

## **Analysis of Old-Age Policy Items in the 1991 Pilot Study**

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The purpose of this memo is to evaluate new items on old-age policies included in the 1991 NES Pilot Study and make suggestions about which of these items to include in future NES studies. Refining NES measurement of attitudes towards spending on old-age programs will provide the opportunity to track public opinion over the next several decades as the American population ages, the cost of the Social Security and Medicare programs rise, and the issue gains growing national prominence. Moreover, successful measurement of attitudes towards old-age policies will also enable researchers to monitor the emergence of possible generational conflict and political activism on this issue. The current NES items prove inadequate to this task in several different respects and need serious reconsideration.

### Problems with Current NES Items

Questions assessing attitudes toward spending on the Social Security and Medicare programs were first added to the National Election Study in 1982, at a time when the Social Security fund faced possible bankruptcy. Basically, respondents were asked whether spending on Social Security and Medicare should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. Both items were repeated in 1984; the question on Social Security was repeated in 1986, 1988, and 1990. In each of these election surveys, respondents indicated remarkably strong support for old-age programs. A mere handful of respondents wanted spending cut; and the remainder were split almost evenly between support for spending at increased or the same levels.

Similar questions asked in other national public opinion polls during the 1980s elicited even stronger levels of support for increased or continued government financing of Social Security and Medicare. In a range of polls conducted by major polling organizations (ABC, Gallup, L.A. Times, NORC, Roper) in the late 1980s, the majority of respondents supported increased spending on Social Security; a smaller minority (roughly a third) thought current spending levels adequate; and an even smaller number (less than 10% in all cases) supported spending cuts (American Association of Retired Persons, 1990b).

### Maintaining Benefits versus Rising Costs

Despite the popularity of the NES-style question on support for old-age programs and its ability to elicit similar responses over time and across surveys, the question can be criticized on several different grounds. First, it may well be misleading to someone with more than cursory knowledge of the Social Security and Medicare programs. Asking respondents whether the government should spend more or less on Social Security and Medicare implies that government funds are allocated to Social Security and Medicare from general tax revenues in the same way as for other programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or the Food Stamp program. This is not strictly true. The Old Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund containing workers' Social Security contributions and the Hospital Insurance Trust Fund containing workers' Medicare contributions are kept separate from general tax revenues. And both Social Security and Medicare payroll taxes are deducted separately from state and federal income tax.

Sophisticated respondents might endorse greater government spending on old-age programs because they support an increase in payroll taxes; less sophisticated respondents might endorse higher benefits because they assume funds will come from general revenues not from increased payroll taxes.

In other words, the present NES items may mask support for two distinct dimensions of policy support: (1) maintaining benefits at their present level, and (2) transferring the costs of old-age programs to younger people. Findings from various surveys conducted in the last decade suggest that there is stronger consensus on support for increased benefits for the elderly than there is on how to pay for this. For example, over 75% of all respondents supported a new program to help pay for long-term care for the elderly in a recent poll conducted by AARP (1990a), opposed freezing Social Security cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) in a 1989 poll conducted by the L.A. Times (AARP, 1990b), opposed placing further limits on Medicare, and opposed reducing the size of the COLA in a 1989 Gallup survey (AARP, 1990b; Kohut, 1989). On the other hand, poll findings suggest less unanimous support for transferring the costs of expanded old-age programs to younger working age people. A bare majority supported increasing Social Security payroll taxes (59%) or income taxes (51%) to pay for a new long term care program in a recent AARP study (1990a), or approved of raising taxes to pay for Social Security benefits (57%) in a 1985 Harris poll (Public Opinion, 1985); in the same Harris poll, an overwhelming majority opposed raising the age at which people become eligible for Social Security benefits (68%) to help pay for future Social Security expenses, and a near majority viewed Social Security payroll taxes as too or much too high.

There is more uniform opposition to passing on the costs of old-age programs to the elderly. Various polls have uncovered resounding opposition to taxing Social Security benefits, increases in Medicare premiums, and increased taxation of Social Security benefits to pay for long term care. Thus, poll data provide evidence of widespread support for maintaining and even increasing benefits to elderly beneficiaries, strong opposition to passing the costs of this on to the elderly themselves, but only moderate support for transferring costs to the group most likely to pay for them, younger workers (Shapiro and Smith, 1985).

The importance of this distinction between attitudes towards benefit levels and various means of paying for them is underscored by the increasing cost of old-age programs. At present, Social Security and Medicare expenditures account for just under 30 percent of the federal budget (Estes, 1983), but future projections suggest a doubling of this figure by the year 2025 (U.S. Senate, 1980). In the same period, Medicare-related health care costs are expected to have doubled from 5.3% to a substantial 10.2% of the gross national product (Clark and Menefee, 1981). Simply assessing support for the maintenance of current benefits to the elderly may ignore growing confusion about how to pay for them.

### Generational conflict

Second, the present NES item may mask emerging generational conflict over old-age programs. Obviously, as American society ages over the next several decades, the rising cost of age-based entitlement programs may well fuel political tension between

generations over how best to fund them. As yet, there is no sign of age-based disagreement on the standard NES-type spending question. If anything, older respondents were somewhat less supportive of continued spending on Social Security and Medicare in the 1984 NES study (Huddy, 1989). This also holds for other recent public opinion polls. Compared to people under the age of 65, at least ten percent fewer older respondents in recent AARP polls supported increased government spending on Medicare, Social Security, or long term care for the elderly (AARP, 1987; AARP, 1990a).

In contrast on other more specific benefits for the elderly, older respondents are more opposed than younger to cutting back on benefits. They more strongly opposed reducing the COLA and placing further limits on Medicare in a 1989 Gallup poll (Kohut, 1989), though these effects are not uniform across all surveys (AARP, 1990a).

There is also suggestive evidence that younger people are more reluctant to pay for the increased costs of old-age programs and somewhat more prepared to pass them on to the elderly, though once again findings are somewhat uneven. A Gallup poll conducted in 1982 found much greater opposition among younger people to increasing the age of future eligibility for Social Security benefits, and younger respondents in a 1985 Harris poll were much more opposed to raising Social Security taxes to fund benefits. A recent local-area Stony Brook survey found age-based disagreement on whether Social Security participation should become voluntary. A majority of the oldest respondents disagreed with this, whereas a majority of the youngest respondents supported it (Huddy, 1990).

Younger respondents also seemed more willing to pass costs on to the elderly. In a recent 1989 Gallup poll, younger respondents were somewhat less strongly opposed to taxing Social Security benefits (48% of young versus 64% of old), an action that would have greater negative impact on elderly beneficiaries than on young contributors to the Social Security system (Kohut, 1989). Older respondents in a recent AARP poll (1990a) were slightly less supportive than younger respondents of taxing Social Security benefits to pay for a long term care program, though they were slightly more willing to increase Medicare premiums to fund this.

Furthermore, the attitudes of old and young people may be further polarized by a growing perception that old-age programs will not be in place for current contributors on their retirement. Younger participants in a 1983 NY Times/CBS poll did not think they would get what they had hoped to receive from the Social Security system (79% of the 18 to 29 age group; 75% of those aged 35 to 44); middle aged respondents were evenly divided (46%); whereas older respondents were quite optimistic with only 21% thinking their benefits would not meet their expectations. Similar patterns emerge in data collected by Yankelovich in 1984 and by ABC/Washington Post in 1985 (Public Opinion, 1985). These various poll findings suggest that questions assessing attitudes towards who should pay for the rising costs of old-age programs may provide more insight into the dynamics of possible future generational conflict than policy questions about benefit levels for the elderly.

### Contemporary Political Relevance

Third, existing NES items have not fully captured the flavor or specifics of contemporary debate over old-age policies. For example, older and younger NES respondents continue to express widespread support for increased government spending on Social Security, but this does not help to explain heated opposition that ultimately lead to the repeal of the 1986 Catastrophic Health Insurance Act. Perhaps the standard NES question and others like it are too general, measuring pervasive support for long-cherished political programs but failing to assess specific political controversies in which old-age programs are currently embroiled.

An attempt was made to include items in the 1991 NES pilot study tapped issue support at a medium level of specificity, to capture elements of the political debate surrounding old-age policies that are likely to persist over the next decade but that are not so general as to render them useless indicators of current political controversy.

#### 1991 NES Pilot Old-Age Policy Variables

Five old-age policy items were included in form 3 of the 1991 Pilot Study (N=450). Two items concerned benefits to the elderly. Respondents were asked whether Social Security payments to the elderly were too low, about right, or too high (V2814). Respondents were also asked whether they favored or opposed expanding Medicare to pay for nursing home care and long hospital stays for the elderly (V2818), which was the goal of the failed 1986 Catastrophic Health Insurance Act. Exact wording and marginals for all items are presented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Three items dealt with the costs of old-age programs. Respondents were asked whether taxes should be raised to cover the increased cost of medical care for the elderly (V2822), placing greater financial responsibility on working age people. They were also asked whether Social Security benefits to the elderly should be taxed (V2826), delegating some fiscal responsibility to the elderly themselves. A fifth item assessed the perceived long-term costs of the Social Security program to younger people by asking non-retired respondents the likelihood that Social Security would exist when they retired (V2827). In the following analyses, new policy items are compared to the original 1990 NES item on support for greater government spending on Social Security (V820), also shown in Table 1.

An examination of the marginals presented in Table 1 demonstrates very high levels of support for increasing or maintaining benefits to the elderly. Over two-thirds of the sample thought current Social Security benefits were too low (67%) and almost a third thought they were much too low. An overwhelming eighty-six percent wanted to see Medicare expanded to cover nursing home care and long hospital stays; sixty-six percent supported this strongly. There was comparably strong opposition to passing on the costs

of old-age programs to the elderly by taxing Social Security benefits more heavily. Again, more than two-thirds of respondents strongly opposed this; eight-two percent opposed the idea overall. Respondents were much more willing to pass on the rising costs of old-age programs to younger people by increasing taxes. Seventy-one percent preferred raising taxes to reducing benefits, though the majority (61%) preferred to see taxes raised a little rather than a lot. Moreover, support for passing on the costs of old-age programs to the young existed even though a substantial minority of respondents thought they would receive nothing from the Social Security system themselves (40%). Overall, the marginals supported findings from other surveys: there was widespread support for expanding benefits for the elderly and continued support for passing on the costs to younger people even though many respondents felt they would never benefit from old-age programs themselves.

### Two Dimensions of Support for Old-Age Policies?

Is the current NES item on government spending ambiguous, confounding support for increased benefits with ways to pay for these as suggested earlier? Implicit in this question is the assumption that attitudes toward old-age policies reflect two dimensions of public opinion, one concerning support for increased benefits and the other indicating support for passing on costs to younger people. To test for the existence of these two dimensions, we factor analyzed all old-age policy items including the original NES spending item. We ran this twice, once on the whole sample excluding the item on the future existence of Social Security, and once on the non-retired subsample with this item included. Both analyses are presented in Table 2 along with the correlations between all policy items.

Contrary to expectations, we found only one dimension underlying old-age policy items in the 1991 pilot study. However, this was largely because costs items were weakly linked to benefits items but not strongly linked to each other and so did not form a separate costs factor. In partial support of our earlier predictions, we found that support for increased government spending on Social Security, expanding Medicare, and perceptions of inadequate Social Security benefits all loaded above .6 on the single benefits factor that emerged in both factor analyses.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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As seen in Table 2, the other three cost-related items loaded on the benefits factor but at somewhat or much lower levels: willingness to increase taxes to pay for rising medical costs (.50 and .49), support for increased taxation of Social Security benefits (.36 and .33) and the perceived future existence of Social Security (.29). The item pitting reduced medical benefits for the elderly against increased taxes was the most strongly linked to support for increased benefits overall, though its loadings still did not reach those of the other three benefits items. This may be because it explicitly mentions benefits for the elderly. The item on taxing Social Security benefits loaded only weakly

on the benefits factor, suggesting that support for taxing benefits is not strongly at odds with support for an increase in benefits for the elderly. Being pessimistic about the future existence of Social Security had the smallest loading on the benefits factor.

At the same time, there was no clear second costs factor. Opposition to taxing the elderly's benefits was not strongly linked to support for increased general taxes to pay for old-age programs. These two items did not form a separate factor and were barely correlated ( $r=.04$ ). Nor was either item related to future expectations about the existence of Social Security. A pessimistic prognosis for the Social Security system was barely correlated with opposition to increased taxes ( $r=-.04$ ) or support for taxing Social Security benefits ( $r=.02$ ).

Overall, this factor analysis lends some credibility to the original NES item. The standard item clearly measures support for increased benefits to the elderly and is only weakly related to support for increased taxes ( $r=.24$ ) or opposition to taxing Social Security benefits ( $r=.08$ ). Somewhat surprisingly, the standard item is even positively correlated with pessimistic estimates of the Social Security system's longevity ( $r=.18$ ). This provides some initial evidence that the standard NES item is a relatively unambiguous measure of support for expanded benefits for the elderly.

#### Generational Conflict?

Based on previous poll findings, we had expected to find little generational disagreement on general government spending on Social Security but greater age-based differences on the new policy items. Specifically, we hoped to replicate previous findings of greater support from the elderly for specific old-age policy proposals and greater willingness among younger respondents to pass rising costs of old-age programs on to the elderly rather than pay for this themselves. Findings presented in Table 3 largely confirmed these expectations.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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First, there was no evidence of any generational differences in support for greater government spending on Social Security, the standard NES item. Older respondents (60 and older) were no more likely to support increased spending and, as in previous studies (AARP, 1990a; Huddy, 1989), were in fact somewhat less supportive of increased spending on Social Security (52%) than younger respondents (64%, see Table 3). Of course, this finding runs counter to expectations based on self-interest theories that predict greater support for government spending among older beneficiaries than among younger contributors.

This initially counter-intuitive finding may be partially explained by findings that younger respondents also perceived current Social Security benefits to be less adequate than older people, many of whom actually receive them. Only twenty-four percent of respondents under 35 and twenty-eight percent of respondents aged 35 to 59 felt payments to the elderly were about right compared to a near majority of older

respondents who felt this way (44%). Apparently, younger respondents support government spending on old-age programs because they perceive current benefit levels as insufficient.

This age difference was reversed on the specific proposal to expand Medicare to include nursing home care and long hospital stays. Older people were slightly more supportive of this. Seventy-one percent of older respondents strongly supported the expansion of Medicare, compared to sixty-two percent of those under 35 and sixty-six percent of those aged 35 to 59 (see Table 3). This findings corroborates data from other studies in which older respondents have expressed stronger opposition to specific proposals to cut the COLA or place limits on Medicare (Kohut, 1989).

As expected, the youngest age group was most willing to pass the costs of old-age programs on to the elderly. Respondents under the age of 35 were much less opposed to taxing Social Security benefits (48% indicated strong opposition) than either those aged 35 to 59 (77% strong opposition) or 60 and older (75% strong opposition). Moreover, the youngest age group was also least likely to expect the Social Security system to exist on their retirement. Almost half (47%) of respondents under the age of 35 thought the system was unlikely to exist on their retirement compared with forty percent of those aged 35 to 59 and twenty percent of non-retired respondents aged 60 or older (see Table 3).

Clearly, there are generational differences in attitudes toward old-age programs that go unmeasured with the standard NES item. These generational differences do not suggest a pattern of simple self-interested conflict over old-age programs, however. Younger respondents do not simply oppose old-age programs because they pay for any increase in benefits while older people, as the beneficiaries of such increases, support them. It is more complex than that. If anything, younger respondents are ambivalent about old-age programs. On the one hand, they feel even more strongly than older respondents that Social Security benefits are currently too low. On the other hand, they are more willing to tax Social Security benefits to pay for old-age programs and are less sanguine than older respondents about their personal receipt of benefits on retirement. Older people express greater satisfaction with current Social Security benefits, lesser willingness to increase spending on Social Security, greater resistance to further taxing of Social Security benefits, and greater support for an extension of old-age programs to include expenses for which they presently receive no government coverage such as nursing home care and long hospital stays.

### Determinants of Old-Age Policy Items

To further examine differences between each of the new policy items, we analyzed their determinants. Based on previous research we generally expected the least affluent elderly to be most supportive of expanded benefits (Day, 1990; Huddy, 1990) but expected current finances to play a much lesser role in predicting attitudes among younger respondents. Among younger respondents, we expected sympathy for the elderly and concern over their financial situation to play a greater role in driving support for old-age programs (Huddy, 1990).



We used household income in 1990 (V1404) and perceived household finances over the last year (V2458) as indicators of financial well being among both old and young respondents. Feelings towards the elderly were assessed using the thermometer rating scale (V2244). In addition several political beliefs that usually influence support for social welfare policies were also included: political ideology (V2450, V2451), party identification (V2333), and support for the expansion of government services (V2803).

Regression analyses for each old-age policy item are shown in Table 4. First with the exception of the item on Social Security's future, the remaining five policy items including the original spending item have roughly similar determinants at all ages. Low income or deteriorating finances, positive feelings toward the elderly, support for increased government services, and liberal ideology were the major predictors of support for policies favorable to older people. Contrary to predictions, there were relatively few differences in the determinants of support for old-age policies among old (60 and older) and young (under 60) respondents.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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There were minor exceptions to this general pattern. There was a slight difference in the determinants of the three benefit items. Feeling positively toward the elderly predicted support for the expansion of Medicare and increased the perception that Social Security benefits were too low but had no effect on support for greater government spending on Social Security. There were also minor differences in support for the benefits and costs items. The three benefits items were better predicted by support for increased government services than ideology or party identification. On the other hand, holding a liberal ideology better predicted support for increased taxes to pay for the elderly's rising medical costs (see columns 1-4 in Table 4). And low income resulted in stronger support for spending on Social Security and expanding Medicare but decreased support for increased taxes.

Age was also included as a predictor of each of the policy items and findings mirrored bivariate results presented in Table 3. Younger respondents continued to rate Social Security benefits as too low even controlling for other political beliefs, feelings for the elderly, and so on. Older respondents were significantly more opposed to taxing Social Security benefits, once again controlling for income and other political beliefs. Moreover, age was the sole significant determinant of the perceived future existence of Social Security. Younger respondents were much more pessimistic about this and this perception was unrelated to the respondent's ideological leanings or party preference (see Table 4).

### Political Consequences

Ultimately, the acid test for these new policy items is their success in predicting political outcomes. We adopted two different strategies to examine the ability of policy

items to predict other political attitudes. First we assessed the extent to which each item successfully identified individuals who were most concerned with old-age policies and, therefore, presumably most likely to take action on the issue, use a candidate's issue position as a basis for their vote decision, and so on. Second, we compared the impact of the standard and new policy items on attitudes toward the president, the respondent's House representative and senators.

### Salience of Old-Age Policy

In the absence of specific items in the 1991 Pilot study that measured the respondent's interest and knowledge of old-age policies, we inferred interest from any open-ended reference to old-age policies in either the 1990 or 1991 pilot study. We analyzed responses to a series of open-ended questions in both studies, distinguishing between comments that reflected support for old-age programs versus those indicating opposition.

Specifically, we analyzed responses to the 1990 party likes and dislikes questions (V130-V152), the 1990 questions concerning likes and dislikes for the House candidates (V401-V424), the questions on the most important problems facing the nation in 1990 (V702-V704), and 1991 (V2334-2336), the most important issues in the 1990 congressional race (V426-428), and the questions assessing likes and dislikes for George Bush asked in 1991 (V2100-V2111). For the three sets of likes/dislikes questions (party, House candidates, Bush), support for old-age policies included any positive reference to the party or candidate because he/she/it was pro-Social Security (code=909), supported programs for the elderly (code=924), or was pro-seniors (code=1221) or any negative reference because of anti-Social Security positions, opposition to programs for the elderly, or negativity towards seniors. For responses to questions assessing the most important problems in the nation or the 1990 congressional race, support for old-age policies was assessed as mentioning the aged or elderly (code=30).

Overall 56 individuals (13% of the sample) made at least one positive reference to old-age programs in these six sets of questions. And while the number is surprisingly high given it is assessed with relatively weak open-ended measures, it is, if anything, an underestimate. This is because the party likes and dislikes questions were only asked of half the 1990 sample, resulting in responses from only half the respondents answering form 3 of the 1991 Pilot study (N=210). Very few respondents (N=5) made negative references to old-age programs in response to any of these open-ended questions and these will be ignored in subsequent analyses.

The bulk of positive comments (61%) about old-age programs were made in response to questions about the most important problems facing the country in 1990 and 1991. The remaining comments were almost evenly split among the other four sets of questions. Thirteen percent of positive comments about old-age programs were in response to likes and dislikes for the two parties and were almost evenly split between positive comments about the Democratic party and negative comments about the Republican party. Eight percent of comments concerned candidates for the 1990 House race; seven percent concerned major issues in that race; and six percent of comments were given in response to what respondents disliked about George Bush.

To test the relationship between these unsolicited comments in support of old-age programs and close-ended support assessed by the standard and new old-age policy items, a series of t-tests were conducted. Differences between respondents who did (N=56) and did not (N=384) spontaneously mention support for old-age programs on each of the old-age policy items is presented in Table 5. As can be seen in Table 5, the group spontaneously mentioning old-age programs were significantly more supportive of increased spending on Social Security ( $t=3.35$ ,  $df=442$ ;  $p<.01$ ), felt current Social Security benefits were too low ( $t=2.35$ ,  $df=428$ ;  $p<.05$ ), and more strongly supported the expansion of Medicare ( $t=1.77$ ,  $df=438$ ;  $p<.1$ ).

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Insert Table 5 about here

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There was no significant difference between these two groups on the three items assessing who should pay for old-age programs. Respondents for whom old-age programs were not salient were equally supportive of increased taxes to pay for benefits, just as opposed to taxing Social Security benefits, and similarly optimistic about their future receipt of Social Security benefits as those for whom programs were salient. Overall, respondents for whom old-age programs were most salient, were also the strongest supporters of current programs and seemed primarily concerned about increasing the size of current benefits for older people. Despite much discussion about the rising costs of old-age programs, this issue has, as yet, generated relatively little public concern.

### Opposition to George Bush

Another way in which to assess the predictive validity of each of the new old-age policy items is to compare their impact on assessments of political figures included in the 1990 and 1991 NES studies. We first analyzed reactions to President Bush. In general the Bush administration has not opposed the interests of older people as vehemently as the Reagan administration in its first two years. Still, there may be some opposition to Bush fueled by dissatisfaction with his administration's dealings with the elderly. The issue of escalating health care costs for the elderly, paid for increasingly by older people themselves, has received little attention from the administration. In fact, the Bush administration unsuccessfully proposed cuts in Medicare to resolve 1990 budget problems. Quite plausibly, staunch supporters of old-age programs might feel negatively toward President Bush. Moreover, there is a general perception that Bush is not adept at handling domestic issues, especially problems affecting members of less affluent groups in society. To determine if some of our old-age policy items were better able to detect this negativity than others, we ran a regression equation predicting opposition to Bush.

Attitudes toward Bush were assessed with two items asked in 1991: job approval (V2115) and thermometer rating (V2205). The two items were strongly correlated ( $r=.76$ ) and were combined to form a single scale. The combined scale assessing opposition to Bush was regressed onto the standards NES item on Social Security spending, each of the new old-age policy items, party identification, ideology, and feelings

toward the elderly. A second equation was estimated on the non-retired subsample in which perceptions of Social Security's future were added as an additional predictor of opposition to Bush. Bivariate correlations and the two regression equations are presented in Table 6. Not surprisingly, Democrats, and liberals were most strongly opposed to Bush accounting for most of the explained variance. However, support for old-age policies also accounted for some opposition. Specifically, respondents who felt Social Security benefits for the elderly were too low expressed significantly stronger opposition to the President (see column 1, Table 6).

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Insert Table 6 about here

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None of the other policy items had a significant impact on opposition to Bush. In fact, the standard NES spending item had an effect in the opposition direction. Wanting more spent on Social Security actually decreased not increased opposition to Bush. However, this finding only occurs once party identification and ideology are controlled. The bivariate relationship between wanting more spent on Social Security and opposing Bush is relatively weak ( $r = .04$ ).

This pattern of findings was not found simply among older respondents who might be more inclined to punish Bush for any actions considered unfavorable to other older people. Findings are replicated when regression equations are rerun separately among older (60 and above) and younger (under 60) respondents (not shown). Both old and young respondents who felt Social Security benefits were too low, were more likely to dislike George Bush. None of the other new policy items predicted opposition toward Bush. Apparently, the president is blamed for what are perceived to be, particularly among younger people, inadequate Social Security benefits for the elderly.

### Support for Other Elected Officials

We also examined the impact of attitudes towards old-age policies on support for the respondent's House representative and senators. We were primarily interested in whether the old-age policy items could predict support for representatives and senators who had taken positive stands on old-age issues, and, if so, whether some of the items demonstrated greater predictive validity than others. In particular, we were interested in examining this relationship among older people who are more likely to know the positions of their representatives on old-age issues (via information disseminated by AARP, the National Council of Senior Citizens, and so on) and use that information to shape their political impressions. To gauge elected officials' support of old-age programs, we used a measure of each House representative's and senator's cumulative voting record on old-age bills put before Congress between 1973 and 1990, compiled by the National Council of Senior Citizens.

First, we estimated a series of regression equations predicting older people's support for their House representative. Support for the representative was assessed with two items asked in 1991: job approval (V2320) and thermometer rating (V2217). The

two items were strongly correlated ( $r=.89$ ) and were combined to form a single scale. Each equation included the respondent's proximity to their representative's party<sup>1</sup>, their representative's voting record on old-age issues, one of the old-age policy items, and an interaction between this policy item and the representative's voting record. Given the reduced number of older respondents who both rated their representative and for whose representative voting information was available ( $N=87$ ), we decided not to include all old-age policy items in a single equation but rather run separate equations for each item. A similar series of regression equations were estimated predicting support for the respondent's two senators.

Regression equations predicting support for House representatives are presented in the top panel of Table 7. While none of the regression coefficients reach significance, this lack of significance is partly a function of small sample size. There are several sizeable coefficients in Table 7 that warrant discussion. First, the standardized regression coefficient for party proximity was consistently positive and high in all equations, ranging from .16 to .18. Not surprisingly, respondents who identified with the party of their representative liked him or her better.<sup>2</sup> Second, the coefficients for vote record were positive and of moderate size ranging from .11 to .13. Older respondents were more supportive of a representative who had voted in favor of old-age programs.<sup>3</sup>

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Insert Table 7 about here

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Third and more importantly, there were modest positive interactions between vote record and the two new benefits items: the perceived adequacy of Social Security benefits (.06) and support for Medicare expansion (.08). The interaction between vote record and support for increased benefits was even more sizeable when calculated for a scale constructed by combining these two items (coefficient for interaction = .11;

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<sup>1</sup>This measure was created by reversing the direction of the respondent's party identification to match that of their representative or senator so that strong Democrats were scored as most proximal to their representative or senator if he or she was a Democrat and strong Republicans received the highest party proximity score if their representative or senator was a Republican.

<sup>2</sup> However, this relationship was much weaker among younger respondents. In comparable regression equations, the coefficient for party proximity ranged from -.02 to 0 for younger respondents. Similarly the correlation between party proximity and representative support was substantially higher among older ( $r=.19$ ) than among younger respondents ( $r=-.01$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Again, this relationship between support and the representative's voting record on old-age issues was absent among younger respondents. The correlation between support and vote record was .13 among older respondents and -.01 among younger respondents.

equation not shown). Apparently, older respondents who supported increased benefits for the elderly were somewhat more supportive of House representatives who voted in accordance with the interests of older people.

Fourth, support for several of the old-age policy items had sizeable effects on support for the representative independently of vote record, which we had not expected. In general, older respondents who favored increasing benefits to the elderly were generally more negative toward their representative as seen in columns 2, 3, and 5 of the top panel of Table 7). Specifically, older respondents who preferred increased taxes rather than reduced medical benefits for the elderly, were most negative towards their representative regardless of his or her vote record on old-age issues ( $b = -.17$ ). Similarly, supporters of increased benefits for the elderly, indexed by combining items on the adequacy of Social Security benefits and support for expanding Medicare, were substantially more negative toward their representative ( $b = -.13$ ). The one exception to this occurred on the standard NES spending item; surprisingly, respondents who supported greater spending on Social Security were more positive toward their representative.

Similar regression analyses were conducted to analyze the determinants of support for both of the respondent's senators. These regression equations are presented in the lower two panels of Table 7. Support for the respondent's senators was assessed with two items about each senator asked in 1991: job approval (V2324 and V2328) and thermometer rating (V2218 and V2219). The two items for the first senator were strongly correlated ( $r = .87$ ) and combined to form a scale indicating support for the senator; correlations were similarly high for the second senator ( $r = .86$ ) and were also combined to form a support scale. Party proximity proved a much stronger predictor of older people's support for their senators than for their House representative; it had a significant, positive effect on support for the respondent's first and second senator in all of the regression equations presented in Table 7.

There was a significant interaction between the first senator's vote record and the respondent's support for the expansion of Medicare ( $b = .19$ ) and a sizeable, positive interaction between the second senator's vote record and support for Medicare expansion ( $b = .14$ ). In other words, older respondents who supported the expansion of medical benefits to include nursing home care and long hospital stays were more supportive of senators who have consistently supported old-age programs.

Additionally, there were several substantial interactions between items assessing opposition to transferring costs of old-age programs to the elderly and a senator's vote record. There was a sizeable interaction between the respondent's support for increased taxes to pay for the elderly's medical expenses and the first ( $b = .13$ ) and second ( $b = .14$ ) senator's vote records on old-age programs. Older respondents who preferred raising taxes to reducing medical benefits for the elderly liked their senators most when they voted in support of old-age programs. There was also a sizeable, positive interaction between opposition to taxing Social Security benefits and the first senator's vote record ( $b = .13$ ). Older respondents who opposed taxing benefits liked their senator more if he or she had voted in favor of old-age programs.

As for House representatives, supporters of extended benefits to the elderly were

generally less positive about their senators, regardless of how their senator had voted on old-age programs. Respondents who supported increasing taxes to pay for old-age programs liked their first senator less ( $b = -.16$ ); respondents who thought Social Security benefits were too low liked their second senator significantly less ( $b = -.21$ ) as did respondents who supported Medicare expansion ( $b = -.12$ ).

A parallel series of regression equations were estimated for younger respondents but the total variance explained in each equation was substantially less and coefficients were smaller across the board. There were a few minor exceptions to this. In analyses not presented here, younger respondents who felt the Social Security system would not exist on their retirement were significantly less supportive of their House representative ( $b = -.21$ ;  $p < .01$ ); younger respondents opposed to taxing Social Security benefits were significantly less positive toward their first senator ( $b = -.15$ ;  $p < .05$ ); and there was a significant, positive interaction between feeling that Social Security benefits were too low and the first senator's vote record ( $b = -.11$ ). However, for the most part interactions between the representative or senators' vote record and younger respondents' positions on old-age issues were relatively minor, as anticipated.

### Summary

Overall, the two new benefit items -- assessing the adequacy of Social Security benefits and support for Medicare expansion -- proved the most politically consequential of all new items. Supporters of greater benefits for the elderly, as indexed by both items, were more inclined to spontaneously mention their support for old-age programs in discussing what they liked and disliked about the parties, political figures, and in describing pressing national problems. Older people who supported increased benefits on these two items, particularly the expansion of Medicare, were more inclined to support elected officials who had voted in favor of old-age programs. Moreover, older people who supported expanded benefits were also more negative toward their politicians in general, expressing greater dislike for President Bush, their House representative, and their second senator. Among younger people, support for expanded benefits as indexed by feeling that current Social Security benefits for the elderly were too low resulted in greater opposition toward President Bush and their House representative.

The costs items were comparatively less successful in predicting political attitudes. Old-age programs were not especially salient to respondents who felt that taxes should not be increased to pay for the elderly's rising health care costs or that Social Security benefits should be taxed to cover rising costs. Other political effects of the costs items were checkered or open to alternative interpretations. Older respondents who supported higher taxes to pay for old-age programs were more likely to favor senators who had voted in support of old-age programs, and were more negative toward their representative and first senator more generally. However, these political effects might have been linked to support for greater benefits given the reference to reduced benefits in the question wording. Older people who opposed taxing Social Security benefits were more supportive of their first senator if he or she had voted positively on old-age programs, but this effect was not found for the second senator or House representative. Younger respondents who viewed the future of Social Security as unlikely felt much

more negatively toward their House representative, but not either of their two senators. Apparently concern over who should pay for old-age programs is not an especially salient issue that has few political consequences for elected officials, as yet.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, items on old-age policies included in the 1991 pilot study were not simply interchangeable. Different items measured different things. Some provided insight into generational conflict; others did not. Some were better indicators of current concerns over old-age policies; others indicated the types of issues that have not yet reached public awareness. The following suggestions on which of these items to include in future studies should be read with this qualification in mind.

#### Standard NES Spending Item

Several serious problems with the standard NES spending item emerged from the preceding analysis. In support of the item, it proved to unambiguously measure support for increased benefits for the elderly and was not confounded with support for passing on the costs of old-age programs to younger contributors. Old-age programs were also more salient to respondents of all ages who supported greater spending on Social Security, lending some further credence to the measure. However, in numerous instances the item had counter intuitive political consequences that were at odds with findings for the new benefits items. Support for greater spending on Social Security resulted in more not less support for President Bush among respondents of all ages and more not less support for House representatives among older respondents. Both findings are difficult to explain and at odds with evidence that new items indexing support for increased benefits to the elderly had substantial negative effects on support for the President among respondents of all ages, and House representative and senators among older people. Moreover, unlike the other new benefits items, there was no interaction between older people's support of increased Social Security spending, the standard item, and elected officials' voting record on old-age programs. While the spending item is relatively cheap to collect because it is part of a larger series, its ability to predict political attitudes is quite poor compared to several of the new items assessed in the pilot study. It should probably be replaced in future NES studies.

#### New Benefits Items

The two new benefits items -- the perceived adequacy of Social Security benefits and support for the expansion of Medicare -- were the most successful of all the new items, particularly in predicting other political attitudes. The item assessing support for the expansion of Medicare predicted older people's support for senators who had voted in favor of old-age programs, resulting in one of the strongest interactions between any of the old-age policy items and the voting records of representatives or senators. This item identified respondents for whom old-age programs were highly salient. It was also the only benefits item on which older respondents expressed greater support for increased benefits for the elderly. These analyses suggest that, at least for older people, questions about medical coverage for the elderly influence their assessments of elected



officials. This item should be included in future NES studies because the question of Medicare coverage for nursing home care and long hospital stays remains unresolved, is sure to attain greater political visibility in the near future, and is of considerable concern to older people.

The perceived adequacy of Social Security benefits proved to be an equally powerful item. Like support for the expansion of Medicare, it helped to identify respondents for whom old-age programs were a salient issue. It also predicted opposition to President Bush among respondents of all ages and opposition to at least one of the two senators among older respondents. And when combined with support for the new Medicare item, it interacted more strongly than either item alone with the vote record of representatives among older respondents. Clearly, the perceived inadequacy of Social Security benefits results in some political resentment toward elected officials, across several different branches of government.

The Social Security benefits item also deserves inclusion in future NES studies for an additional reason. It provides illumination on the widespread support for old-age programs among younger people. Younger respondents in the pilot study were significantly more likely to perceive Social Security benefits as inadequate and somewhat more likely to support increased spending on Social Security, as a consequence. This finding parallels evidence from the 1984 NES, 1985 NES pilot study, and a recent Suffolk county survey in which the perception that older people's finances were deteriorating increased support for old-age programs (Huddy, 1990). And as in the 1991 pilot study, younger respondents in all three studies viewed older people's finances as worse than older respondents themselves. With increasing media attention to the relative affluence of the current elderly (Fortune, 1989), there is good reason to track the perceived adequacy of Social Security benefits over time. Any decline in the perceived neediness of older people should result in decreased support for programs benefitting them.

### New Costs Items

The three new items that dealt with the costs of old-age programs proved less politically consequential than the benefits items. They were unrelated to the salience of old-age programs and had only sporadic effects on assessment of political figures. Yet, eliminating items simply because the cost of old-age programs has not yet become a political issue is not necessarily wise. The problem of how to fund old-age programs is discussed among political elites, there are alarming projections of their future costs, particularly Medicare, and this debate could well filter into popular discourse some time in the near future.

Moreover, it is clear that the costs items tapped different dimensions of public opinion than the benefits items, as reflected in relatively weak correlations between the two sets of items. The costs items were even more weakly related to each other, suggesting that there was not a single dimension of attitudes towards who should pay for old-age programs. Passing on costs to the elderly was viewed as a different issue to raising taxes, and both attitudes were distinct from the estimated future existence of Social Security. If the question of how to pay for the increased costs of old-age programs was to become a salient political issue, new benefit items would not be an accurate guide

to predict public opinion on this issue. What follows is a more detailed discussion of each of the costs items in an attempt to identify items that might prove useful in future NES studies.

Transferring the costs of old-age programs to the elderly by taxing Social Security benefits resulted in significant generational differences; older and middle-aged people strongly opposed this proposal whereas members of the youngest age group were mildly supportive of it. While this item interacted with vote record to increase support for one of the senators among older respondents, it had few other political consequences. Nevertheless, the existence of age-based disagreement over passing on the costs of old-age programs to older people is interesting and may prove useful in predicting support for future proposals that charge the elderly for increasingly costly benefits. An item of this type deserves serious consideration for inclusion in future NES studies, though it may or may not be the best item of its type. Other possible items initially suggested, but as yet untested, include support for taxing Social Security benefits to pay for long-term care, increasing the percentage that older people pay for their health care, and increasing costs or reducing benefits for financially secure older Americans.

The item assessing the perceived future existence of Social Security also varied with age. Younger respondents who were further away from retirement were less optimistic that they would ever receive Social Security benefits. And, of course, it is the youngest generations who will end up paying most heavily to maintain the system. Despite this, pessimism about the future of Social Security has few political consequences. It leads to greater negativity toward House representatives, but has no impact on ratings of senators or the president. It is an interesting item, nonetheless, and should be considered for inclusion in future NES studies because it may fuel negativity toward old-age programs if program costs become a salient political issue.

The item asking respondents to choose between increased taxes or reduced benefits had somewhat stronger political effects than the other two costs items, though this may have been in part because it had the highest loading of any of the costs items on the benefits factor. Its forced choice format, pitting increased taxes against reduced benefits may have confounded opposition to increased benefits with opposition to increased taxes. Because of this possible confound, the item should be given low priority for inclusion in future NES studies.

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**Table 1**

**Standard NES Item**

V820. Should federal spending on Social Security be (N=441):

increased	61%
kept the same	36%
decreased	3%

**1991 Items - Benefits**

V2814. Are Social Security payments to the elderly (N=427):

much too low	31%
somewhat too low	36%
about right	32%
somewhat/much too high	2%

V2818. Do you favor or oppose expanding Medicare to pay for nursing home care and long hospital stays for the elderly? (N=437)

strongly favor	66%
somewhat favor	20%
neither	2%
somewhat oppose	7%
strongly oppose	5%

**1991 Items - Costs**

V2822. As you may know the cost of medical care for the elderly is rising rapidly, presenting the government with some tough choices. Some people feel that the best way to pay for medical care for the elderly is to raise taxes for everyone. Others feel that medical care for the elderly should be reduced instead of raising taxes. How about you? (N=422)

increase taxes a lot	10%
increase taxes a little	61%
neither	15%
reduce benefits a little	10%
reduce benefits a lot	5%

V2826. Do you favor or oppose taxing Social Security payments to the elderly just like any other source of income? (N=444)

strongly oppose	68%
somewhat oppose	15%
neither	2%
somewhat favor	10%
strongly favor	6%

V2827. How likely is it that Social Security will exist when it is time for you to retire? Is it (N=356):

very unlikely	16%
somewhat unlikely	25%
somewhat likely	35%
very likely	24%

**Table 2**  
**Old-Age Policy Items: Factor Analysis and Correlations**

	<b>Correlations</b>				
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Standard NES Item</b>					
1. More Government Spending					
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>					
2. Low Social Security Benefits	.45**				
3. Expand Medicare	.30**	.29**			
<b>1991 Items - Costs</b>					
4. Increase Taxes	.24**	.18**	.21**		
5. Oppose Tax on Benefits	.08	.21**	.15**	.04	
6. Unlikely Future S.S. Existence	.18**	.14*	-.04	.04	-.02

	<b>Factor Analysis</b>	
	Entire Sample (N=450)	Non-Retired (N=356)
<b>Standard NES Item</b>		
More Government Spending	.74	.75
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>		
Low Social Security Benefits	.75	.75
Expand Medicare	.65	.63
<b>1991 Items - Costs</b>		
Increase Taxes	.50	.49
Oppose Tax on Benefits	.36	.33
Unlikely Future S.S. Existence	.29	

Note: Entries in the top panel are correlations; entries in the bottom panel are standardized factor loadings.

**Table 3**  
**Generational Differences on Old-Age Policies**

	under 35 (N = 133)	35 - 59 (N = 188)	60 and older (N = 128)
Standard NES Item			
Government Spending			
More	64%	64%	52%
Same	33	33	44
	Somer's D = .10		
1991 Items - Benefits			
Social Security Benefits			
Much too low	35%	33%	22%
Somewhat too low	39	36	31
About right	24	28	44
	Somer's D = .14		
Medicare Expansion			
Strongly favor	62%	66%	71%
Somewhat favor	27	20	12
Somewhat/strongly oppose	10	13	12
	Somer's D = -.05		
1991 Items - Costs			
Taxes vs. Benefits			
Increase taxes a lot	8%	9%	12%
Increase taxes somewhat	63	62	58
Neither	9	11	18
Reduce benefits a lot/somewhat	20	11	11
	Somer's D = .04		
Tax Soc. Sec. Benefits			
Strongly oppose	48%	77%	75%
Somewhat oppose	29	9	8
Strongly/somewhat favor	23	13	13
	Somer's D = .21		
Future S.S. Existence			
Somewhat/very unlikely	47%	40%	20%
Somewhat likely	38	36	24
Very likely	14	24	56
	Somer's D = -.17		

Table 4  
Determinants of Old-Age Policy Items

	Spend more on S.S.	S.S. Payments too low	Benefits Expand Medicare	Costs Increase Taxes	Oppose Tax on Benefits	S.S. Future Unlikely
Age	-.07	-.18***	.01	.07	.14**	-.24**
<u>Interests</u>						
Poor finances	.01	.12***	.01	-.01	.02	.05
Low income	.12*	.04	.09*	.09*	-.14***	-.01
<u>Pro-elderly</u>	.03	.14***	.13***	.09*	.14***	.05
<u>Political Beliefs</u>						
Increase Services	.20***	.20***	.21***	.10*	.06	.04
Liberal	.09	.05	.08	.18**	.02	.04
Democratic	.05	.00	.03	.03	-.05	.02
R <sup>2</sup>	.108	.139	.112	.089	.060	.069

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01

**Table 5**  
**Differences in Support of Old-Age Policies by Issue Salience**

	Old-Age Policies	
	Salient <sup>a</sup>	Non-Salient
<b>Standard NES Item</b>		
More Government Spending (range: 1-3)	1.80	1.54**
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>		
Low Social Security Benefits (range: 1-5)	3.20	2.91*
Expand Medicare (range: 1-5)	3.61	3.32*
<b>1991 Items - Costs</b>		
Increase Taxes (range: 1-5)	3.60	3.62
Oppose Taxing Benefits (range: 1-5)	4.39	4.27
S. S. Unlikely Future (range: 1-5)	2.72	2.73

Note: Entries are means. Differences are tested using a t-test.

a. Issue salience assessed using open-ended measures; item construction is discussed in the text.

\*\* p < .01; \*p < .05



**Table 6**  
**Origins of Opposition to President Bush**

	r	Entire Sample N=450	Non-retired Subsample N=358
<b>Standard NES Item</b>			
More Government Spending	.04	-.13**	-.13**
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>			
Low Social Security Benefits	.16	.16**	.17**
Expand Medicare	.06	-.04	-.05
<b>1991 Items - Costs</b>			
Increase Taxes	.10	-.03	-.01
Oppose Taxing Benefits	.05	-.01	.00
S. S. Unlikely Future	.02		-.01
<b>Beliefs</b>			
Liberal	.37	.26**	.31**
Democratic	.43	.36**	.32**
Pro-Elderly	.01	.06	.08
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		.269	.274

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

**Table 7**  
**Determinants of Support for Representative and Senators: Respondents 60 and Older**

Support for Representative(N=87)					
	Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase	Policy=Oppose Tax on S.S.
<u>Representative</u>					
Votes Pro-Elderly	.12	.11	.13	.11	.11
<u>Respondent</u>					
Party proximity <sup>a</sup>	.17	.16	.16	.17	.18
Pro-old age policy	.14	-.10	-.09	-.17	-.04
Policy X Rep. Vote	.05	.06	.08	-.04	-.04
R <sup>2</sup>	.070	.057	.062	.080	.049
Support for First Senator (N=82)					
	Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase	Policy=Oppose Tax on S.S.
<u>Senator</u>					
Votes Pro-Elderly	.07	.07	.08	.06	.07
<u>Respondent</u>					
Party proximity <sup>a</sup>	.34***	.34***	.34***	.35***	.34***
Pro-old age policy	.07	.07	-.03	-.16	-.02
Policy X Sen. Vote	.06	.05	.19*	.13 (p=.23)	.13 (p=.21)
R <sup>2</sup>	.136	.134	.163	.171	.146
Support for Second Senator (N=82)					
	Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase	Policy=Oppose Tax on S.S.
<u>Senator</u>					
Votes Pro-Elderly	.02	.02	.03	.00	.00
<u>Respondent</u>					
Party proximity <sup>a</sup>	.51***	.46***	.52***	.53***	.54***
Pro-old age policy	-.04	-.21**	-.12	.05	-.07
Policy X Sen. Vote	.03	-.08	.14 (p=.17)	.14 (p=.15)	-.10
R <sup>2</sup>	.274	.317	.309	.292	.285

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

a. For respondents with Democratic representative/senators: 6=strong Democrat, 0=strong Republican; for respondents with Republican representative/senators: 6=strong Republican, 0=strong Democrat.

\*p<.1; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.012

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**TO:** NES Board of Overseers  
**FROM:** Leonie Huddy  
**SUBJECT:** Addendum to Report on Old-Age Policy Items  
**DATE:** February 2, 1992

Benefits Items

Two issues arose during the Pilot study meeting that required clarification. The first, concerned the need for new items assessing current levels of support for increased or maintained levels of benefits to the elderly, in addition to or as replacements for the standard spending item. While the standard item is strongly correlated with both new items - current levels of Social Security benefits and support for expanding Medicare - the Medicare item is considerably more salient to older people and the issue has greater impact on their assessments of their representative and senators. This is demonstrated in two new tables. As seen in Table 5A, older respondents who spontaneously mention their support for old-age policies are significantly more likely to support the expansion of Medicare; the issue is not salient to younger respondents. However this does not distinguish the Medicare item from the standard spending item. As also seen in Table 5A, the standard item is salient to both age groups, especially younger respondents.

More persuasively, older respondents who are most supportive of expanding Medicare are most likely to assess their representative and senators according to their support for old-age programs. In contrast, the standard NES spending item is considerably less diagnostic of older people's sentiments towards their elected representatives. Findings that support these conclusions are presented in Table 7A, a version of the original Table 7 in which standardized regression coefficients have been replaced with unstandardized coefficients. As can be seen from the third column in Table 7A, even among older people least supportive of Medicare expansion, a ten point increase in their official's vote record increased their support for him or her by 1.4 points (the average of .15, .16, and .11). Among the strongest supporters of Medicare expansion, a ten point increase in their official's vote record resulted in a whopping 5.7 point increase in support (the average of .15 + .25, .16 + .56, and .11 + .47). Clearly, older people's attitude toward Medicare coverage of nursing home care and long-hospital stays has substantial impact on assessments of their elected representatives. By comparison, the standard NES item has effects in the right direction that are roughly half the size of those observed for the new Medicare item. As seen in the first column of Table 7A, among older respondents who are least supportive of increased spending on Social Security a 10 point increase in their official's vote record results in a 1 point increase in their support. Among older respondents who are most supportive of increased spending on Social Security, a ten point increase in their official's rating results in a 2.6 increase in their support.

Should a new benefits item be added? Ideally, with a larger sample we would have

simultaneously compared the relative effects of the standard and Medicare items on older people's support for their elected officials. However, when this was attempted the signs of coefficients swung around wildly indicating that the results were highly unreliable. In the absence of a larger sample, it is clear that the Medicare item is substantially more successful in explaining the reactions of older people to their elected officials than the standard item. And given that the issue of funding for long hospital stays and nursing home care is not about to disappear, it would be wise to include the Medicare item in future studies. However, it is also apparent that the standard item is most salient among younger respondents and, perhaps, should be retained for that reason.

### Costs

The second issue raised at the pilot study meeting concerned the addition of new items tapping attitudes towards the costs of old-age programs. None of the three new costs items had achieved much public prominence as yet, as demonstrated in the original report. Yet, there is continued debate over how to fund programs, at least among economists, political elites, and policy mavens. Crystal-ball gazing aside, there is no certain way to gauge whether and in what form the question of costs will achieve political prominence. One issue that has consistently arisen over the past decade is the option of passing on greater health care costs to more affluent elderly people. This prospect arose in early discussions of the 1993 budget in the form of increased Medicare premiums for the most affluent elderly but was then abandoned. Several questions along these lines were initially proposed to the board but went untested in the 1991 pilot study. The board should think seriously about testing one or two items like this in future studies.

The costs issue may also arise in the form of proposals to increase taxes paid by working age people. The question tested in the 1992 study, pitting increased taxes against reduced benefits for the elderly, proved to confound the costs and benefits dimensions and so did not have obvious political effects. It was not an especially salient issue nor was it especially powerful in predicting older people's assessments of their representatives. However, it is an issue that may arise at any time, particularly given some dissatisfaction with relatively high Social Security payroll taxes. Possible items suggested in the original proposal that might be considered by the Board for future investigation include voluntary Social Security participation, increased payroll taxes, and concern about the current level of Social Security payroll taxes.

Last, the costs issue may arise in the form of proposals to pass the costs of old-age programs onto all older people. This was assessed in part in the 1991 pilot study with the question on taxing Social Security benefits. Older people were more strongly opposed to this prospect than younger respondents and the issue held somewhat greater salience for older people, as seen in Table 5A. However, opposition to taxing benefits had little impact on older respondent's assessment of their Washington representatives. In reality, the costs of old-age programs are frequently passed on to all older people in the form of increased Medicare premiums and deductibles. Politicians may wish to avoid making this form of covering costs a salient issue, but it is a common political solution and items on this approach should receive some consideration from the Board.

**Table 5A**  
**Differences in Support of Old-Age Policies by Issue Salience and Age**

	Old-Age Policies			
	under 60 Salient <sup>a</sup> (N=35)	Non-Salient (N=285)	60 and older Salient (N=20)	Non-Salient (N=106)
<b>Standard NES Item</b>				
More Govt. Spending (range: 1-3)	1.86	1.58***	1.70	1.43*
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>				
Low Soc. Sec. Benefits (range: 1-5)	3.29	3.00*	3.00	2.69 (p=.14)
Expand Medicare (range: 1-5)	3.43	3.35	3.90	3.26**
<b>1991 Items - Costs</b>				
Increase Taxes (range: 1-5)	3.62	3.59	3.61	3.70
Oppose Taxing Benefits (range: 1-5)	4.29	4.24	4.75	4.33 (p=.16)
S. S. Unlikely Future (range: 1-5)	2.83	2.71		

Note: Entries are means. Differences are tested using a t-test.

a. Issue salience assessed using open-ended measures; item construction is discussed in the text.

\*\*\* p<.01; \*\*p<.05; \* p<.1

**Table 6A**  
**Determinants of Bush Opposition Scale:**  
**Benefits Items**

Entire Sample N=450

<b>Standard NES Item</b>				
More Government Spending	-.07			-.13**
<b>1991 Items - Benefits</b>				
Low Social Security Benefits		.09*		.16**
Expand Medicare			.03	.04
<b>Beliefs</b>				
Liberal	.26**	.35**	.35**	.36**
Democratic	.36**	.24**	.26**	.26**
Pro-Elderly	.04	.06	.04	.07
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.249	.253	.245	.269

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

**Table 7A**  
**Determinants of Support for Representative and Senators:**

		<b>Support for Representative<sup>a</sup> (N=87)</b>			
		Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase
<b>Representative</b>					
<b>Votes Pro-Elderly<sup>a</sup></b>		.14 (.34)	.17 (.16)	.15 (.11)	.59 (.39)
<b>Respondent</b>					.21 (.29)
<b>Party proximity<sup>b</sup></b>		12.93 (8.39)	11.93 (8.55)	12.39 (8.47)	14.77 (8.40)
<b>Pro-old age policy<sup>c</sup></b>		4.87 (25.63)	-27.57 (32.09)	-23.06 (19.16)	26.49 (42.84)
<b>Policy X Rep. Vote</b>		.14 (.34)	.25 (.45)	.25 (.30)	-.75 (.57)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		.070	.057	.064	.097
					.049
		<b>Support for First Senator<sup>a</sup> (N=82)</b>			
		Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase
<b>Senator</b>					
<b>Votes Pro-Elderly<sup>a</sup></b>		.13 (.13)	.12 (.16)	.16 (.10)	-.21 (.27)
<b>Respondent</b>					-.36 (.27)
<b>Party proximity<sup>b</sup></b>		23.71 (7.40)***	23.52 (7.50)***	23.90 (7.27)***	24.15 (7.47)***
<b>Pro-old age policy<sup>c</sup></b>		-10.24 (23.22)	-3.70 (30.07)	-40.21 (21.22)*	-44.45 (26.54)*
<b>Policy X Sen. Vote</b>		.24 (.32)	.18 (.42)	.56 (.28)*	.39 (.36)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		.139	.134	.171	.168
					.158
		<b>Support for Second Senator<sup>a</sup> (N=82)</b>			
		Policy=more spending	Policy= S.S. too low	Policy=expand Medicare	Policy=Tax Increase
<b>Senator</b>					
<b>Votes Pro-Elderly<sup>a</sup></b>		.04 (.15)	-.15 (.19)	.11 (.12)	-.43 (.33)
<b>Respondent</b>					.20 (.28)
<b>Party proximity<sup>b</sup></b>		40.53 (7.85)***	36.37 (7.78)***	41.05 (7.58)***	41.94 (7.85)***
<b>Pro-old age policy<sup>c</sup></b>		-9.93 (23.74)	4.49 (32.16)	-38.72 (19.45)*	-30.43 (27.89)
<b>Policy X Sen. Vote</b>		.10 (.39)	-.56 (.50)	.47 (.33)	.64 (.45)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		.274	.321	.310	.291
					.280

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

a. Range is 0-100. b. For respondents with Democratic representative/senators: 1=strong Democrat, 0=strong Republican; for respondents with Republican representative/senators: 1=strong Republican, 0=strong Democrat. c. Range is 0-1.

\*p<.1; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01