

## Collective Action on Issues of Aging



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### Opinion

I looked through the index of my book, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (1975) to see if there were any entries for “aging,” “gerontology,” “old age” or other related categories and found none. The topic has never been one on which I focused my attention. But having recently passed my 84th birthday, I am finding it of increasing interest. I grew up during a period in which social security and medical care for the aged were increasingly taken-for-granted. Social Security and Medicare were sacred cows that no politician in his right mind would attack. This is no longer the case although the attacks are indirect; denying that the policies being advocated would, in fact, weaken protections for the elderly. Under Trump, there are, in fact, attacks on these protections although they are not presented as such. The framing of the attacks is carefully designed to deny that they are being threatened; it is a matter of protecting the larger interest in fiscal responsibility that some limits on spending for the elderly must be adopted.

Part of the campaign involved challenging Trump’s misleading claims. Helaine Olem did this eloquently in an April 18, 2017 article in *The Nation*. As she put it, “Donald Trump’s self-proclaimed refusal to even contemplate cuts to social security during last year’s presidential campaign reeked of a con for a basic reason: It almost certainly was one.” Meanwhile, his rivals for the Republican nomination competed “to see who could toss more senior citizens under the bus.” But my e-mails tell me that there is attack on social security and that we must mobilize to defend it. “Social Security has been around for 82 years and is one of the most successful programs in American History” says a note from [Bounce.Bluestatedigital.com](http://Bounce.Bluestatedigital.com) There is an emphasis on diversity in this campaign. Just now, while writing this, I received an e-mail on “creating a strategy to save

social security” from CHC Bold Pac, which bills itself as “the voice of Latinos in American Politics.”

My general theoretical arguments about the importance of a combination of high collective efficacy and low trust apply here. The appeals tend to assume that trust is already low and that the task is to create a sense that “we,” by acting together, can do something about it. Because of the diversity of the people affected, creating an inclusive “we” is one of the necessary tasks for effective collective action. This argument relies on the theoretical distinction between individual and collective efficacy. People do not need to believe that they, as individuals, can influence social policy on social security if they believe that, by acting collectively, they can have an important impact. My earlier research shows that one of the ways in which this is accomplished is through “small victories.” Often, a victory that by itself falls far short of the changes needed is important because, although not an end in itself, it contributed to an increased sense of collective efficacy and, hence, is a step in the longer term mobilization process.

I don’t really feel personally affected by the attacks on social security. I am well-protected by various pensions and do not feel dependent on my social security benefits in particular at this stage. But I have a strong identification with those who are affected and can empathize with their feelings. If the campaign to preserve social security is successful-as I believe it will be-I will feel exultant and triumphant. Part of my pleasure will be the displeasure such an event will produce in our ill-begotten President. Perhaps the rebuff will lead him to resign but, alas, this is probably wishful thinking and the prospect of a possible President Pence is enough to give me nightmares.



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