

Was Social Security Successful?

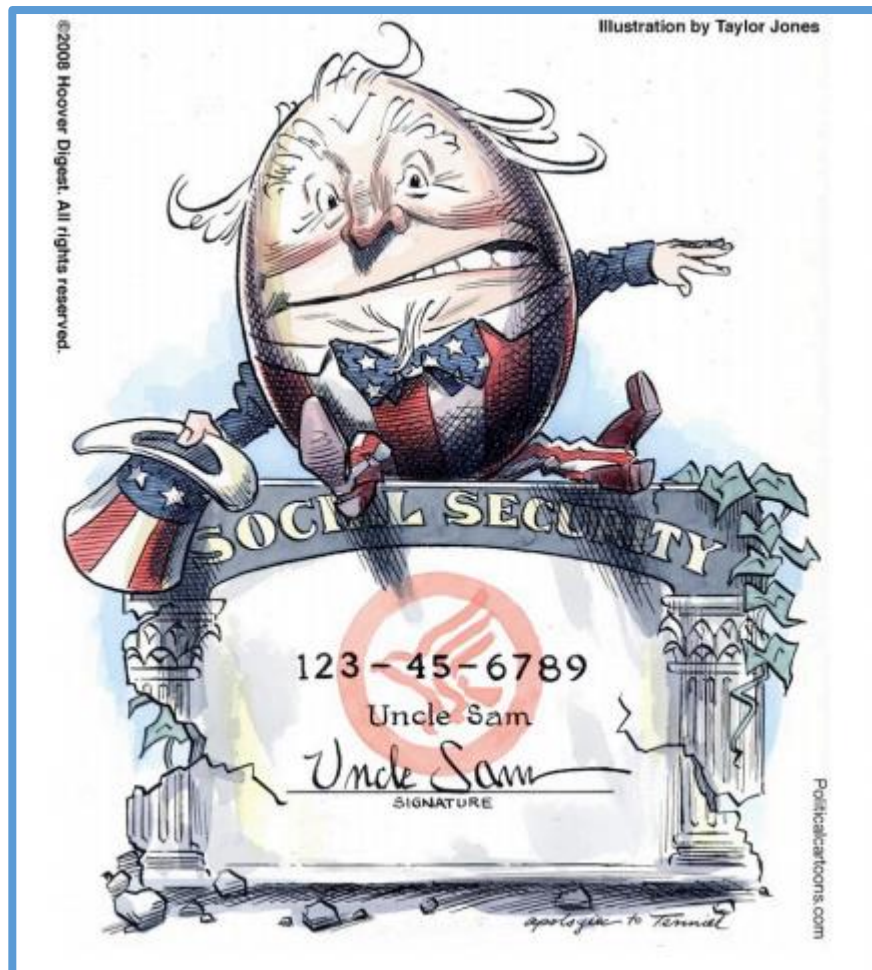


Image from Council of Economic Education lesson. Political Cartoon illustrated by Taylor Jones politicalcartoons.com

Supporting Questions

1. What is the purpose of Social Security?
2. What are the effects of Social Security?

Was Social Security Successful?

Standards and Content Angle	D2.Eco.12.9-12. Evaluate the selection of monetary and fiscal policies in a variety of economic conditions.
Staging the Compelling Question	Read the US Constitution’s <i>Preamble</i> and discuss the phrase “promote the general welfare.”

Supporting Question 1
What was the purpose of Social Security?
Formative Performance Task
Complete one side of a T-Chart which lists the purposes of the Social Security.
Featured Sources
<p>Source A: “Social Security Act”</p> <p>Source B: “President Roosevelt Speech, 1935”</p> <p>Source C: “Your Social Security”</p>

Supporting Question 2
What are the effects of Social Security?
Formative Performance Task
Complete other side of T-Chart which lists the effects of Social Security.
Featured Sources
<p>Source A: “Social Security Today”</p> <p>Source B: “How does the federal governments spend \$3.95 trillion”</p> <p>Source C: “Poverty Among the Elderly”</p> <p>Source D: “Visualizing the Debate”</p>

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT: <i>Was Social Security Successful?</i> Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that evaluates the long-term success of the Social Security program using specific claims and relevant evidence from sources while acknowledging competing views.
	EXTENSION. Participate in a mock Congressional committee in which students debate the successes of the Social Security Program.

Overview

Inquiry Description

This focused inquiry leads students through an investigation of both the purposes and the potential successes of the Social Security Program.

This inquiry highlights the following additional standards:

Council for Economic Education: National Content Standards

- Identify and evaluate the benefits and costs of alternative public policies and assess who enjoys the benefits and who bears the costs.

C3 Framework:

- D2.Eco.12.9-12. Evaluate the selection of monetary and fiscal policies in a variety of economic conditions.

It is important to note that this inquiry requires prerequisite knowledge of the role of Congress in the lawmaking process, the Federal budget, President Franklin Roosevelt, the Great Depression, the New Deal, and a basic understanding of economic policy.

Note: This inquiry is expected to take one to two 50-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (e.g., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, featured sources, writing). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their students. This inquiry lends itself to differentiation and modeling of historical and economic thinking skills while assisting students in reading the variety of sources.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question, students will bring into question the success of one of the most important social and economic policies created in American history. The Social Security program, created by the Social Security Act of 1935, is one of the largest entitlement programs to be instituted by the Federal government, and represents one of the many important reforms created by the New Deal that are still in effect today. In order to determine its success, students will address two supporting questions in order to firstly examine the purpose of the program, and secondly to examine how that program now affects Americans.

Staging the Compelling Question

To stage the compelling question students will read the *Preamble* of the United States Constitution. Students will specifically pay attention to the phrase “promote the general welfare.” Students will (as a class or in small groups) define the term “welfare” as they believed the writers of the Constitution meant that term. Subsequently, they will create a list of ways that the government does or should provide for the general welfare. This short thought experiment will help students better understand the reasons for the Social Security program, i.e. that it was created by the Federal government in order to provide for the common benefit of the majority of Americans in times of economic depression. This list will also allow students to later compare the effects of Social Security on America’s current society and economy, thus providing students with a framework for thinking about the economic success and government provided social programs.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question asks students “What was the purpose of Social Security?” This question is designed to lead students through the basic reasons behind the need and creation of the Social Security program through the Social Security Act of 1933.

The formative task asks students to fill out the first part of a graphic organizer “T-Chart” in which they create a detailed reasons for the creation of Social Security (see below).

The sources are arranged in a way to increase the student level of knowledge from a basic secondary account (Source A), to primary source (Source B), to a view of the program from the perspective of the media (Source C). As such teachers may implement this task with the following procedures:

- Have students work individually to read/analyze each source and then compare lists in order to check learning.
- Students could first analyze Source A with a series of short comprehension question (e.g. when was the Social Security created? What larger program was Social Security part of? etc.). Both Sources B and C could then be used as ways of deeper learning about how the program was conceived and how it was advertised.
- After reading Sources A and B, students could analyze Source C and discuss the extent to which the source is effective in communicating the intentions of Social Security.
- Students could revisit the list they created in the “Staging” portion to see if the Social Security’s initial purpose matched up to the criteria of “providing for the common welfare.”

The scaffolds and other materials may be used to support students as they work with sources:

Supporting Question 1 Formative Task: List the purposes of the Social Security Program:	Supporting Question 2 Formative Task: List the effects of the Social Security Program:
Student List...	Student List...

The following sources were selected to provide students with a basic understanding of why Social Security was created:

Featured Source A is a description of the Social Security Act of 1935 from the *Our Documents* website. This short excerpt

details the historical context in which the law was created, citing the competing views and approaches to reforming the nation’s retirement system. The excerpt also provides a brief description of the program itself.

Featured Source B is a speech given by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935 promoting the new Social Security program. In this short excerpt, the President outlines both the present purpose of the program and the need for such a program to prevent further effects of other potential depressions. This speech provides students with the chance to get a first-person account of the main architects of this historical program.

Featured Source C is a public service informational film created in the 1950s to explain both the purpose of Social Security but also how it is designed to work. The film is supportive of the program and explains in simplistic terms how the program is meant to benefit the nation as a whole.

Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question asks students, “Who benefits from Social Security?” This question is designed to guide students into an analysis of who the current Social Security system serves and its overall impact on the American economy. This question also serves as a contrast to the first supporting question so that students can measure the purpose of the program with how it has evolved and expanded over time.

The formative task asks students complete the second part of a T-Chart (see Supporting Question 1 scaffolds), listing the effects of Social Security.

Teachers may implement this task with procedures that are similar to the procedures used with Formative Task 1. The Featured Sources include both visual and textual information, so teachers may want to consider how they will ask students to gather information (e.g. guided questions, graphic organizers, etc.).

The following sources were selected to provide students with a wide range of information about the current effects of Social Security on our national debt, the elderly, and the current workers.

- **Featured Source A** is an excerpt from the Social Security website detailing the various groups of individuals that are covered and/or protected through Social Security. Students should note the wide variety of individual recipients, recognizing that Social Security has expanded beyond just retirement supplements.
- **Featured Source B** is a pictograph from the Pew Research Foundation describing the overall budget of the United States Federal Government. Students should note the large portion of the overall budget that is consumed by Social Security. This information will help students determine if the costs of the program may be exceeding what was originally intended by the 1935 Social Security Act.
- **Featured Source C** is a graph from the Social Security official website that shows the decline in the rate of poverty among the elderly. One of the goals of the Social Security Act was to help alleviate poverty among the elderly and those who had lost their retirement savings in the Depression. Students will be able to use this source to compare the results of this goal based on current poverty trends.
- **Features Source D** is a series of two political cartoons provided by the Council for Economic Education. Both of these cartoons discuss the potential dangers of the current Social Security system. Students will note that each cartoon provides a different potential drawback to the funding of benefits to the elderly throwing into question the overall net benefits of such a program, particularly on future generations of workers.

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined both the early purposes of the Social Security Act of 1935 and the modern effects of that program. They have also examined both primary and secondary sources, political cartoons, and media that have provided a well-rounded view of this important government program.

Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In the summative performance task, students construct an evidence-based argument that addresses the compelling question.

Students' arguments will likely vary, but could include:

- *The Social Security program has expanded and evolved over the years to include more beneficiaries and to cover more than simply the elderly. While this expansion has come at a great cost to our overall budget, the Social Security program has been successful because it has reduced elderly poverty and also provided a safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.*
- *The Social Security program was originally created to protect the elderly and those affected by the Great Depression. While this program has drastically reduced the poverty rate among the elderly, Social Security has largely been unsuccessful as it has expanded beyond its original goals hurting current workers' benefits and taking up too much of our national budget.*

To support students in their writing teacher should encourage students to use the T-Chart they created in making evidence-based claims and counter claims. By weighing these claims, students will be able to craft a balanced argument using all of the evidence available to them.

To extend their arguments, students could participate in a mock Congressional committee debate in which they present different sides of the argument to committee members. Students could then complete a short writing proposal to recommend potential changes to the program that would make it more in line with the original intentions of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Staging the Compelling Question

Featured Source

Source A: *Preamble* of the United States Constitution, U.S. National Archives & Records Administration

“**We the People** of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Accessed at: <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=9&page=transcript>

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source A: Social Security Act (1935), from *Our Documents* website, U.S. National Archives & Records Administration

“Before the 1930s, support for the elderly was a matter of local, state and family rather than a Federal concern (except for veterans’ pensions). However, the widespread suffering caused by the Great Depression brought support for numerous proposals for a national old-age insurance system. On January 17, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a message to Congress asking for "social security" legislation. The same day, Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative David Lewis of Maryland introduced bills reflecting the administration’s views. The resulting Senate and House bills encountered opposition from those who considered it a governmental invasion of the private sphere and from those who sought exemption from payroll taxes for employers who adopted government-approved pension plans. Eventually the bill passed both houses, and on August 15, 1935, President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law.

The act created a uniquely American solution to the problem of old-age pensions. Unlike many European nations, U.S. social security "insurance" was supported from "contributions" in the form of taxes on individuals’ wages and employers’ payrolls rather than directly from Government funds. The act also provided funds to assist children, the blind, and the unemployed; to institute vocational training programs; and provide family health programs. As a result, enactment of Social Security brought into existence complex administrative challenges. The Social Security Act authorized the Social Security Board to register citizens for benefits, to administer the contributions received by the Federal Government, and to send payments to recipients. Prior to Social Security, the elderly routinely faced the prospect of poverty upon retirement. For the most part, that fear has now dissipated.”

Accessed at: <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=68>

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source B: An excerpt from a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt, 1935, provided by the Council for Economic Education.

“Today a hope of many years’ standing is in large part fulfilled. The civilization of the past hundred years, with its startling industrial changes, has tended more and more to make life insecure.

Young people have come to wonder what would be their lot when they came to old age. The man with a job has wondered how long the job would last.

This social security measure gives at least some protection to thirty million of our citizens who will reap direct benefits through unemployment compensation, through old-age pensions and through increased services for the protection of children and the prevention of ill health.

We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.

This law, too, represents a cornerstone in a structure which is being built but is by no means complete. It is a structure intended to lessen the force of possible future depressions. It will act as a protection to future Administrations against the necessity of going deeply into debt to furnish relief to the needy. The law will flatten out the peaks and valleys of deflation and of inflation. It is, in short, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide for the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness.

I congratulate all of you ladies and gentlemen, all of you in the Congress, in the executive departments and all of you who come from private life, and I thank you for your splendid efforts in behalf of this sound, needed and patriotic legislation.

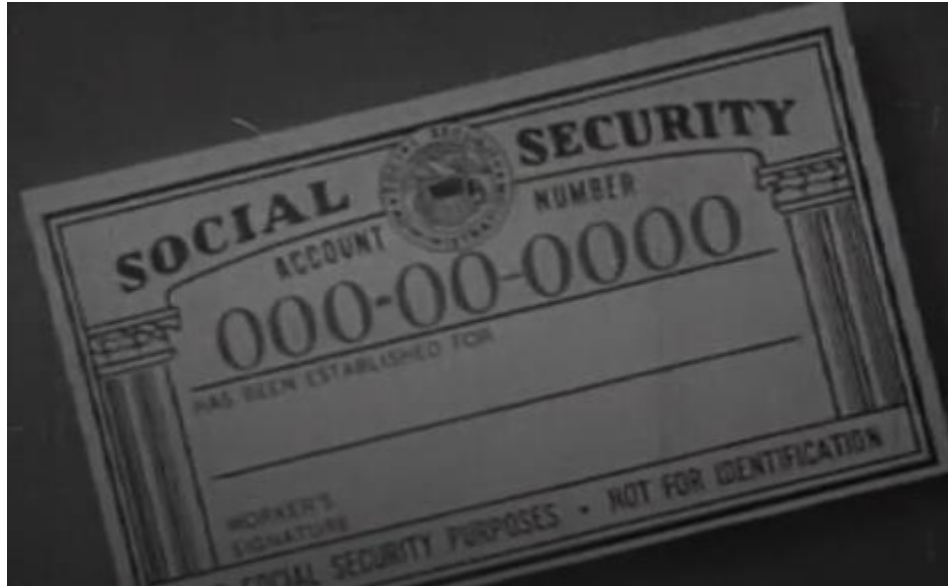
If the Senate and the House of Representatives in this long and arduous session had done nothing more than pass this Bill, the session would be regarded as historic for all time.”

Accessed at: <https://econedlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Franklin-D.-Roosevelts-Speech.pdf>

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source C: *Your Social Security*, 1953. Created by the US Department of Health discussing the purpose of Social Security and how it works. Made available by Internet Archive. Total Length 17:40. Suggested clip 0:00 – 8:15.



Access at: <https://archive.org/details/YourSoci1940>

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source A: Excerpt from the Social Security Administration official website detailing the history of Social Security. This excerpt comes from the section, "Social Security Today."

"THE basic idea of the social security system in the U.S.A. is a simple one.

During working years employees, their employers, and self-employed people pay social security taxes which go into special funds; and

When earnings have stopped because the worker has retired, or died, or is severely disabled, benefit payments are made from the funds to replace part of the earnings the family has lost.

- Nine out of ten working people are now building protection for themselves and their families under the social security law.
- More than four-fifths of all the people past 65 are protected by social security and more than 90 percent of those now reaching 65 are protected.
- Nine out of ten mothers and children can look to the program for a regular income if the head of the family dies.

- About 53 million people now meet the work requirements for monthly disability benefits. If they are disabled, monthly benefits can be paid to them and their families.
- Almost twenty million men, women, and children are now drawing benefits under this program-benefits totaling more than \$1.25 billion a month.

Retirement benefits. Benefits are payable to retired workers at age 65, or reduced-rate benefits may be paid as early as age 62. Benefits may also be paid to the following family members: a wife or a dependent husband age 62 or over; children under age 18, and older sons and daughters who have been disabled since before age 18; and a wife of any age caring for a child entitled to benefits.

Survivors benefits. Upon the death of an insured worker, monthly benefits are payable to a surviving widow or dependent widower age 62 or over, children under age 18 or disabled before 18, a mother who has such a child in her care, and dependent parents age 62 and over. A lump-sum death payment is also made.

Disability benefits. Monthly benefits are payable to workers who are totally and permanently disabled and to the same dependents as for retirement benefits. The law encourages rehabilitation of disabled workers under the Federal-State program of vocational rehabilitation.”

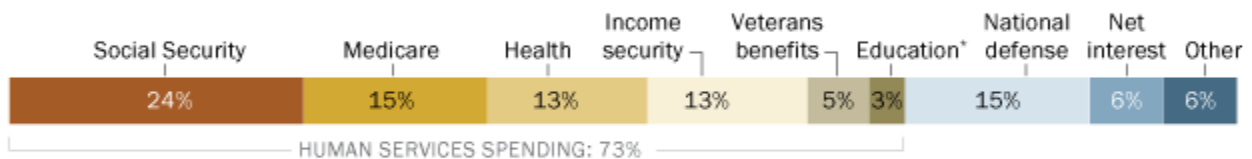
Accessed at: <https://www.ssa.gov/history/ssa/usa1964-1.html>

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source	Source B: “How the federal government spends \$3.95 trillion.” This source is a pictogram showing overall amount of Social Security funding for the 2016 budget, Pew Research Center.
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How the federal government spends \$3.95 trillion

Share of fiscal 2016 estimated spending, by function



*Includes education, training, employment and social services.
Source: Office of Management and Budget archives.

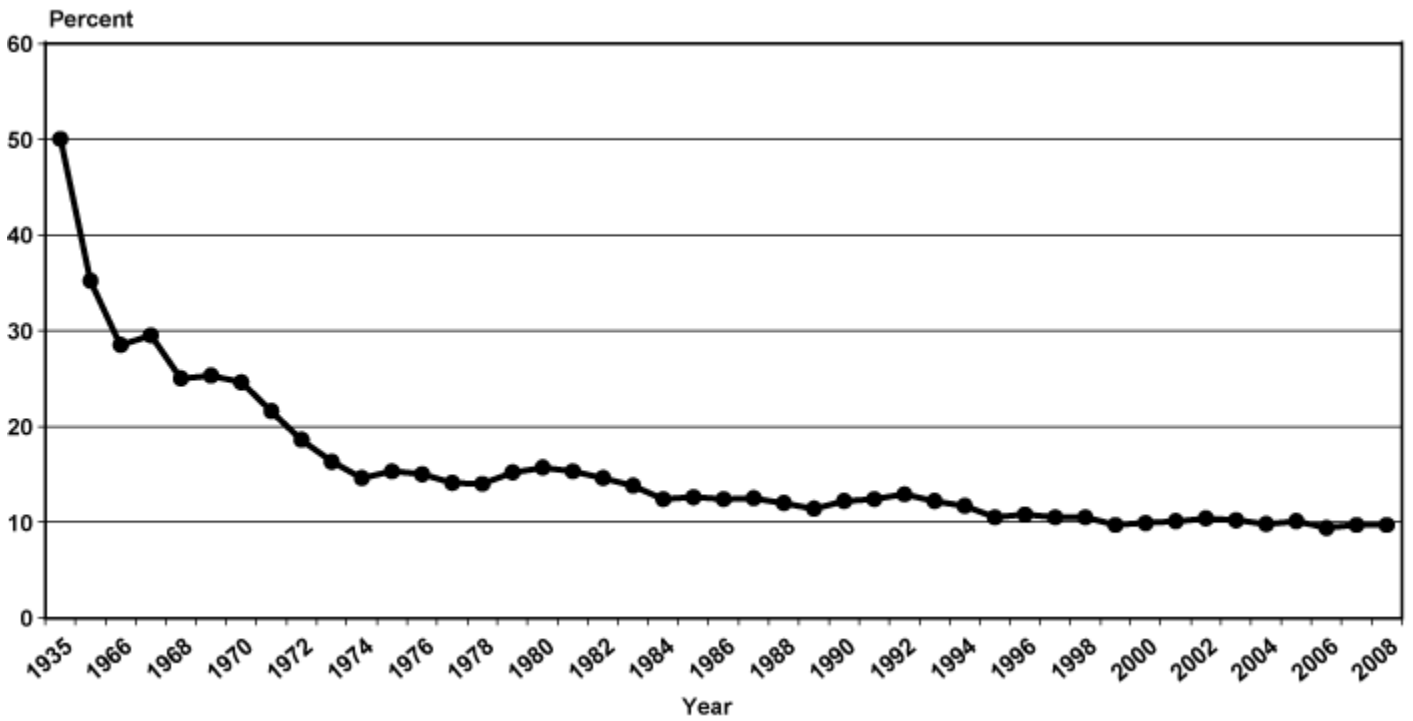
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Accessed at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/04/what-does-the-federal-government-spend-your-tax-dollars-on-social-insurance-programs-mostly/ft_17-04-03_budget_640px/

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source C: "Poverty among the elderly, 1935 – 2008." This line graph details the decrease in overall poverty among the elderly over the course of the Social Security program.

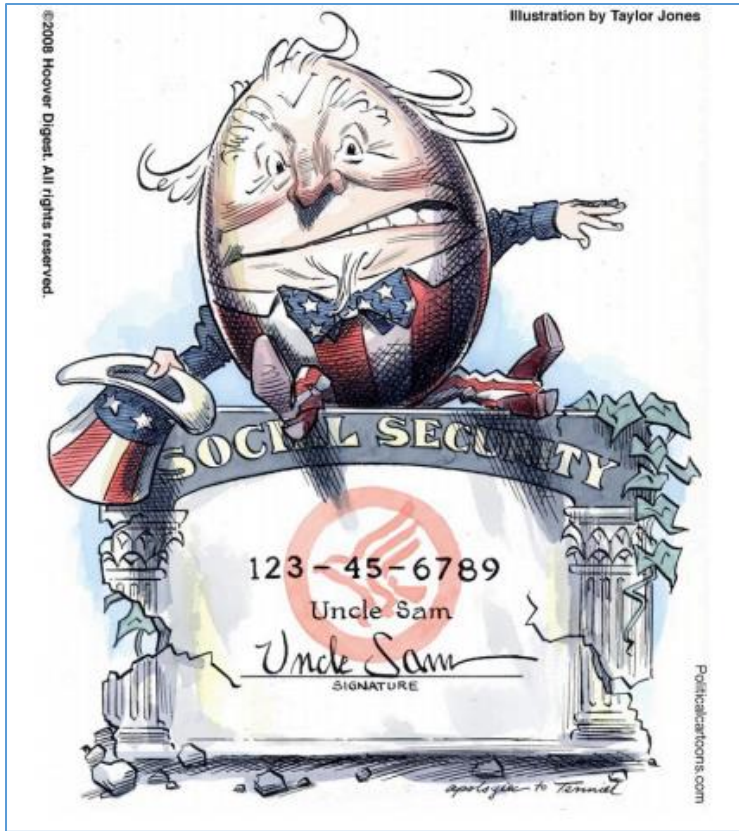


Accessed at: <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n3/v70n3p1.html>

Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source D: "Visualizing the Debate" A selection of political cartoons that express concerns about the future of Social Security. Sources provided by Council for Economic Education.



Accessed at: <https://econedlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Social-Security-Visualizing-the-Debate.pdf>