



The Senior Rights Movement

FRAMING THE POLICY
DEBATE IN AMERICA

Lawrence Alfred Powell

John B. Williamson

and Kenneth J. Branco

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*Lawrence Alfred Powell,
Kenneth J. Branco,
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*To
Lucian W. Pye,
Murray Edelman,
and William Gamson,
for teaching us the importance of symbolism
in politics*

Preface

This book is a history of the struggle for old-age justice in America as it has unfolded since colonial times. Worthy scholars have traversed portions of this terrain before us; we have derived much inspiration and insight from the works of W. Andrew Achenbaum, Henry Pratt, Jill Quadagno, Ann Orloff, John Myles, Robert Binstock, and David Hackett Fischer, among others. This volume seeks to extend and further integrate those pioneering efforts, adding a fresh perspective of our own, which focuses on how struggles to advance “senior rights” have revolved around the framing of public debates between progressives and conservatives over appropriate definitions of what would constitute equity or justice in old age. Using examples of political rhetoric and media images from colonial days to the present, the analysis in this volume highlights the ongoing importance of political symbolism in constructing the “realities” of old-age politics in America.

Our goal throughout the production of this work has been to achieve a rich interdisciplinary synthesis across diverse areas of knowledge that bear on old-age politics in America. We hope that the product of these integrative efforts will provide, for the general reader, a palatable history of the “senior rights movement” that is accessible to students of sociology, history, politics, and public policy, while at the same time stimulating some new ideas within the professional scholarly literatures on social movements, symbolic politics, and gerontology.

Like the history of old-age politics, this volume is a complex social construct, reflecting the creative contributions of many persons. Lawrence Alfred Powell is the primary author of chapters 1–8. Kenneth Branco and John Williamson made contributions throughout

the book and to all phases of the work. For their patient help in locating historical materials for use in this work, we are grateful to the reference staffs of Dewey and Rotch libraries at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Widener Library at Harvard University, Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University, the Boston Public Library, the O'Neill Library at Boston College, the Cushing-Martin Library at Stonehill College, the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs of Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University, Krannert and HSSE libraries of Purdue University, the libraries of the University of Texas at Austin, and Elizabeth Coates Maddux Library at Trinity University. Rosemary Frey contributed to the preparation of this manuscript in a number of ways, including playing a major role in the preparation of the extensive bibliography and in securing permissions for use of the political cartoons. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance and support of Charles Derber, Eunice Doherty, Darlene Epstein, Maureen Eldredge, Eden Fergusson, Sheri Grove, Elizabeth Johnson, David Karp, Keith Neisler, Lisa Pelletier-Branco, Robert Winston Ross, Adrian Saenz, Ben Sargent, and Sheryl Zettner. The authors also wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Purdue Research Foundation, Boston College, Stonehill College, and the University of Texas, in the form of funding for research expenses, summer stipends, and released time from teaching to work on this research project. Finally, the authors are especially indebted to Irwin Sanders, Robert Benford, Carol Chin, John Martin, Athenaide Dallett, Anne Davidson, Barbara Sutton, and Mary Reed at Twayne Publishers for their tireless editorial assistance and moral support in the preparation of this volume.

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Chapter One

Old-Age Equity as a Social Construct

The Symbolic Politics of Reality Definition and Mass Persuasion

The critical element in political maneuver for advantage is the creation of meaning: the construction of beliefs about the significance of events, of problems, of crises, of policy changes, and of leaders. The strategic need is to immobilize opposition and mobilize support. . . . Allocations of benefits must themselves be infused with meanings.

Murray Edelman, "Political Language and Political Reality"¹

On 14 August 1935 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law a landmark piece of legislation designed to provide retirement benefits for the nation's elder citizens. Over the course of the next half century, "Social Security" was to become the most popular and successful federal program of the American welfare state. In recent years, however, a renewed public debate has emerged over the future of the Social Security system and whether that future will prove fair to younger generations. Poised on one side of the debate, conservative intellectuals, economists, and politicians have advanced a pessimistic view of the future of Social Security. Widely disseminated through the national media, this image of "impending crisis" suggests that as the American population "grays" over the next several decades owing to low fertility rates, the Social Security program and Medicare are destined to "go bankrupt," because there will be so many older people collecting their benefits relative to a much smaller number of younger workers paying into the system.² A closely

related argument, championed by lobby groups such as "Lead . . . or Leave" and "Americans for Generational Equity," holds that as the large post-World War II "baby boom" generation reaches retirement age it will place such a heavy financial burden on those still in the labor force that younger workers of a future era—say in about the year 2030—will balk and "refuse to pay." They argue that the huge generation of aged baby-boomers will consume so much of the nation's health-care resources, housing resources, and so on, that a dramatic reduction in the standard of living for the rest of the population will inevitably result—a reduction that will provoke an indignant "age war" against these "greedy geezers" and the "expensive" federal programs that serve them (Kotlikoff 1992; Longman 1987; Barringer 1993).

On the other side of the public debate, defenders of the social rights of elderly Americans counter that to formulate this emerging policy dilemma strictly in terms of issues of cost-containment, generational inequity, and "getting Big Government off the taxpayer's back" is misleading, not to mention heartless to the aged. They argue for a "humane" federal agenda that would instead give primacy to issues of elderly "needs," citizen "rights" to old-age support, the "common stake" that exists between generations, and "equity between rich and poor" (Minkler and Robertson 1991; Hutton 1989; Carlson 1987).³ In *Ties That Bind: The Interdependence of Generations*, a report sponsored by the Gerontological Society of America, aging advocates have launched a rhetorical counter-offensive against these repeated attacks on the viability of Social Security. The declared purpose of the report is to "assist with the reformulation of the generational equity debate . . . and with the search for an appropriate framework for the aging society." Its authors argue for a quite different conception of what would constitute a socially "equitable" distribution of resources among generations in American society. In their view, maintaining a continued (or even expanded) federal commitment to guarantees of security in old age—which successive generations of Americans have struggled for the better part of this century to achieve—is both fair and possible. In an "equitable" policy solution, the higher social costs associated with responding to the needs of a rapidly aging society ought to be distributed "based on the principle that those most able to contribute to societal progress, regardless of age, bear the greatest burden," with the "higher-income and able elderly people contributing their fair share." They suggest that instead of seeking to incite intergenera-

tional warfare between young and old, responsible public officials should adopt a "multigenerational agenda" that emphasizes the "common stake" that exists between generations that are, in reality, highly "interdependent" (Kingson, Hirshorn, and Cornman 1986).

In response, conservative critics have insisted that such arguments on behalf of preserving current Social Security and Medicare arrangements—however well-intentioned—are naive and unrealistic, ignoring "the facts." The "hard demographic realities" of an unfavorable old-age dependency ratio (ratio of retirees to workers), sluggish economic growth, and massive budget deficits, they argue, dictate that programs and benefit levels for the aged will "inevitably" have to be "scaled back" in coming decades in order to "save" the Social Security system from fiscal "collapse" (Schobel 1992; Peterson and Howe 1988; Torrey 1982). With the lower fertility rates that have prevailed among the current adult generation, these aging baby-boomers regrettably will find that they simply have not produced enough children to support them comfortably in retirement (Wattenberg 1987). Moreover, it would be "inequitable," they argue, to expect future generations to bear the financial burden of doing so, thereby constricting their own opportunities in life (Longman 1985; Hewitt 1986; Lamm 1985, 1987). Furthermore, they warn, it would be the height of irresponsibility for policymakers to continue making "gratuitous" promises of support in old age to the present generation of working adults when government will "obviously" be unable to deliver on those promises down the line (Boskin 1986, 1988). It "inevitably follows," they advise, that responsible policymakers should encourage both the present and future generations of workers to begin seeking "independent" retirement and health care alternatives to public support in their golden years (Ferrara 1985; Goodman 1985; Ricardo-Campbell and Lazear 1988; Chakravarty and Weisman 1988).

Lessons from the Past: A Retrospective History of the Social Construction of Old-Age Justice

Few Americans would disagree that considerations of cost and fairness between generations should be taken into account in devising solutions to the problems of supporting citizens in old age. In this book we suggest that there are a number of prior questions that need to be carefully examined, however, before policy analysts and the

media rush to accept these “inevitable facts” and their “inevitable policy consequences” as gospel. Among these questions are the following:

1. What social forces, sectors, or groups stand to gain the most from declaring that a “crisis” exists? What policy “solutions” are being implied by these crisis definitions of the situation? What *other* possible policy solutions are thereby systematically being ignored, and hence kept *out* of the public debate? Given the widely divergent fates of rich and poor elderly in the United States, for example, wouldn’t it be equally plausible to declare an impending “crisis of class inequity” or perhaps a “crisis of need satisfaction among the aged poor”?

2. Have similar crisis definitions and counter-definitions arisen *before* in the history of American old-age policy struggles? If so, who stood to gain and who to lose from promoting those earlier definitions of the realities of old age? What lessons can be drawn for dealing with current policy dilemmas?

3. How might a “social construction of reality” theorist view these recent attempts to redefine the legitimacy of Social Security as a social institution and the aged as deserving recipients? What kinds of symbolic imagery are being employed to portray the old, the young, and the relationship between the two? Is the social construction of political enemies involved here? If so, how does this negative imagery come into play? Who is “good” and who is “evil” according to these revised definitions of sociopolitical reality? Are there scapegoats? Are there implied victims, heroes, and so forth? Perhaps most important, in what ways might this distorted symbolism constrain the range of choices available to policymakers in formulating old-age policies over the next several decades?

4. Have twentieth-century old-age policies constituted legitimate social reforms of the circumstances of elderly Americans, or are they better understood as token legislation and symbolic reassurance measures, undertaken by anxious elites in order to deflect threats of potential restructuring of the socioeconomic order posed by radical reform movements?

In addressing fundamental questions like these, a look at the history of old-age policy reform struggles is instructive. In this volume we suggest that the dynamics of these present issues, and their implications for future aging policies, cannot be understood apart from what

has gone before. One cannot devise prudent designs for the future without comprehending the past. To intelligently evaluate these current rhetorical claims and their validity requires that one consider them within the broader context of the history of aging policy struggles as they have evolved over centuries. We argue, further, that it is important to understand the symbolic politics of how similar public debates over issues of old-age justice have been "framed" by senior rights advocates and their opponents in the past in order to justify resource claims in society. Have similar rhetorical devices been used in the past by conservative societal forces in order to head off aging program expansion? What rationales were used by advocates of progressive reform to promote better economic and social conditions for the aged?

Such questions are best addressed by critically examining the processes by which American old-age problems, social change organizations, policy solutions, and their accompanying rationales have been socially constructed over time. In this volume we have therefore made it our purpose to provide a historical description and analysis of the ongoing phenomenon that has been variously called "senior power," the "senior movement," and the "gray lobby"—to which we shall refer subsequently as the "senior rights movement." It is our hope that this book, by helping to illuminate the past, will contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the political challenges posed by a rapidly aging population leading into the early decades of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, in the chapters that follow we examine the origins of, societal resources available to, and power of the ongoing old-age policy reform movement as it has developed in the American context.

A major feature that distinguishes this study from other histories of American old-age politics is its emphasis on the role played by *symbolic politics* in the evolution of twentieth-century struggles to achieve social justice for the elderly. Our historical account underscores the importance of symbolic gestures and counter-gestures that have been used by both senior rights advocates and their opponents to influence the direction of events and to sway public opinion on aging issues. We argue that emergent problems of old age, the policies designed to address them, and the movements to extend or repeal those policies have in large part been *socially constructed*. Throughout this century, conflicting definitions of the realities of aging have reflected the pre-

dominance of competing societal values, conceptions of social problems, and their appropriate solutions. These, in turn, represent attempts to justify and protect the vested interests of different sectors in American society.

In tracing the dialectical interplay between these progressive reform mobilizations and reactionary counter-mobilizations over time, the analysis that follows focuses on critical points in the history of old-age struggles—arguing that such “crises” have often been arbitrary social constructs, conveniently declared to achieve political or economic ends rather than necessarily reflecting objective social realities. We find, moreover, that these socially defined crisis points in the history of aging politics have typically involved a struggle between senior rights movement advocates and the opponents of reform to *frame the debate* over what is, or is not, *equitable*—that is, to define the terms of public discourse about old-age problems and to dictate which values and interests will subsequently be given priority in a “fair” public policy response. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the pivotal struggles for Social Security in the 1930s, for Medicare in the 1960s, and the neoconservative backlash against both in the 1980s and 1990s provide instructive examples. Efforts to control the direction of the public debate have, in each instance, centered on competing definitions of what would constitute an equitable relationship between classes, age groups, and generations in American society.

We suggest that the present preoccupation with the “coming crisis of Social Security” and “generational inequity” in government and academic circles is best understood against the backdrop of these historical trends. *Viewed from this broader temporal perspective, the present public debate over what to do about the “crisis of the Social Security system” can be seen to be only the most recent manifestation of a recurrent struggle to define the context of American public discourse about social justice in old age.* Extrapolating from historical patterns, we project that the future of Social Security, Medicare, and related federal policies will depend heavily on whose definition of “fairness” with respect to aging issues ultimately prevails in the rhetorical battle for the hearts and minds of Americans, and not just on demographic and economic trends alone. In an era of political consultants, ideological think tanks, and increasingly sophisticated manipulation of mass media images for political purposes, the ability to “frame the debate”—to define popular priorities, mobilize opinion, and thereby

set the nation's issue agenda—is likely to be the pivotal factor that determines the direction of American old-age policies over the next several decades.

The Social Construction of Political Realities: A Framework for Analyzing Aging Reform Politics

In order to intelligently distinguish the realities of aging in America from the rhetoric that surrounds aging policy, we need to first step back and understand the ways in which political “realities” are socially defined, as that process applies to crises, policy solutions, reform movements, and social problems in general. As will become increasingly evident in the historical chapters that follow, political symbolism and the skillful manipulation of public perceptions have often been as formative in shaping American old-age politics as the more tangible realities of economic conditions, group resources, and demographic change. We do not mean to imply by this that the structure of society and the material resources of competing interests have been unimportant. Quite the contrary. What we do suggest, however, is that changes in aging policies over time have often occurred in conjunction with concerted efforts at mass persuasion through use of political language and political gestures—which in turn represent attempts to justify, or protect, the resource claims of different sectors in American society. In short, we suggest that politics is not merely, as Harold Lasswell was fond of pointing out, a matter of “who gets what, when, and how,” but also a matter of who *defines* what, when, and how.

The most commonly used approaches to political analysis—rational-choice theory, interest-group pluralism, functionalism—tend to be less than adequate for explaining this “who defines” aspect of reform politics. There are both material *and* symbolic dimensions to most aging policy reform conflicts, and those traditional approaches have little to say about the latter—namely, the purely persuasive, dramatic, rhetorical, propagandistic, legitimizing, and consent-manufacturing aspects of the political process (Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson 1988).

The work of “social construction of reality” theorists within sociology, and “symbolic politics” theorists within political science, is therefore immensely helpful in overcoming this shortcoming of the standard analytic paradigms. The social-construction-of-reality