



National Committee to Preserve
Social Security and Medicare
FOUNDATION

FOUNDATION Report

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US ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL SECURITY

PROJECT REPORT FOR

NATIONAL COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE FOUNDATION

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The Survey Center
University of New Hampshire

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The University of New Hampshire

Survey Center

The UNH Survey Center is an independent, non-partisan academic survey research organization and a division of the UNH College of Liberal Arts.

The Survey Center conducts telephone, mail, e-mail, Internet, and intercept surveys, as well as focus groups and other qualitative research for university researchers, government agencies, public non-profit organizations, private businesses, and media clients.

Our senior staff have over 40 years experience in designing and conducting custom research on a broad range of political, social, health care, and other public policy issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of New Hampshire Survey Center conducted a survey of U.S. residents about their attitudes toward Social Security for the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare Foundation. Seven hundred sixty four (764) U.S. adults were interviewed by telephone between June 24 and June 30, 2010. The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/- 3.6%. Included in this sample was a subsample of five hundred thirty-two (532) likely November 2010 voters, for which the margin of sampling error is +/- 4.2%. (See Technical Report below for a more detailed description of survey methods.)

Major findings of the survey

1. Americans Do Not Believe Social Security is Responsible for the Deficit

- Americans are quite familiar with the national budget deficit – 55% say they have heard a lot recently about the deficit, 27% say they have heard a little, and 18% have heard little or nothing at all recently about the deficit. (*Figure 1*)
- However, Americans do NOT believe Social Security is a major cause of the deficit – it is only cited by 2% of Americans as the primary cause of the deficit. Military activity and wars (27%), government waste (9%), the recent bank bailouts (6%), and foreign aid (5%) are cited as the primary cause of the national deficit in an open-ended question. (*Figure 2*)
- Three out of four Americans do not think policymakers should make significant changes to Social Security in order to reduce the national deficit. (*Figure 3a*)
 - Solid majorities of all demographic groups think Social Security should be left alone. More than two-thirds of younger Americans (under 35) and Republicans think Social Security should be left alone. (*Figure 3b*)

2. Social Security is Critical in Bad Economic Times

- Two out of three Americans (64%) think that Social Security provides security and stability to the U.S. economy while only 20% think it is a drain on the economy, and 11% think it does some of both. (*Figure 4a*)
 - Solid majorities of all demographic groups think Social Security provides security and stability to the economy. Three in five younger Americans and two out of three Independents think Social Security provides security and stability to the U.S. economy. (*Figure 4b*)
- 70% of Americans agree (49% strongly agree) that the recession underscores the critical role Social Security fills for working families. (*Figure 5*)
- 70% of Americans expect to need Social Security when they retire – almost one-half of respondents hold this view strongly. (*Figure 6a*)
 - Americans with incomes under \$60,000 (approximately 56% of all American households) and early and older baby boomers are most likely to believe they will need Social Security when they retire.
 - 70% of younger Americans (under 35) believe they will need Social Security when they retire. (*Figure 6b*)

3. Americans Support Candidates who Support Social Security

- Americans are more likely to vote for candidates who oppose cutting Social Security benefits than for candidates who favor cutting Social Security benefits. **(Figure 7)**
 - Overall, 58% say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who supports cutting Social Security benefits (46% of them much less likely), while only 9% say they would be more likely to vote for such a candidate.

4. Americans Express Solid Opposition to Social Security Changes

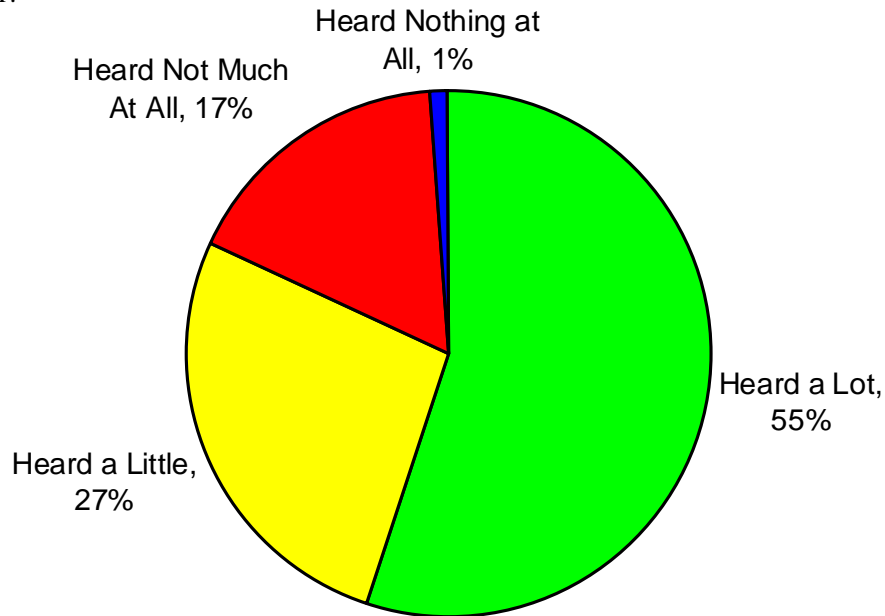
Americans oppose most changes to Social Security that have been proposed to reduce the national deficit. The exception is removing the cap on wages that are taxed for Social Security. **(Figure 8a)**

- 78% of Americans oppose raising Social Security's retirement age – with two-thirds of Americans expressing strong opposition to such a proposal. **(Figure 8b)**
- 60% of Americans oppose reducing the starting benefit level for new retirees, and the opposition is shared by majorities of all demographic and political groups. **(Figure 8c)**
- 74% of Americans oppose converting Social Security into a flat benefit, as produced by price indexing proposals which do not reflect workers' contributions into the system. 61% of respondents hold this position strongly. **(Figure 8d)**
- Half of Americans support removing the current cap on Social Security wages that are taxed (\$106,800). Upper income Americans – that is, those who are most likely to pay higher taxes under such a proposal – are also the income group most likely to support removing the cap. **(Figure 8e)**

5. Americans Strongly Believe Social Security Represents *their* Retirement, and that it is not just another government program

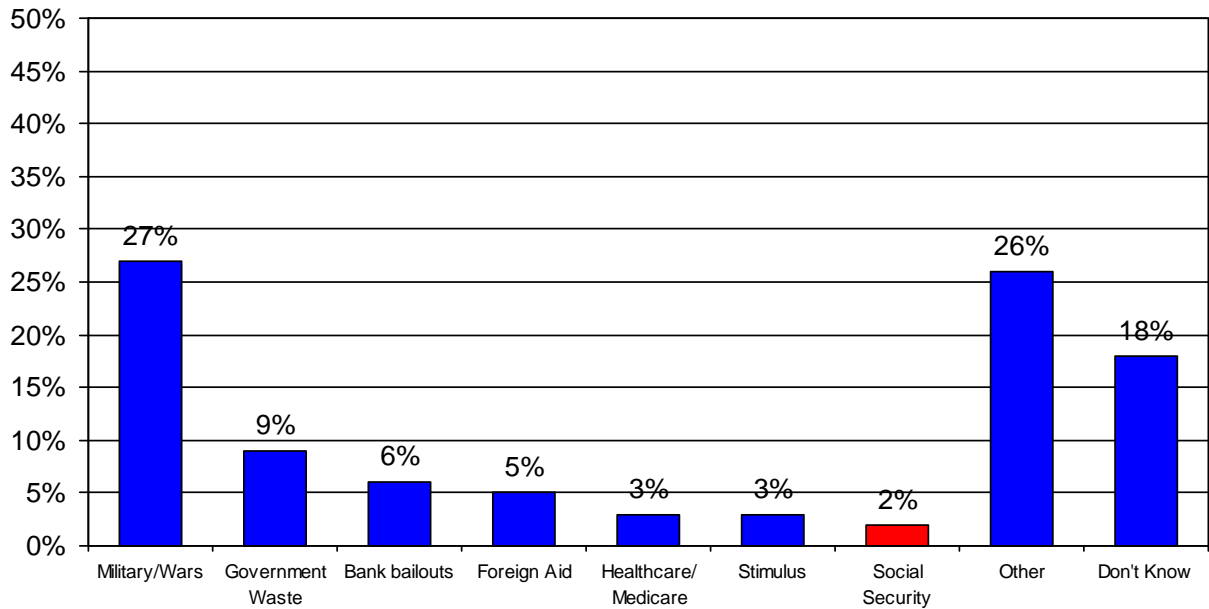
- Virtually all Americans (96%) agree (87% strongly agree) that Social Security money belongs to the people who contribute and to their beneficiaries. **(Figure 9)**
- 4 of 5 Americans agree (69% strongly agree) that Social Security is a promise made to all generations and should not be broken. **(Figure 10)**

Figure 1: “How much have you seen or heard recently about the issue of the national budget deficit, that is, the amount of money the Federal government has to borrow each year to cover the amount of money it spends? Would you say you have seen or heard a lot about the national budget deficit ... a little ... or not much at all?”



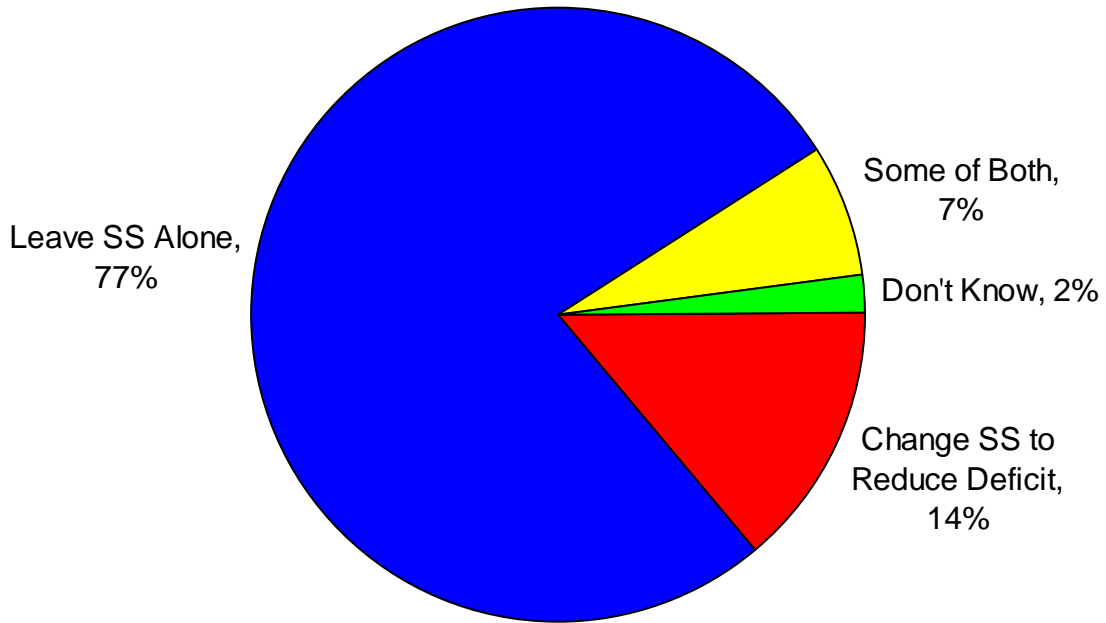
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Figure 2: “Think of all the things that the Federal government spends money on ... which of the programs or service do you think is the primary cause of the national budget deficit.”



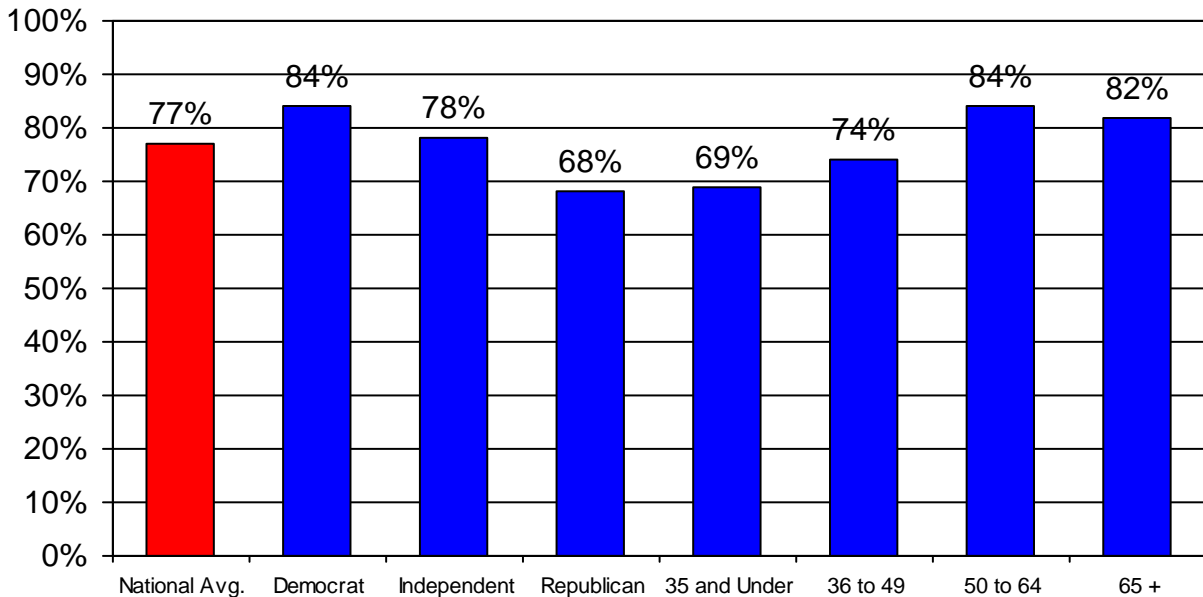
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Figure 3a: “Some people have proposed significant changes to Social Security, including cutting benefits, raising the retirement age, and increasing taxes in order to help reduce the national deficit. Do you think that policy makers in Washington should significantly change Social Security to reduce the national deficit or should they leave Social Security alone and look at other ways of reducing the deficit?”



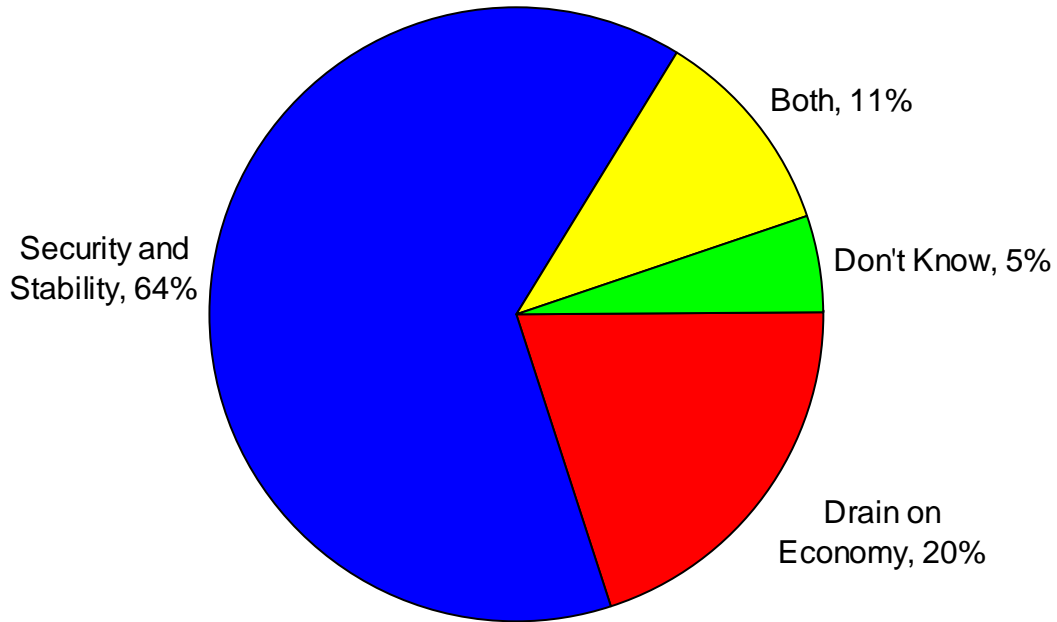
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Figure 3b: “Do you think that policy makers in Washington should significantly change Social Security to reduce the national deficit or should they leave Social Security alone and look at other ways of reducing the deficit?” (Percent “Leave Social Security Alone” by party identification and age.)



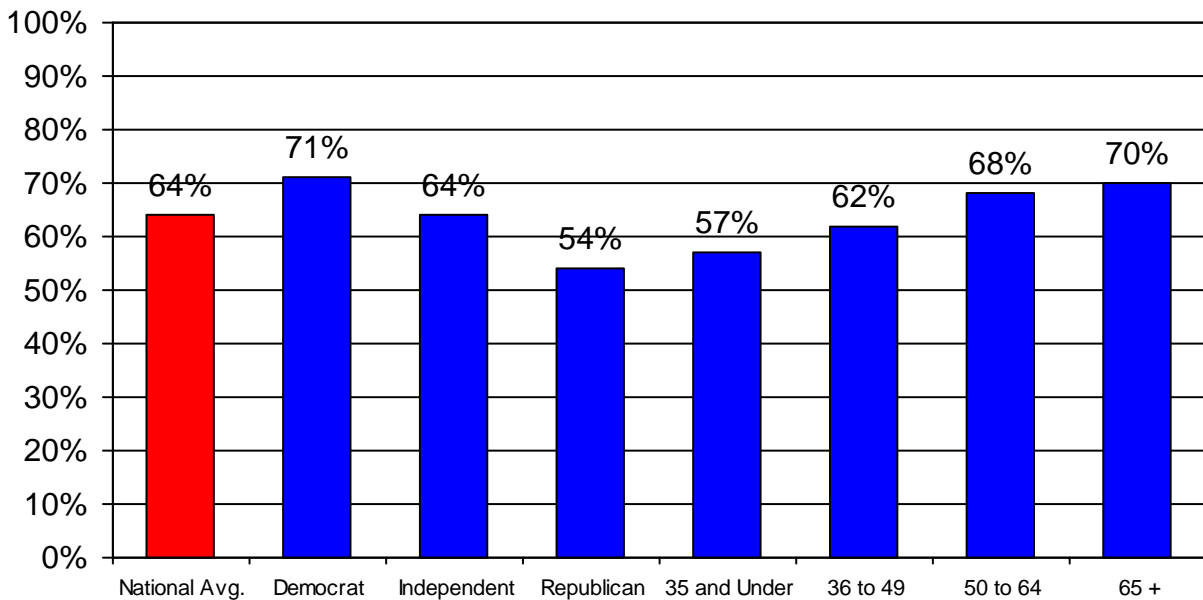
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Figure 4a: “During bad economic times is Social Security ... a drain on the economy ... or does it provide security and stability to the economy?”



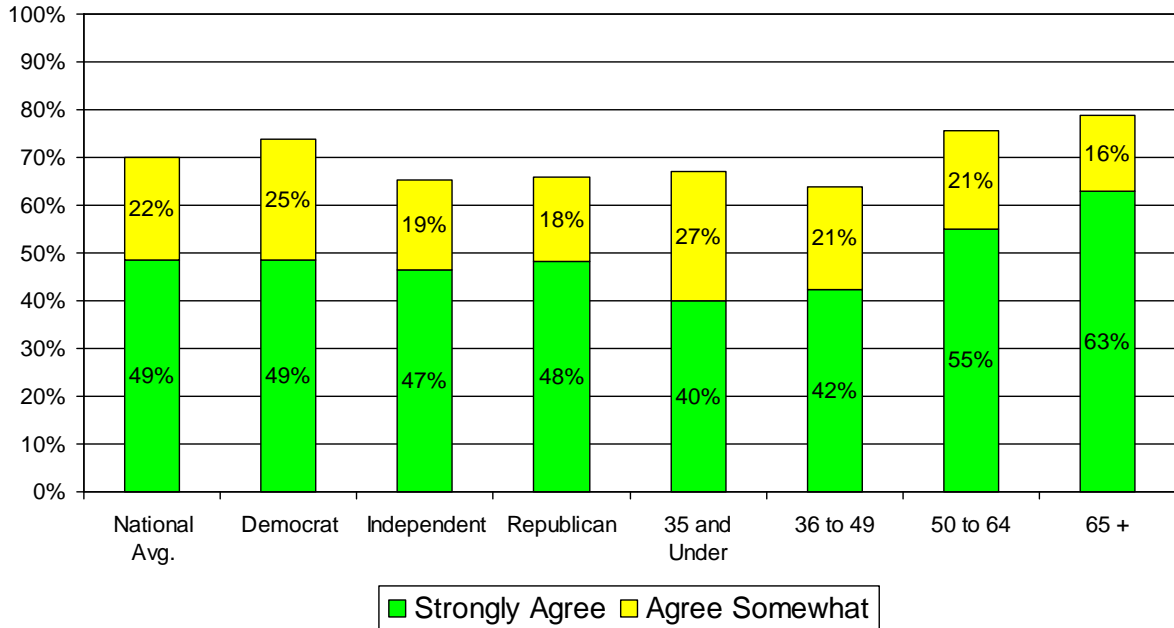
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Figure 4b: “During bad economic times is Social Security ... a drain on the economy ... or does it provide security and stability to the economy?” (Percent “Security and Stability” by party identification and age.)



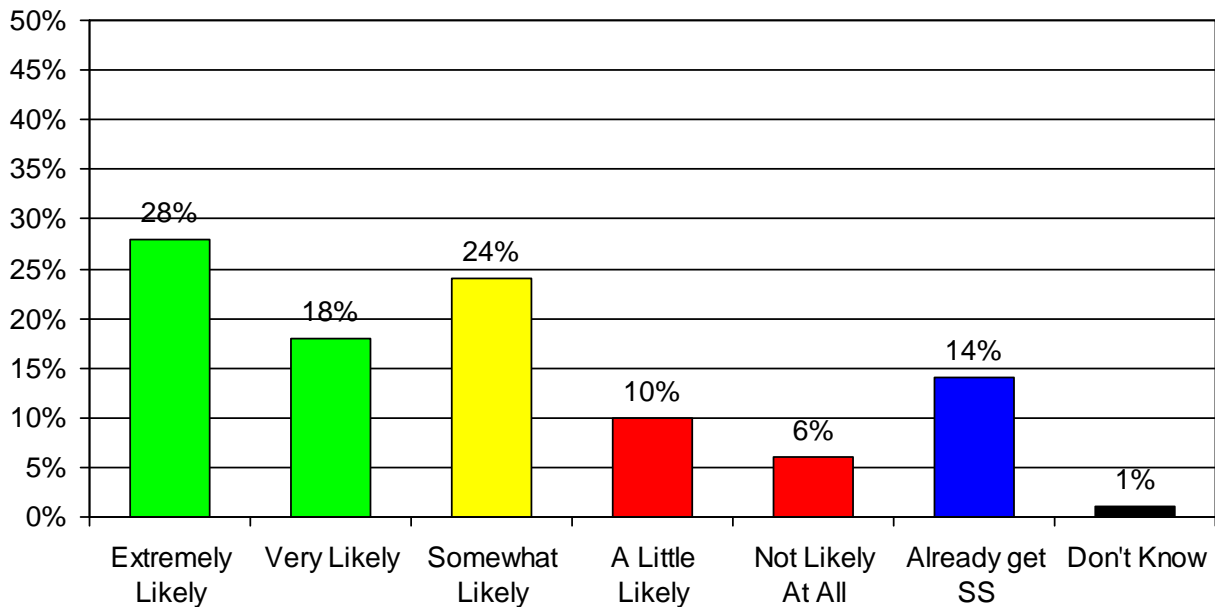
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Figure 5: “Here are some statements about Social Security. Using a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 means you strongly DISAGREE and 100 means you strongly AGREE, please indicate if you agree or disagree with each statement: The recession underscores the critical role Social Security fills for working families and retirees across the nation.”



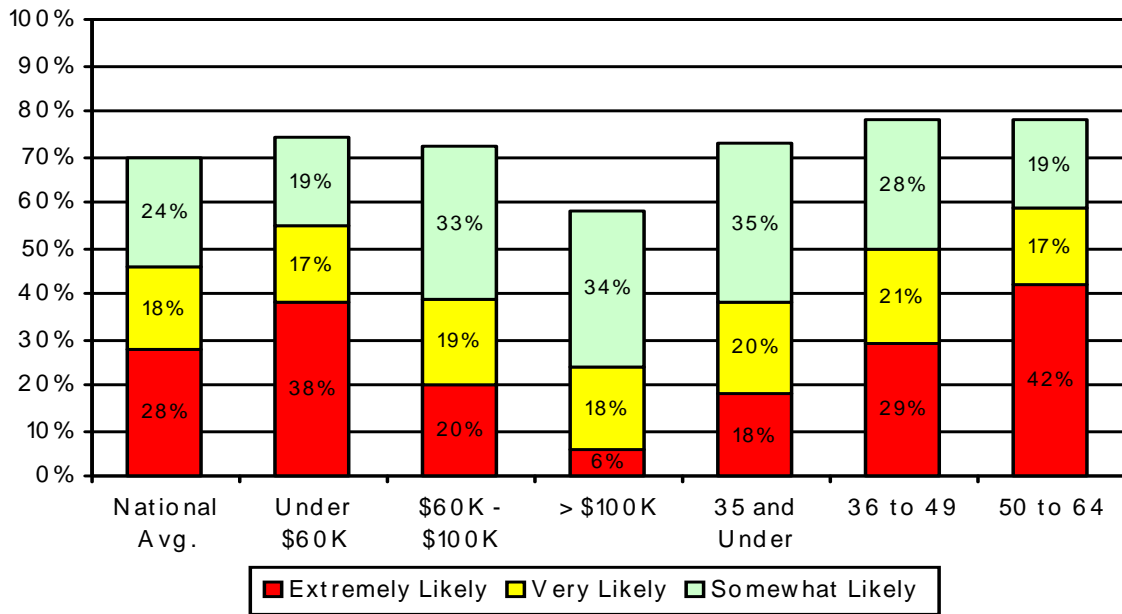
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Figure 6a: “How likely do you think it is that you, personally, will NEED Social Security for your retirement ... extremely likely ... very likely ... somewhat likely ... a little likely ... or not likely at all?”



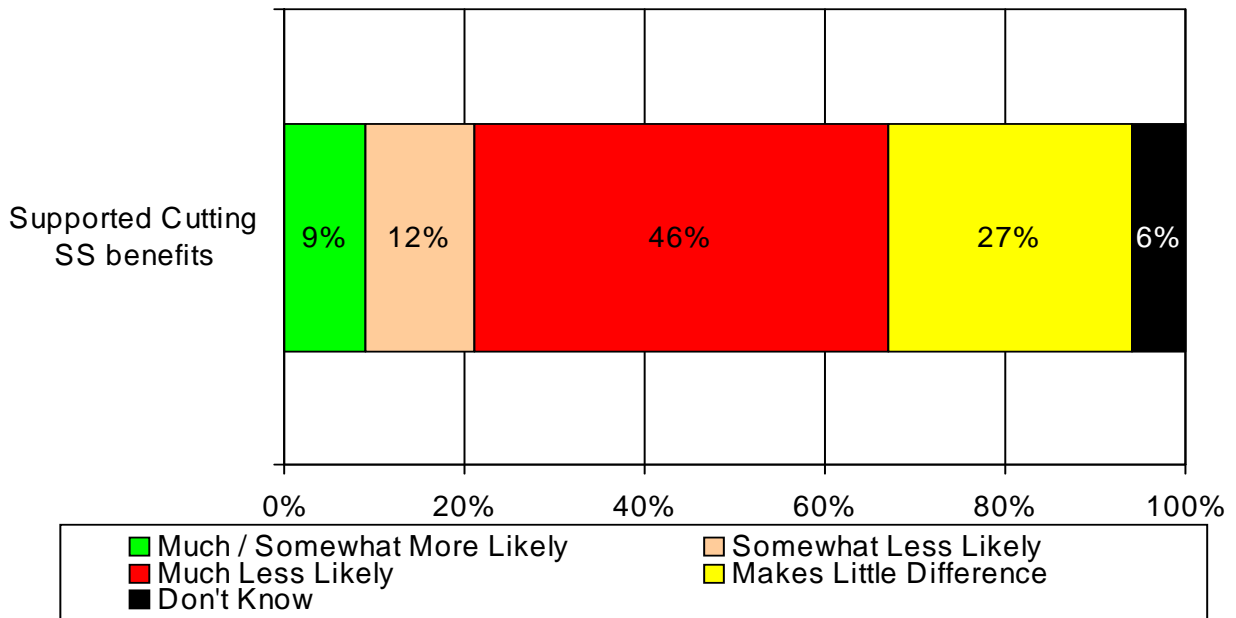
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Figure 6b: “How likely do you think it is that you, personally, will NEED Social Security for your retirement ... extremely likely ... very likely ... somewhat likely ... a little likely ... or not likely at all?”
 (By age and income.)



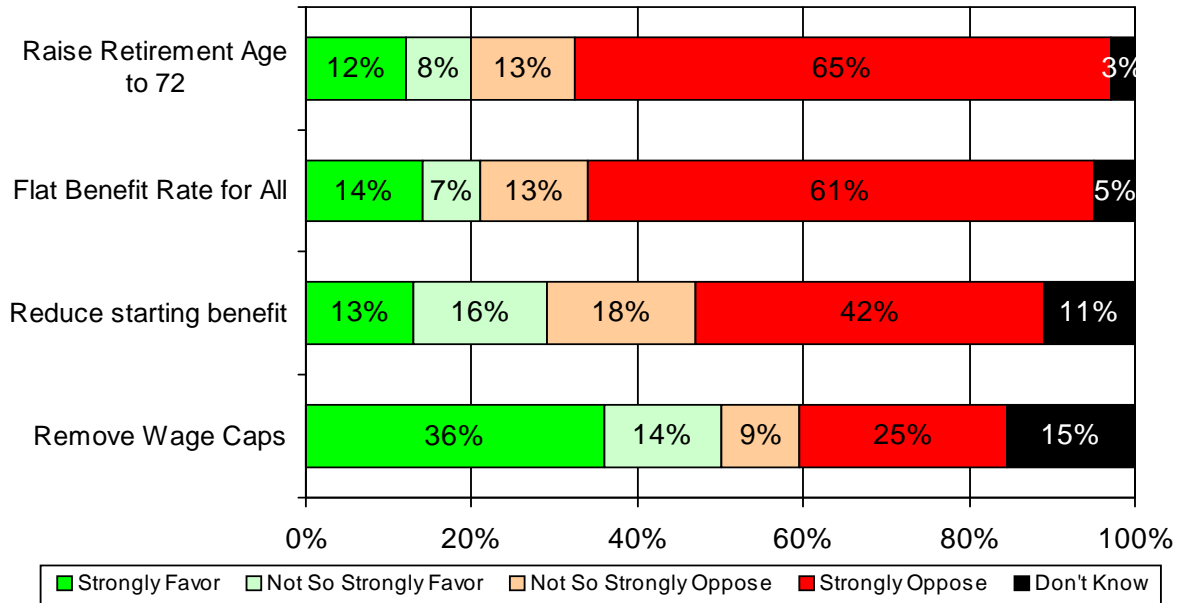
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Figure 7: “Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who supports cutting Social Security benefits, or would that make little difference in your vote?”



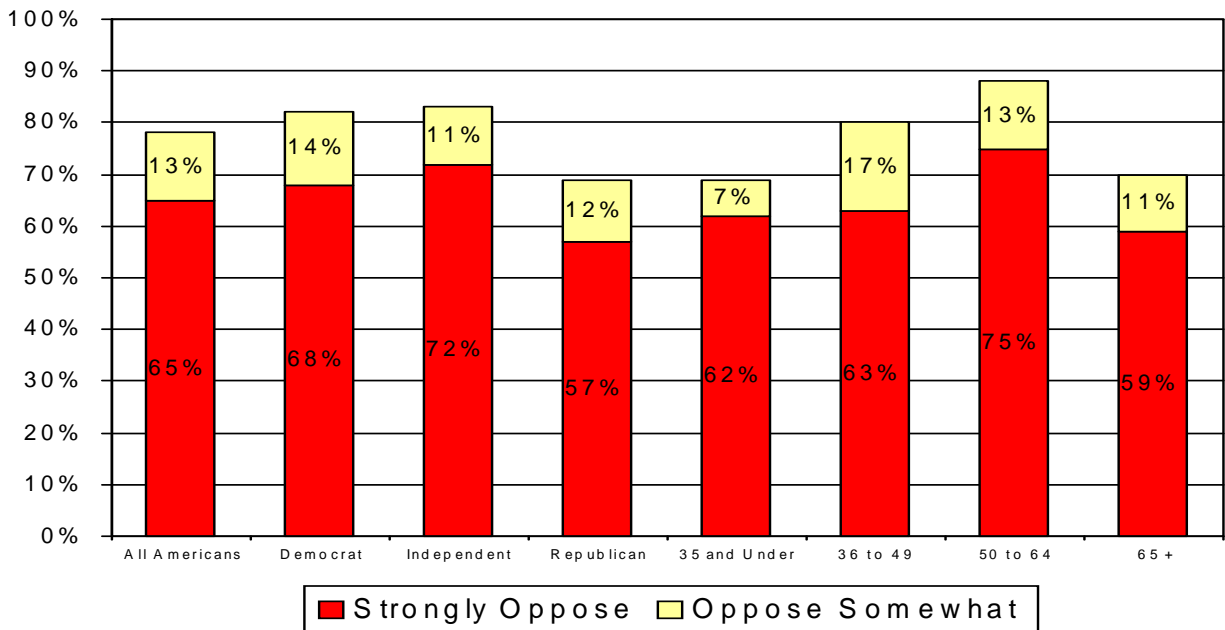
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Figure 8a: "Here are some possible changes to Social Security that have been proposed to reduce the national budget deficit. Please indicate whether you favor or oppose each policy:"



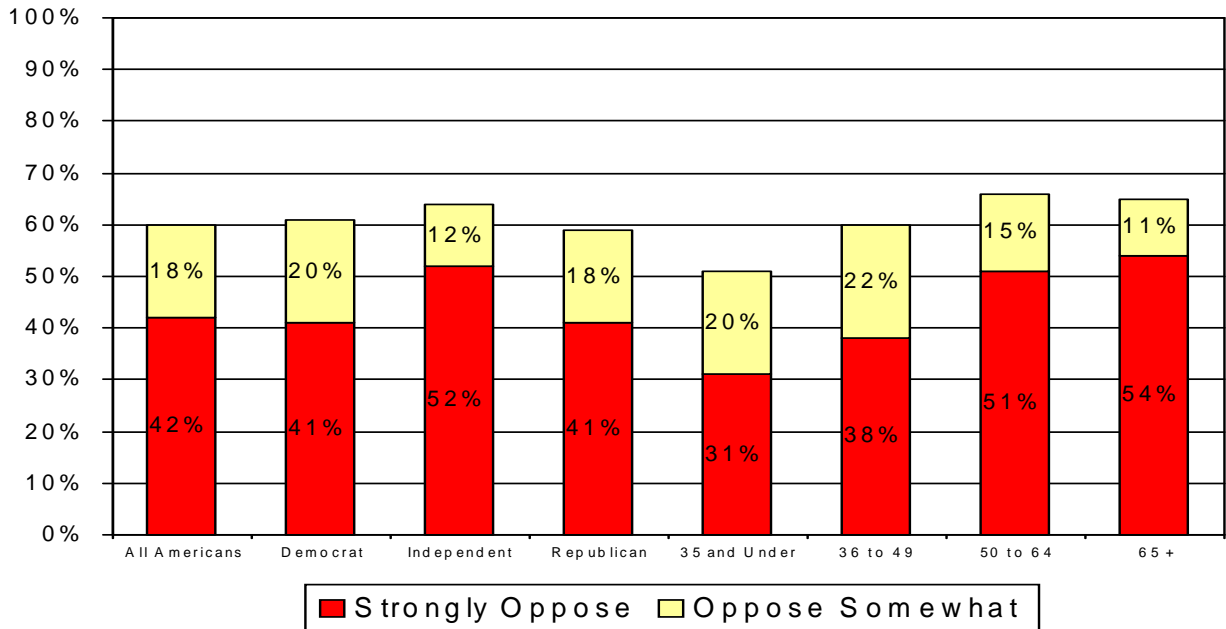
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Figure 8b: Percent Opposing Raising Retirement Age to 72 by Party Identification and Age



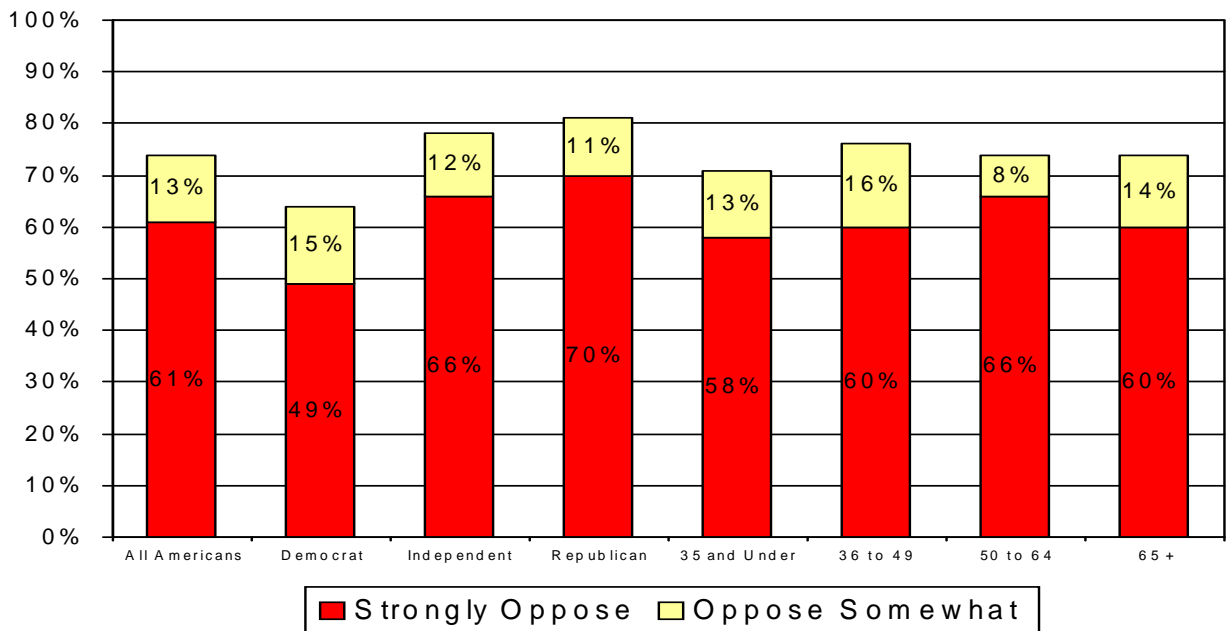
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Figure 8c: Percent Opposing Reducing Starting Benefit Level by Party Identification and Age



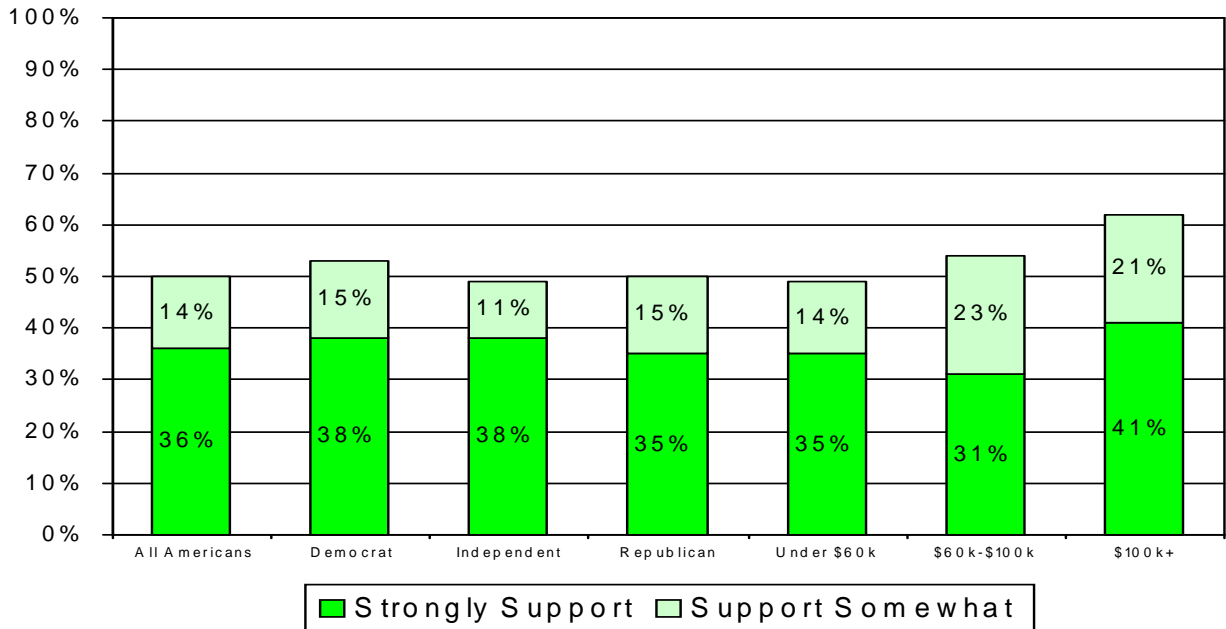
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Figure 8d: Percent Opposing Flat Benefit Rate for Everyone, Regardless of Income by Party Identification and Age



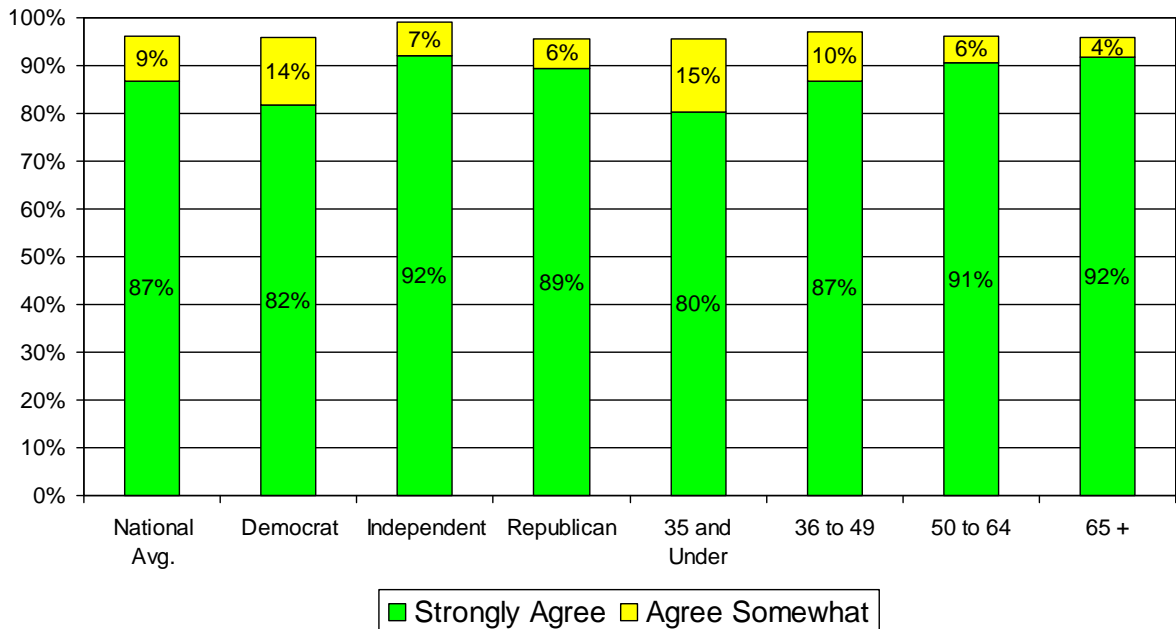
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Figure 8e: Percent Supporting Removing Wage Cap of \$106,800 by Party Identification and Income



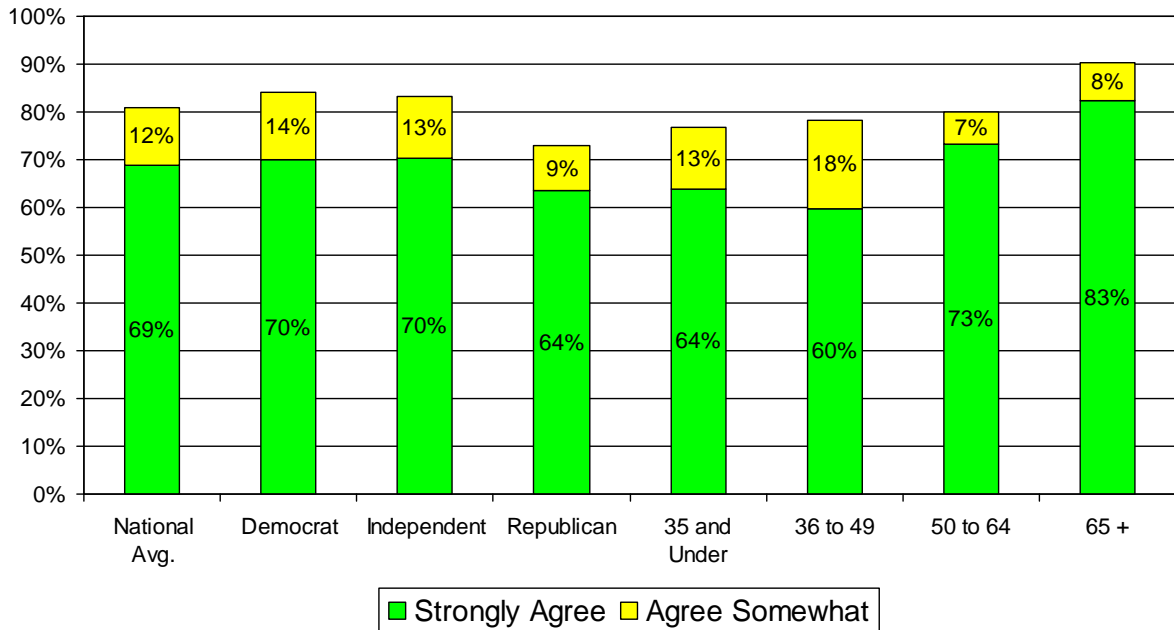
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Figure 9: “Using a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 means you strongly DISAGREE and 100 means you strongly AGREE, please indicate if you agree or disagree with each statement: Social Security moneys belong to the people who contribute and to its beneficiaries, not to the government.”



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Figure 10: “Here are some statements about Social Security. Using a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 means you strongly DISAGREE and 100 means you strongly AGREE, please indicate if you agree or disagree with each statement: Social Security is a promise made to all generations and should not be broken.”



National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare Foundation

TECHNICAL REPORT

How the Sample Was Selected

The 2010 National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare Foundation (NCF), Social Security Attitudes Survey was a survey of randomly selected U.S. adults (including Alaska and Hawaii). This survey was conducted using a procedure called Random Digit Dialing (RDD) which is described below.

A sample of households in the area was selected by a procedure known as random digit dialing. The way this works is as follows. First, with the aid of a computer, one of the three digit area codes from across the U.S. is selected (e.g., 614), next one of the three-digit telephone exchanges that are currently used in the area (e.g., 772) is randomly selected. The computer then randomly selects one of the "working blocks"--the first two of the last four numbers in a telephone number (e.g., 64)--and attaches it to the randomly selected exchange. Finally, the computer program then generates a two-digit random number between 00 and 99 (e.g., 57) which is attached to the previously selected prefix (772), and the previously selected working block (64) resulting in a complete telephone number -- i.e., 614-772-6457. This procedure is then repeated numerous times by the computer to generate more random numbers, so that we have a sufficient quantity to conduct the survey. The end result is that each household in the U.S. in which there is a land-line telephone has an equally likely chance of being selected into the sample.

The random sample used in the NCF Social Security Attitudes Survey was purchased from Scientific Telephones Samples (STS), Foothill Ranch, California. STS screens each selected telephone number to eliminate non-working numbers, disconnected numbers, and business numbers to improve the efficiency of the sample, reducing the amount of time interviewers spend calling non-usable numbers.

Each of these randomly generated telephone numbers is called by one of our interviewers from a centrally supervised facility at the UNH Survey Center. If the number called is found not to be a residential one, it is discarded and another random number is called. (Approximately forty-five percent of the numbers were discarded because they are found to be businesses, institutions, or not assigned.) If it is a residential number, the interviewer then randomly selects a member of the household by asking to speak with the adult currently living in the household who has had the most recent birthday. This selection process ensures that every adult (18 years of age or older) in the household has an equally likely chance of being included in the survey. No substitutions are allowed. If, for example, the randomly selected adult is not at home when the household is first contacted, the interviewer cannot substitute by selecting someone else who just happens to be there at the time. Instead, he or she must make an appointment to call back when the randomly selected adult is at home. In this way, respondent selection bias is minimized.

When the Interviewing Was Done

U.S. adults were interviewed between June 24 and June 30, 2010. Each selected respondent was called by a professional UNH Survey Center interviewer from a centrally supervised facility at the UNH Survey Center. Telephone calls during the field period were made between 9:00 AM and 9:00 PM. local time.

Response Rates

Interviews were completed with 764 randomly selected adults from a sample of 6332 randomly selected telephone numbers. Using American Association for Public Opinion (AAPOR) Response Rate 4, the response rate for the NCF Social Security Attitudes Survey was 31 percent. The formula to calculate standard AAPOR response rate is:

$$\frac{I+P}{((I+P) + (R+NC+O) + e(UH+UO))}$$

I=Complete Interviews, **P**=Partial Interviews, **R**=Refusal and break off, **NC**=Non Contact, **O**=Other, **e**=estimated portion of cases of unknown eligibility that are eligible, **UH**=Unknown household, **UO**=Unknown other.

Weighting of Data

The data have been weighted to account for known biases of telephone surveys. The data in the NCF Social Security Attitudes Survey are weighted by the number of adults and telephone lines within households to equalize the chances that any one adult would be selected for inclusion. The data are also weighted by respondent sex, race, age, and region of the country.

Sampling Error

The NCF Social Security Attitudes Survey, like all surveys, is subject to sampling error due to the fact that all residents in the area were not interviewed. For those questions asked of even hundred fifty (7500) or so respondents, the error is +/-3.6%. For those questions where fewer than 7500 persons responded, the sampling error can be calculated as follows:

$$\text{Sampling error} = \pm (1.96) \sqrt{\frac{P(1-P)}{N}}$$

Where **P** is the percentage of responses in the answer category being evaluated and **N** is the total number of persons answering the particular question.

For example, suppose you had the following distribution of answers to the question, "Should the state spend more money on road repair even if that means higher taxes?" Assume 500 respondents

answered the question as follows:

YES	- 47%
NO	- 48%
DON'T KNOW	- 5%

The sampling error for the "YES" percentage of 47% would be

$$\pm(1.96) \frac{\sqrt{(47)(53)}}{\sqrt{500}} = \pm 4.4\%$$

for the "NO" percentage of 48% it would be

$$\pm(1.96) \frac{\sqrt{(48)(52)}}{\sqrt{500}} = \pm 4.4\%$$

and for the "DON'T KNOW" percentage of 5% it would be

$$\pm(1.96) \frac{\sqrt{(5)(95)}}{\sqrt{500}} = \pm 1.9\%$$

In this case we would expect the true population figures to be within the following ranges:

YES	42.6% - 51.4% (i.e., 47% \pm 4.4%)
NO	43.6% - 52.4% (i.e., 48% \pm 4.4%)
DON'T KNOW	3.1% - 6.9% (i.e., 5% \pm 1.9%)