

# Comparing the Candidates on Social Security

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**MarketWatch Blog** by Alicia H. Munnell



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*Center for Retirement Research offers the candidates' proposed changes.*

Social Security is the bedrock retirement income source for American workers. The program, which faces a long-term financing shortfall, has drawn little attention from the 2016 presidential candidates so far but will likely become a major issue as the campaign proceeds. For this reason, the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College has compiled a **comparison** of the candidate's proposals for Social Security.

The comparison relies on three types of sources:

1. The candidates' websites;
2. Documents from the campaigns or Social Security Administration scoring of proposals;
3. Candidates' remarks from public forums or media interviews (ignored if they conflict with the candidates' websites).

Not surprisingly, Democratic and Republican candidates emphasize different approaches to shoring up the program's finances. Democrats shy away from

reductions in benefits and rely on increasing revenues, while Republicans take the opposite tack. Beyond actions to improve Social Security's finances, some Democratic candidates propose general increases in benefits.

In terms of specific proposals, a few have emerged as the most popular among the candidates. Interestingly, and perhaps a response to voters' concern about income inequality, candidates from both parties have singled out higher earners. All three Democratic candidates would increase taxes on this group while several Republican candidates would target them for benefit reductions. Another popular proposal on the Republican side – raising the “full retirement age” – would reduce benefits for all workers.

As a sign that bipartisan commissions do have some influence over the direction of the policy debate, several of the detailed provisions offered by the candidates echoed items included in the **Domenici-Rivlin Commission** or the **Bowles-Simpson Commission**, both of which issued their reports back in 2010.

In terms of ideas that have generally not received much attention, two candidates propose creating a caregiver credit that would provide some Social Security earnings credit to individuals caring for children. This idea seems, in part, to be a response to major social changes that have led to many more households headed by single mothers who are not eligible for Social Security spousal benefits.

The one provision attracting some support across party lines, supported by two candidates from each party, is increasing Social Security's minimum benefit to ensure a higher floor for lower earners.

Connecting the policy ideas offered to the broader retirement income challenge, one clear theme that emerges from the Republican proposals is

an emphasis on working longer. In addition to raising the “full retirement age” – which is strictly speaking a benefit cut, but may also provide a signal to work longer – three candidates would eliminate payroll taxes for older workers and two would eliminate the earnings test that applies to workers below the “full retirement age” (and is sometimes mistaken for a tax, potentially discouraging some from working longer).

Finally, the Democrats’ focus on holding the line – or even increasing – benefits would retain the centrality of Social Security’s role in the retirement system, while Republicans would implicitly shift the retirement system toward a greater reliance on private saving by scaling back benefits.

We plan to update and maintain this comparison throughout the 2016 presidential campaign. To ensure that it is complete and accurate, we invite representatives of the campaigns to provide any clarifications or additional information.