rights-based approach allows alliances with many other groups when there are concerns of mutual interest. The
recent decision to formally ally with the AFL-CIO, for example, significantly increased their resource base and, thus, potential for social change. The Panthers have the least by way of resources, which influences how much they can devote to a given issue and how effective they can be in their lobbying efforts. Like the ARA, though, their rights-based perspective and intergenerational coalitions strengthen their ability to advocate an aging agenda.

Contemporary policy debates

In this section, we discuss the advocacy role played by the senior rights movement and its interest organizations/on recent aging issues, namely the partial privatization of Social Security and the Medicare Prescription Drug Program.

Debating the proposed partial privatization of Social Security

The ongoing debate over Social Security reform is the most recent incarnation of the age-old question about what share of family and/or communal resources should be allocated to elders. The two major groups competing to frame the debate over public policy for older Americans are often described as being advocates of either generational “equity” or “interdependence.” Labeling it as “the generational equity debate,” of course, gives a symbolic victory and rhetorical advantage to one of the networks and its interpretative package.

The generational equity frame, advanced by influential conservative organizations like the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, calls for the partial privatization of Social Security by employing themes of self-reliance and personal freedom reminiscent of the opposition to pension reform in the 1930s (Borden, 1995; Ferrara, 1995; Porter, 1995). The generational interdependence frame, in contrast, generally opposes “disentitlement through privatization” (Jost, 2003) and instead supports the redistributive social goals of Social Security by emphasizing obligation to protect low-wage workers and vulnerable groups (Ball & Bethell, 1997; Quadagno, 1996).

Framing issues as a crisis is an effective tactic for social movements to elicit support from the general public and otherwise resistant policy makers (Beard, 2004a). In the case of Social Security, inferring catastrophe has been an essential mobilizing strategy, with such expressions as “demographic earthquake,” “colossal debt,” and “the coming entitlement tsunami” all framing Social Security in a way that critical social scientists have referred to as “apocalyptic demography” (Robertson, 1990). This encouragement of fear or perceived threat to the public has been vital to the alleged blame the victim mentality of the equity frame. Accordingly, public support is portrayed as a failure of individual responsibility. This failure is framed as resulting from deficient family values despite assertions that this “nostalgia trap” erroneously assumes the existence of a proverbial (and normative) “Golden Age” (Coontz, 2000).

Such age-based perspectives (Beard, 2004b; Binstock, 1999) fail to account for historical factors as well as increases in single-parent families, female workforce participation, same-sex unions, divorce rates, longevity, or demographic effects on the societal value of seniors. In so doing, access disparities based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental functioning, citizenship or geographic region cannot be adequately taken into consideration. A number of social gerontologists argue that we must acknowledge the “man-made” nature of Social Security (Kingson & Berkowitz, 1993) if we are to account for the increasing diversity of older adults (Yee, 2005) and, for example, the “gender gyp” (Bethell, 2005). To avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater, we must understand the reasons for both the successes and the shortcomings of what has been called the most popular and is the most enduring social program in American history.

The ARA’s close affiliation with the AFL-CIO, and the working-class generally, brings them squarely within the interdependence camp:

Advocates of Social Security privatization are working hard to convince the American people that Social Security is in deep trouble, and that the only solution is to transform the current social insurance system into a privatized system...What privatization proponents consistently fail to mention, however, are the dangers inherent to their proposed solutions and the enormous gains to be had by simply raising the Social Security tax cap... (Network Democracy, n.d.).

The ARA’s alliance with the AFL-CIO also allowed them to bring the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) into the debate, which essentially guaranteed that privatization would fail (at least for now). A recent press release by the Alliance’s President demonstrates steadfast commitment to the cause:

Representatives Ryan and Boehner must not have seen what I saw when we put unbridled faith in the markets in Wall Street. We need to continue our work to protect Social Security. It is a valuable lifeline which has kept millions of retirees out of poverty (ARA, 2010).

Likewise, the founding tenet of the Panthers encouraged interdependence between individuals and generations. To combat the “war rhetoric” espoused by conservative forces in an effort to pit generations against one another (Binney & Estes, 1988), in the early 1980s the Panthers began publicly voicing a pro-Social Security sentiment.

The Panthers remain avid supporters of maintaining “Social Security as a right” and proclaim their campaign slogan “Strengthen Social Security for Future Generations—Not Wall Street” publicly:

Social Security is not in crisis. Unless it is undermined by privateers, who would gamble with the funds, it will never be bankrupt....The Gray Panthers advocate that we must maintain benefits, not increase the tax rate on working Americans, and strengthen Social Security...This is the only fair, just, and equitable action to take! (Gray Panthers, 2007).

The ARA and Panthers both skillfully employ the widely-salient rhetoric of family finances and provision of care to retirees and appeal to justice for all workers while highlighting the role of social class and related disparities.

AARP, in contrast, remained relatively impartial in the early stages of the Bush administration’s push for the partial
privatization of Social Security. During the final months of that effort, however, it was clear that Bush would not be seeking input from them, AARP ultimately mounted a major campaign to oppose the plan (Goozner, 2005). Importantly, AARP was not against all forms of privatization, but rather the structure of the Bush administration proposals which called for the diversion of a substantial fraction of a worker’s payroll tax contribution into (high-risk) individual accounts and sharp cuts in the traditional defined benefit component of the scheme (Basler, 2005). Today AARP is still not on record as opposed to all forms of individual accounts (partial privatization); only those models that divert a portion of current contributions while simultaneously reducing existing Social Security benefits. In fact, they are in favor of supplemental private accounts and recently began selling mutual funds to their members.

These differences in priorities and political claims-making from within the senior movement may in the long run undermine the movement’s agenda of preserving Social Security in a form closely approximating its present structure. Obviously, size matters insofar as the ARA’s success in aligning with both AFL-CIO and the NAACP significantly altered the level of influence they were able to have on the issue. Also, the size and organizational structure of AARP may have prevented them from being able to launch opposition to the Bush proposals as quickly as might have been possible otherwise. The Panthers’ limited financial resources are also directly related to the size of its membership. As the ability to frame this debate will remain central to the goals of the senior movement in the decades ahead, this lack of consensus may have adverse effects on the movement’s influence more generally.

Social Security was initially framed as a rights-based program for seniors, namely from the industrial sector, who earned it. Proponents of privatization have since reframed the basis of rights using rhetoric of individual choice, autonomy, and ownership. The case is built on the argument that those who contribute to Social Security should be assured a fair return on their investment, framing the program as a personal retirement savings plan rather than as a social insurance plan designed to spread risks and make modest transfers to low-wage workers in an effort to reduce the number who must spend their final years receiving a means-tested welfare pension (Supplemental Security Income).

The dramatic decline in poverty rates among seniors since the enactment of this crucial piece of legislation, however, is not currently threatened by population aging or issues of financing, as we are led to believe. Rather, it is argued that the “underlying structural weaknesses and the macroeconomic dynamics” such as increasingly lower wages and medical inflation, driving total revenue and spending are to blame; “Thus, the low price of labor and the regressive cap on the Social Security tax “push” the contributions to the system down, while increasing prices of health care services “pull” the benefits payments up” (Yaşar, 2009, p. 862).

Debates on the Medicare Prescription Drug Program

President George W. Bush’s Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act (MMA legislation) was enacted by Congress in 2003 by a close margin. The largest expansion to the program in its 38-year history introduced an entitlement benefit for prescription drugs through tax breaks and subsidies to be administered by private insurance plans that are reimbursed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). As of January 1, 2006, seniors were offered a plan (Medicare Part D) to cover the cost of prescribed medications. Critics complained about the allegedly intentional underestimation of expenditures and the gap in insurance (known as the donut hole) that costs many enrollees up to $2850 out-of-pocket annually. The inclusion of this “donut hole” reflects the power of a few key interest groups. It created “winners” (namely private insurance companies and the pharmaceutical industry) and “losers” (particularly low-income or otherwise disadvantaged seniors, but arguably many other seniors who face the need to take large quantities of expensive drugs).

The visibility of the three interest organizations was markedly divided on this policy issue, with AARP taking a far less progressive political stance than either the ARA or the Panthers. Given AARP’s role of providing insurance to its members, they took a more supportive approach to the proposed legislation than either of the other interest organizations. Unlike the ARA and Panthers, the organizational interests of AARP arguably conflicted with the goals of the senior rights movement.

The Panthers were quick and unrelenting in their rejection of the original legislation and denounced the subsequent inadequacies:

The Medicare Prescription Drug scheme is clattering toward its second year, and we’re beginning to see the results. Many of us know first-hand what life in the Medicare “donut hole” is really like... Only drug companies and private insurers could love this plan! (Gray Panthers (b), n.d.).

The Panthers opposed the plan’s inefficiencies, and claimed it primarily served “vested” interests (including AARP, who allegedly sold disproportionate numbers of Part D plans).

Since its realignment in 2001, the ARA has been very active politically, including launching consistent attacks at the Republican-endorsed MMA legislation. In the 2003 debate over Medicare Part D, they accused the legislation of being a lemon created by Republicans intending to dismantle Medicare (Pear & Toner, 2003). They also broke with AARP by publicly criticizing their leaders for being out of touch with “the average” senior and putting their own financial interests ahead of the wellbeing of aging Americans (some of AARP’s health insurance products might have suffered had a more generous prescription drug benefit been enacted and they currently receive royalties under the program).4

In this debate, the ARA not only takes a strong stance, but it also makes a conscious effort to separate itself from AARP by highlighting its allegedly more representative population (Espo, 2003; Finucane, 2003; Walker, 2004). More recent position pieces make a call for an overhaul of

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4 This opinion may, in fact, been a motivating factor in renaming and positioning themselves as the Alliance for Retired Americans.
Part D altogether due to the extensive present and future shortcomings:

[It] has barely dented seniors’ out-of-pocket spending... In 2009, Part D premiums will jump by 30% for the 10 most popular prescription drug plans... Along with cutting back on medications in an effort to avoid reaching the doughnut hole, Part D beneficiaries stop using an average of one in five prescriptions once in the coverage gap (Alliance for Retired Americans(d), n.d., p. 3)

The role of AARP in the MMA legislative process was their most prominent to date. Despite the provisions to further privatize Medicare, AARP ultimately endorsed the bill and launched a $7 million advertising campaign in support of it (Cook, 2003). Although an incrementalist argument for supporting the legislation was made, AARP’s decision allegedly cost them 45,000 members (Pear, 2004). AARP’s attempt to present a politically neutral tone (Binstock, 2004) came across as showing less commitment to the goals of the larger senior movement than the stance taken by the Panthers or the ARA.

The organizational structure, social base, and resources of AARP led them to tolerate an incrementalist policy that would ultimately financially benefit their organization and their members rather than to advocate for all seniors or larger social change. The fundamental difference between the organizations on this issue potentially poses a serious threat to the unified front of the larger movement in the years ahead.

Conceptions of aging

Civic engagement: “Productive” and “successful” aging

In this section we consider the potential impact of decisions made and actions taken on contemporary conceptions of aging, namely notions of what constitutes aging well. The topic of civic engagement, including discourse on so-called productive or successful aging, came to the forefront in the 1980s. These debates are centered on the role of seniors in voluntary, (primarily) political realms. Supporters present a “transforming aging” stance by arguing that work and volunteer activities benefit the health and well-being of seniors, the organizations that count on them, the people served by those organizations, and the economy (Zedlewski & Butrica, 2007). Opponents suggest civic engagement is a universalizing concept that makes assumptions about how all people should use their time in retirement that risks discriminating against those who choose not to perform this role or cannot due to financial constraints, familial obligations, or health restrictions. The latter view highlights the heterogeneity of seniors and the failure of mass membership groups to address the particularly disadvantaged members (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001; Crystal, 2001; Holstein, 2006; Kyriakos & Black, 2001).

In an effort to respond to ageism, the gray lobby has advocated a distinctly pro-aging stance since its inception. Although all three interest organizations analyzed here rely on civic engagement from their constituents, very different images of aging and positions on the issue of aging well are revealed, with AARP championing the concepts and the Panthers in complete opposition to the “compartmentalization of old age that displaces rather than eliminates ageism” by assuming a homogeneity of (successful) aging and older citizens. The ARA takes a more neutral stance suggesting that volunteering enhances health and life satisfaction despite their largely working-class membership. This might be due, however, to the disproportionately low numbers of constituents who participate in such activities (since volunteer work is predominantly performed by populations of privilege). In concert with their founding goal of advocating for the employment rights of seniors, AARP’s website and bulletins portray a very telling image of aging: one of youth, fitness, and the social capital to do certain retirement activities (e.g., take exotic vacations or play golf at Pebble Beach). The decision to extend membership to anyone 50 and over has critics claiming that the demographic being portrayed by AARP includes retirees who show few if any visible traces of aging. Their magazine AARP The Magazine (known as Modern Maturity until 2002) is criticized for never using the words old or retired and not accepting advertisements from nursing homes or incontinence products that is rooted in a so-called “fountain of youth” mentality. A major initiative of AARP is entitled Staying Sharp®, which purports a “use it or lose it” approach to brain health and aging. Opponents claim that these public health messages are too (bio)medical and fail to account for differences in access to various cognitive strategies and risk further marginalizing individuals with, for example, Alzheimer’s disease, lower literacy rates, or reduced mobility. Attention to seniors who transcend aging, compared to those in need, also risks neglecting quality of life in the pursuit of disease prevention and health promotion.

No such images are portrayed on the websites of the ARA or the Gray Panthers. In fact, images are of (visibly) older people who are (often) still working. Recall Maggie Kuhn’s reference to herself as the “wrinkled radical” and the ARA’s recent proclamation that they are the “voice of retired workers.” The most vehement opponents tend to be feminists and race scholars, who beg us to ask the questions: Successful according to whom? Productive in which realms? Such critiques posit that the continued expansion of the cohort considered old and the establishment of norms for successful or productive aging are in fact anti-aging. Accordingly, this extension of the medicalization of aging suggests that there is a normative course of aging for all Americans.

To combat the ageism of the 1960s and 1970s, these three interest organizations were instrumental in presenting a more positive portrayal of our oldest members. This pro-aging image has been exploited, however, by conservative groups advocating that seniors are so-called greedy geezers living at the expense of younger citizens, such as has been the case with the...
privatization debate, or as healthy enough not to require special attention, as with the case of the token advantages offered through Medicare Part D. In fact, the organizational structure and social base of some groups, namely AARP, have arguably pioneered this super-aging image. Ostensibly, at least some of the motivation behind this decision relates to what sells, including prevention and images of so-called positive aging, that result from the organization having multiple (conflicting) accountabilities. Symbolic-issue groups advocating social change, like the Gray Panthers and to a lesser extent the ARA, are less likely to be swayed by such fiscal motivations.

Discussion and conclusions

This sociohistorical analysis highlights the different strategies pursued by members of the senior rights movement to achieve similar goals. Through elucidating the policy positions taken and the conceptions of aging presented by the various components of the movement, the importance of the internal dynamics of each group for influencing the strategies pursued and stances taken becomes more obvious. Understanding the role of factors such as social base, size, organizational structure, and resources helps us begin to answer why the key interest organizations utilize such divergent tactics in pursing their shared interests (of advocating senior rights).

In our efforts to find where senior organizations and their interests had the greatest impact, we compared AARP, the ARA, and the Gray Panthers. Such movements and interest organizations have direct and indirect effects on social policy as well as intended and unintended consequences for constituents. We find a variety of movement dynamics to be important, including issues of continuity (short versus long-term aims), constituency (seniors versus larger groups; charismatic versus bureaucratic leaders), and political agenda (urgency, scope). Enduring groups are able to avoid certain organizational weaknesses, such as a single-agenda focus (as in the case of the Townsend Movement), symbolic-focused advocacy (such as the Gray Panthers outright attack on ageism), objectives that are too radical (as in the case of the early pension movements), and heavy dependence on a specific charismatic leader (e.g., Francis Townsend and to a lesser extent Maggie Kuhn of the Panthers). The most widely-influential interest organizations offer extensive incentives to members including direct benefits, such as discounts, as well as socialization and group-building activities.

There is also an important distinction between organizations of the aged that work for social change (such as the ARA and Panthers) and those that are advocates for seniors (AARP), who are more likely to have (diverse) constituencies and ideologies that encourage the promotion of piecemeal policies rather than large-scale social transformation. In either case, the influence on social policy has been most pronounced when senior groups and organizations have been able to form coalitions with other powerful interest groups. Forging strategic alliances with external, often more powerful, groups has been the dominant and most persuasive strategy of aging policy. Such coalition formations explain why substantial old-age policy gains have often occurred in conjunction with the advances of interest groups devoted to laborers, minorities, and the poor while movement-specific advances have been largely augmentative.

Given the extensive popularity of the current senior interest organizations, one might wonder why the senior rights movement in America has not been more successful in achieving shared objectives. We argue that at least two factors are at play: their opponents, with little opposition from their most influential interest organization, have used symbolic victories as political strategies and, subsequently, surges of strong senior advocacy have been followed by relative lulls. The incremental nature of Social Security since 1935 has often worked against the senior rights movement by making concessions that are presented as noteworthy enhancements to the program. Such emblematic changes have served to remove some of the intensity and radicalism from the movement’s initial Townsend-era efforts. Often, it is only when a potential threat becomes imminent that the interest organizations together confront the problem. That is, the three groups unite in a primarily defensive manner but fail to launch a comprehensive offensive for structural change, despite the impressive efforts of the Panthers.

If successful frames are persuasive in shaping both the construction and production of relevant social realities and what are viewed as appropriate policy responses to those values, then senior interest organizations have generally been effective in presenting Social Security as an important issue, in combating threats to the program, and (to a lesser extent) advocating necessary expansions. Since an important task of the senior rights movement is to launch counteroffensives, or to keep certain proposed changes off the political radar, few groups in America have been as triumphant as seniors. Consequently, it might be that the greatest power of senior interest organizations is their potential for uniting large groups of citizens when cuts to old age benefits are proposed. Senior groups have been less effective in lobbying new policies and more successful in preventing changes that would affect their constituents negatively. The most significant cumulative effect of the senior rights movement is that it has united a very diverse group of constituents according to race, class, gender, and age in a shared battle to guarantee income security for all senior citizens in America. This emphasizes the importance of analyzing the outcomes of interest organizations’ efforts as well as those of the larger movement since that which fragments the individual organizations may also be the cultural glue solidifying the larger senior rights movement.

Although the most pervasive frame employed by the movement has been to present “social security” as rights-based, the interest organizations themselves use multiple and at times competing frames to advance the interests of their advocates and agendas, which has resulted in unintended outcomes. While promoting the perception of crisis is an effective mechanism for advancing social change, it has also been used by opponents aiming to partially privatize Social Security and has led to inconsistencies with other issues of concern, such as the one-size-fits-all tones of civic engagement/successful aging. The incremental evolution of Social Security policy has allowed opposition groups to employ symbolic gestures by presenting minimal policy changes, such as the Medicare Plan D, as social progress.

The different strategies pursued by the various elements of the senior rights movement include at least two unintended consequences, or outcomes, for social policies and public portrayals of seniors. First, the incremental nature of Social Security reform has made it possible for opposition groups,
and even strong components of the senior movement itself, to successfully advance minimal reforms or symbolic gestures to prevent enactment of alternatives involving more comprehensive structural change. Second, the policies enacted to provide security in old age have been so effective in appearing to alleviate the “need” that seniors are now framed as a burden to the system rather than in need/worthy of societal aid. This “scapegoating” of seniors (Binstock, 1983) is at least theoretically linked to contemporary beliefs about productivity that emphasize workplace contributions, specific types of voluntary efforts, and devalue (unpaid) social roles.

The present analysis suggests that the groups perform roles in the ongoing debates over Social Security and Medicare will be similar to their initial roles in connection with the earlier issues we have focused on. We expect that the actions of AARP, ARA, and the Gray Panthers in the current rendition of the healthcare debate will tend to mirror those discussed in this article. AARP’s founding opposition to national health insurance (in no small part due to their own potential loss of business in the industry) and current constituency of affluent (increasingly younger) members, make the organization less likely to advocate strongly on behalf of a national health system. The Panthers and ARA, in sharp contrast, have deep philosophical and organizational investments in providing universal coverage. One of the earliest Panthers’ goals was an intense commitment to a system resembling social medicine, and they have made repeated efforts to advance such an agenda. Given a predominantly working-class constituency, the ARA has an obvious connection to such goals as well. Despite the Obama administration’s achievements with respect to health care policy, the ultimate influence of the senior rights movement as well as the respective roles of interest organizations remain to be seen.

The recent economic crisis has been credited with both bringing attention to the strength of Social Security and Medicare and their importance in the lives of American seniors. For example, despite the economic meltdown, these programs continued to provide a safety net to seniors (Altman, 2009) when many were not so fortunate. Thus, the recession-driven deficit lends credence to the need for programs like Social Security and Medicare and the importance of bolstering them (Kuttner, 2010). Yet the perceived “visceral hostility to redistributive policy in all of its forms” (Vladeck, 1999, p. 25–26) leads some to argue that the major policy challenge related to population aging are about distribution rather than demographics or finances (Myles, 2002). Allegedly, this political reticence, the ever-increasing costs for healthcare (Altman, 2009), including long-term care (Munnell, Webb, Golub-Sass, & Muldoon, 2009), and the recession-based deficit and job losses are to blame for the country’s increasing debt. This makes debates over the future of healthcare policy intricately connected to programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

Recent critiques suggest that “illiteracy and misconceptualization” (Yaşar, 2009, p. 844), President Obama’s “caving in to the fear-mongers” (Kuttner, 2010, p. 3), and “the inertia of nearsighted congressional politics” (Cranch, 2010, p. 795), lead to the conflation of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid into a so-called entitlement crisis, which is misleading (Altman, 2009, p. 66). Allegedly, both sides of the debate demonstrate illiteracy and misconception by focusing on demographic changes and financing mechanisms rather than the real problems of low wages and the failure to contain rapidly increasing health care costs (Yaşar, 2009, p. 843). Since Medicare and Medicaid are far worse off financially (including projections that the 14.9% of GDP devoted to healthcare in 2005 could increase dramatically in the decades ahead) (Altman, 2009) and 65% of American households would be unable to maintain their current standard of living after accounting for health and long-term care costs (Munnell et al., 2009), this conflation of the programs is very misleading.

Furthermore, current fixation on recession-based deficits rather than recovery denies the fact that our nation can provide social support (i.e., investment in children, workers, and public infrastructure) without compromising the welfare of seniors (Kuttner, 2010). That we have long-known about the eventual need to reform and improve Social Security cannot be overshadowed by the present economic climate, since increases in employment rates alone will not solve the problem (Cranch, 2010, p. 795). According to Yaşar (2009) and countless others, it is time to seriously consider the way healthcare is produced and provided in the United States.

References


