

# Republican presidential hopeful proposes means testing of Social Security

Patrick Martin  
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In a speech Tuesday in New Hampshire, site of the first US presidential primary, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie called for transforming Social Security into a means-tested welfare program and for raising the retirement age from 67 to 69.

Means testing would be introduced by reducing Social Security benefits for seniors with incomes over \$80,000 a year and eliminating benefits entirely for individuals making \$200,000 and up.

The purpose of this change is to undermine political support for Social Security among sections of the upper middle class, making it an easier target for subsequent cuts. Moreover, with any significant level of inflation, benefit cuts would soon affect much broader sections of retirees.

Presenting himself as someone willing to tell hard truths to the American public, Christie declared, “Washington is afraid to have an honest conversation about Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid with the people of our country. I am not.”

In addition to raising the age of eligibility for retirement benefits under Social Security, Christie called for raising the age of eligibility for Medicare, which provides health insurance for the elderly, from 65 to 67. He also called for dismantling Medicaid, the joint federal-state health care program for low-income families, and turning it into a program run entirely by the states, with limited federal funding. All told, Christie’s plan would cut social spending by \$1 trillion over 10 years, aides said.

Christie, who is expected to announce his presidential campaign later in the spring, is the first Republican presidential hopeful to openly target Social Security for major cuts. The speech is a political signal of the direction of social policy for the whole ruling elite in the United States.

It comes as Democrats and Republicans in the Senate overwhelming passed a plan Tuesday previously passed by the House to expand the level of means-testing within Medicare, part of a bill that raises reimbursement rates for health care providers under Medicare while giving providers financial incentives to deny costly treatment to elderly patients.

While congressional Republicans have repeatedly targeted Medicare and Medicaid for massive cuts and/or privatization, they have avoided Social Security, in part because of the overwhelming popular support for the program.

It was the Obama White House that took the lead in raising Social Security in budget talks in 2011 and 2012, calling for \$100 billion in cuts to planned future benefit increases. No deal was reached, however, because of Republican opposition to proposed tax increases on the wealthy.

Now, Social Security is being openly targeted in the presidential campaign. Christie will certainly not be the last candidate to propose major attacks on the program. The New Jersey governor’s attack on Social Security was at least in part an effort at refuting right-wing attacks on his supposed “moderation,” which have driven down his poll numbers among likely Republican primary voters.

Other candidates will take up the issue now that Christie has laid down a marker, and will seek to outbid him in advocating “entitlement reform.”

Kentucky senator Rand Paul, who announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination April 7, has called for a constitutional amendment to require a balanced federal budget every year, which would force massive spending cuts, as well as sharp cuts in food stamps, in part to finance tax cuts of \$700 billion a year, which would go disproportionately to the

wealthy.

Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who declared his candidacy April 13, focused his announcement largely on foreign policy, denouncing the Obama administration for its proposed deals with Iran and Cuba, while calling for stepped-up US military intervention in the Middle East. But his campaign web site highlights “the need to reduce spending” beginning with cuts in Social Security and Medicare, whose exact nature is left vague.

As for the Democrats, frontrunner Hillary Clinton and any challengers who emerge will posture demagogically as defenders of Social Security and Medicare, the standard Democratic Party campaign strategy for many decades. This will not stop a Democratic administration from carrying out major cuts in these programs once the election is concluded, as the example of the Obama administration has already demonstrated.



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