Social Security Politics: Ideology and Reform

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**Objectives.** The purpose of this study was to examine the distribution of dominant values, actors, and ideological advocacy coalitions influencing the Social Security debate across two presidential administrations.

**Methods.** Through content and cluster analyses, we analyzed federal legislative hearing testimonies on Social Security reform spanning 11 years.

**Results.** Witnesses consistently expressed six dominant values: (a) advancing the market, (b) self-interest, (c) generational equity, (d) belief in market activity, (e) recommendations for market solutions, and (f) favoring the replacement of Social Security with private accounts. We identified three advocacy coalitions: conservative, progressive, and nonaligned. Conservatives dominated the hearings and were more consistent in their expression of market values when compared to progressives, who expressed social contract values less frequently. Congressional Democrats were inconsistent in upholding Social Security’s social contract values. The distribution of testimonies paralleled historical, political, and economic events.

**Discussion.** Our research indicates that one can interpret social policies as well as policy options as sets of values, and these as ideological models. We anticipate that the coherence on one political ideological view (market) and the relative lack of consistency in another (social contract) will be highly consequential for the future of Social Security, U.S. politics, and the public.

Historically, Social Security has received wide public support in the United States; it has been successful in alleviating poverty connected with retirement, disability, and beneficiary death across age groups. Yet based on increases in the proportion of older people in the population, there has been a heightened focus on program reform over the past two decades. Federal legislators debate what types of reform are necessary to meet the demographic challenges, entertaining arguments that range from budgetary fixes to fundamental program restructuring. Proponents of the Social Security program say that (a) any required changes can be made within the existing framework because the current system, based on its social insurance structure and principles, is working well; and (b) privatization would be risky and costly, as well as harmful to beneficiaries (Ball, 2000; Munnell, 2001; White, 2003). Opponents claim fundamental changes to the program are required because the aging of the population is a catastrophe that threatens to bankrupt the national economy (Cooper, 2000; Feldstein, 1997; James, 1996; Peterson, 1999). Opponents argue that reforms based on market ideals, including privatization of government programs, will result in national savings, economic expansion, and personal wealth.

Scholars recognize that ideologies are central to the policy process. An ideology is any system of ideas, beliefs, values, and attitudes that justifies or legitimizes dominant structural relationships or movements to change them (Jary & Jary, 1991; Johnson, 2000). Shaped by powerful political forces, “coherent political ideologies” form the foundation of conservative and liberal reasoning that holds major implications for social policy (Bailey, 1975; Estes, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Fischer, 1993; Lakoff, 2002 p. 15; Thernborn, 1980). Dominant structural interests utilize ideologies to gain legitimacy, but more significantly they deploy ideologies with the aim to generate societal consensus. Channeled to a delimited view of a problem and solution, citizens perceive no alternatives.

Social and economic value judgments are at the heart of the Social Security reform debate (Heclo, 1998; Munnell, 2001). Values are “shared ideas about how something is ranked in terms of its relative social desirability, worth, or goodness” (Johnson, 2000, p. 339). Thompson (1986) challenged readers to locate the belief systems and values (ideologies) within social policy in order to investigate how dominant ideological communities exist within specific organized collectivities and how they mask intense social, economic, and political struggles. Proponents of market and social contract values constitute ideologically opposed communities within the Social Security debate. Predicated on the significance of the competing ideologies and conflicting values for U.S. politics and the American public, we posed three questions:

1. Can one identify ideologies through the values expressed in the Social Security debate?
2. Who are the major actors in the contemporary debate, and do their values reflect ideological advocacy coalitions?
3. What is the distribution of dominant values over the past two presidential administrations?

Researchers have found that ideological concerns, rather than the issues, are central to policymaking (Burstein & Bricher, 1997; Marmor, 2000; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993, 1994). Although researchers have studied the politics and ideological content of policy formation in areas such as health care (Alford, 1975), old-age policy (Estes, 1979, 2001a), Medicare (Marmor, 2000; Oberlander, 2003; Smith, 2002), long-term care (Estes & Swan, 1993; Quadagno, 2005), and Social Security (Altman, 2005; Beland, 2005; Domhoff, 1978; Gratton, 1997; Schieber & Shoven, 1999; Skidmore, 1999), none have empirically
analyzed the values expressed in congressional testimony on Social Security reform.

The following section provides a brief background on the Social Security debate by describing the ideological underpinnings of the reform options, the changing support of government, and the consistent support of the American public. The Methods section outlines our research methodology, which consisted of content and cluster analyses. The Results section specifies within the federal legislative hearings on Social Security reform (a) the six value domains consistently expressed by witnesses in their testimonies; (b) the clustering of two different ideological camps around the expressed values; and (c) a parallel between the testimonies and historical, political, and economic events. The Discussion section contemplates the implications of the study for subsequent research and the future of Social Security, politics, and the public.

**Ideological Underpinnings of Reform Options**

The contemporary Social Security reform debate comprises arguments along a continuum between two contrasting poles: the market ideology and the social contract ideology. Market proponents believe the market is the best social mechanism for exchanging goods and services, assuming that competition and profit seeking will create fair exchange and higher rates of return (Johnson, 2000). Advocates of the market ideology value economic objectives, including national savings, capital accumulation, a residual role for government, individual wealth, self-responsibility, and equity between generations (i.e., a fair or equivalent return for monies paid; Cooper, 2000; Feldstein, 1997; James, 1996; Peterson, 1999). Social contract proponents believe in an implicit, mutually binding contract between a responsible government (vested by the public as a legitimate institution) and its citizenry for protection in return for submission to the nation’s authority. Social Security is a social insurance contract wherein the U.S. government promises financial security to eligible citizens in return for payroll taxes (Social Security Board, 1937). Advocates of Social Security value social insurance objectives, such as risk pooling, entitlement to earned benefits, intergenerational interdependence, adequacy of benefits, shared responsibility, and the responsibility and accountability of the government to its citizens (Altman, 2005; Ball, 2000).

The current Social Security program is structured as a pay-as-you-go system that pays beneficiaries out of current worker payroll contributions. The government calculates a defined monthly benefit based on a complex formula that includes wages earned, length of lifetime employment, and cost of living adjustments. The government bears the risk associated with paying the benefit. The pay-as-you-go plan spreads the risk of adverse outcomes over a population of beneficiaries, workers, and taxpayers (current or future). The government shares the risks and gains they have assumed through adjustments in benefits, worker contributions, and/or funds acquired through taxes or government borrowing.

Conversely, the private accounts promoted by President George W. Bush and some members of Congress accumulate benefits from workers’ fixed contributions over a period of time. Monthly benefits paid from the accounts would compose an annuity based on the size of the worker’s lifetime accumulation, life expectancy, and the rate of interest at the date of retirement. The individual would bear the risk associated with varying rates of returns. Changing the Social Security system to a privatized system would entail the following: workers bearing the risk of personal misfortune and market volatility; workers bearing high transition costs through increased taxes; higher administrative costs than those paid through Social Security deducted from individual returns; regressive redistribution effects; and less intergenerational solidarity. The central question is whether the government should provide workers with a basic, predictable retirement income or allow workers to place their retirement income at risk (Munnell, 2001).

**Changing Government Support**

Historically, U.S. presidents have consistently supported the fundamental structure and principles of Social Security (Kollmann & Solomon-Fears, 2001). Even in 1983, when the program was in danger of imminent insolvency, the program’s social insurance principles as well as its promise to pay benefits remained intact. Although President Ronald Reagan favored privatization, he and Congress reaffirmed the government’s commitment to its citizens by enacting legislation to ensure program funding (Social Security Administration, 1984). President George H. W. Bush expressed his support by stating he was “not prepared to endorse” replacing Social Security with private retirement accounts (Social Security Administration, 1992). Throughout his two terms, President Bill Clinton supported the program’s basic structure and principles in his reform options. Concurrently, however, privatization as a reform option was contemplated by the Social Security advisory board and it emerged in testimonies at federal hearings and in proposals at the first White House Conference on Social Security. George W. Bush is the first president to support the market ideology through proposals to privatize Social Security. Consistent with his Agenda for America, he directed his Social Security commission to recommend only reforms that included private accounts (Bush, 2004; President’s Commission to Strengthen Social Security, 2001).

**Consistent Public Support**

Although confidence levels have fluctuated over the past two decades, the American public has consistently expressed substantial support for Social Security with its social contract values (Center on Policy Attitudes and Knowledge Networks, 2000; Cook, Barabas, & Page, 2002). Even immediately after September 11, more than half of Americans polled felt that President George W. Bush should not spend the Social Security trust fund surplus in response to the attacks (National Journal Group, n.d.). Congress has pursued private accounts without validating public opinion. Depending on the organization performing the survey and how the survey question is worded, polls provide mixed data on private accounts. Some surveys indicate that a majority of respondents oppose private accounts when the risk of stock market investment is mentioned; other surveys denote only a few percentage points difference between opposition and support (Cook et al., 2002; Shaw & Mysiewicz, 2004). When not reminded of the risk involved, respondents have generally favored private accounts; even so, approval appears to have waned since 2000. Younger people appear to favor private accounts, but they are likely to hold the
government responsible for their personal misfortune or poor investment decisions as well as to reverse their support for private accounts as they age (Mabry, 2005; Silverstein, Angelelli, & Parrott, 2001). Contemporary expressions of market values emanating from the current president and some members of Congress are challenging the social contract values supported by the American public, past Congresses, and every president since Social Security’s legislation in 1935. Our study aimed to identify the dominant actors, values, and corresponding ideologies embodied in the Social Security reform debate over the past two presidential administrations. Accordingly, we examined the distribution of values expressed by witnesses and the ideological coalitions they reflected over 11 years of Social Security reform testimonies.

**METHODS**

Organizations and lobbyists use legislative hearing testimonies as a key tactic in influencing policymakers (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Knoke, 2001). This study examined federal legislative testimonies of witnesses invited by Congress to testify on Social Security reform during the period January 1, 1993, through December 31, 2003, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) suggested that public policies can be “conceptualized ... as sets of value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them” (p. 16). Our study methods comprised the following: (a) identification of the witnesses and the values they expressed over time via a content analysis of federal legislative hearing testimonies on Social Security reform, and (b) identification of ideological groups based on a K-means cluster analysis of the values expressed by witnesses in their testimonies.

**Sample**

Congressional House and Senate committees use hearings to gather information on a particular topic. Witnesses do not have the inherent right to appear at hearings but are selected by the committees based on their expertise and viewpoints (Carr, 2003; U.S. Senate, n.d.). Control over witness selection and hearing topics lies with the majority party in the House and Senate. Ranking minority members may invite witnesses but are less able to set the hearing docket. Some committees seek to ensure that all reasonable viewpoints are represented; others invite only witnesses with a particular point of view. In the Senate, the committee chair determines the agenda and selects the witnesses, working informally with the minority party to invite witnesses that represent its views. In the House, a majority of the minority party members must place their request for witnesses to the committee chair. There is no limit on the number of witnesses that may be invited, and hearings may be scheduled over multiple days.

Testimonies were the unit of analysis in this study. We collected all testimonies available in the Lexis-Nexis Congressional Information System electronic hearing database using the following criteria: (a) the testimony occurred in hearings held between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 2003; (b) the hearing title appeared under the subject heading search term “Social Security;” and (c) the hearing specifically addressed Social Security reform. The study included witnesses or entities that provided testimony three or more times across the study period. The number of testimonies contained in the final database was 268.

**Data Analysis**

We selected the 11-year study period, January 1, 1993, through December 31, 2003, to examine the contemporary debate over two presidential administrations. Three major categories of policy options exist along the continuum between market and social contract ideologies: (a) reforms that reflect the market ideology, such as complete or partial privatization of the system through individual Social Security payroll tax deductions and a residual role for government; (b) reforms that maintain the basic structure of the program but focus on modifying it, such as through reductions to overall benefits or other universal revisions (e.g., raising the retirement age, adjusting the cost of living index); and (c) reforms based on the social contract ideology that retain both the structure and principles of the current social insurance system through increasing revenues (e.g., through budget, tax policy, or government investment in the stock market).

We examined the alignment of ideology on Social Security reform by measuring the values witnesses expressed in their testimonies. We developed a coding frame to capture witnesses’ expressed values based on Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993) advocacy coalition framework. Advocacy coalitions are actors that exhibit similar beliefs and activities over time. It was beyond the scope of our study to identify political networks—the relational ties between actors—within the coalitions (Knoke, 1994).

We measured values by outright expression or times mentioned and coded them on a five-point ordinal scale with opposite views for Values 1 (market) and 5 (social contract), and neutral views (values not mentioned or mixed) for Value 3. To reduce the chance of coding bias, we performed interrater reliability tests with three outside coders. Initial consistency between coders was 91% on the six variables reported in this article and 100% after we had made final revisions to the coding form.

The advocacy coalition framework assumes that in periods of a decade or more (a) opposing coalition memberships in major policy controversies will tend to be stable on their core values and will show substantial consensus on issues; (b) actors from federal administrative agencies will be more centrist than other members of their coalition; and (c) fundamental changes to government programs will require significant external perturbations (e.g., socioeconomic conditions, changes in systemwide governing coalitions, and policy outputs from other subsystems), plus the skillful exploitation of external events by members of an opposing coalition.

We used K-means cluster analysis to classify testimonies into groups based on the values expressed by witnesses at the legislative hearings. The Z-score values of the first cases in the data file served as temporary estimates of the initial $k$ cluster means, where $k$ is the number of clusters researchers specify. The K-means process forms initial cluster centers by assigning each case in turn to the cluster with the closest center and then updating the center. An iterative process is used to find the final cluster centers. At each step, cases are grouped into the cluster with the closest center, and the cluster centers are recomputed. The study data continued through five iterations until...
<table>
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<th>Value Domain</th>
<th>Description of Values in Value Domain</th>
<th>Example of Values Coded in Testimony</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advancing the market vs financial security in old age</td>
<td>Advancing the market emphasized values that would increase national savings, encourage productivity, or reduce federal debt</td>
<td>“The primary goal of any reform of the OASI [Old-Age and Survivors Insurance] system should be to replace it with a system of real private saving and insurance.” “The added saving would boost capital formation, wages, and employment, and benefit workers even before they reach retirement.” (Privatization of the Social Security Old Age and Survivors Insurance Program, 1995).</td>
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<td>Financial security in old age emphasized values that would ensure financial security</td>
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<td>“… for future generations, we must evaluate any solvency proposal not only with regard to these principles, but also to determine if they affirmatively answer the following questions: Does its benefit structure provide the foundation for a secure retirement and provide financial assistance if a worker becomes disabled?” (H.R. 4245, H.R. 4275, and Other Bills to Restore the Long-term Solvency of Social Security, 1994).</td>
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<td>Self-interest vs mutual protection</td>
<td>Self-interest emphasized values such as individual choice, wealth, control, or freedom</td>
<td>“…let individual Americans become owners of their personal retirement savings instead of tenants living off other workers’ taxes…” (Proposals for Alternative Investment of the Social Security Trust Fund Reserves, 1994).</td>
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<td>Mutual protection emphasized values such as social responsibility, shared security, and pooled risk</td>
<td></td>
<td>“AAARP believes the 1983 approach of shared sacrifice and balanced changes within the program should serve as a model for the future.” “Universal coverage is desirable in a social insurance program to ensure public cohesiveness.” (Future of Social Security for This Generation and the Next, 1997).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generational equity vs generational interdependence</td>
<td>Generational equity emphasized values such as improving the “money’s worth” of workers’ individual payroll contributions</td>
<td>“… there remains a huge imbalance in generational policy …” (Legacy to Our Children: Understanding Intergenerational Economic Issues, 2000a).</td>
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<td>Generational interdependence emphasized values such as social solidarity between generations and universal coverage</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Social insurance reflects a long history of people getting together to help themselves.” (Legacy to Our Children: Understanding Intergenerational Economic Issues, 2000b).</td>
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<td>Belief in market activity or responsible government</td>
<td>Belief in market activity emphasized a belief that the market would provide personal wealth, increase national savings, and stimulate the economy through capital investment and, as a result, provide adequate retirement incomes</td>
<td>“As these accounts grow, and the magic of compounding increases them still further, the payroll tax revenues needed to fund benefits will decrease.” (Legacy to Our Children: Understanding Intergenerational Economic Issues, 2000c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in responsible government emphasized a belief in a moral economy due to market failure to provide adequate retirement incomes and that workers, as citizens, are entitled to a secure retirement</td>
<td></td>
<td>“For nearly 70 years Social Security has guaranteed working families would have some income in the event of old age, death of a family wage earner or disability… Today Social Security continues to meet this challenge, and despite recent economic sluggishness, the 2002 Social Security Trustees Report shows an improved forecast for the system with full solvency extended another three years to 2041. By 2017 Social Security will have accumulated over $5 trillion in treasury bonds, backed by the full faith and credit of the United States Government.” (Social Security: The Long-term Budget Implications, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for market vs government solutions</td>
<td>Recommended market solutions such as private retirement accounts or residual government</td>
<td>“If we invest our pensions in countries, like India, with large labor surpluses and low productivity, our capital and technology can generate large returns that can be shared back with retirees in the industrial countries.” (Global Aging Crisis, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended government solutions such as increasing revenues, raising tax caps, and using general revenues</td>
<td></td>
<td>“To summarize, the transfers proposed by the President would bring new resources into the Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds, allowing them to better meet their existing commitments. The transfers would also cause the government to run a bigger surplus than otherwise, because the amounts transferred could not be used for new spending or tax cuts.” (Income taxes: The solution to the Social Security and Medicare crisis, 2000).</td>
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RESULTS

Obtaining answers to our research questions involved the following: (a) identifying the value domains that witnesses consistently expressed in their testimonies, (b) clustering the testimonies into coalition groups based on witnesses’ expressed values, (c) grouping the testimonies by witness affiliation, and (d) studying the distribution of testimonies over time. The majority of the values expressed in testimonies across the study period were aligned with the market ideology (43%), followed by neutral alignment (33%) and alignment with the social contract ideology (24%). Six value domains were under consideration in the Social Security reform debate (see Table 1).

Witnesses consistently expressed six dominant values: (a) advancing the market (45%) versus financial security in old age (28%), (b) self interest (43%) versus mutual protection (31%), (c) generational equity (32%) versus generational interdependence (12%), (d) belief in market activity (49%) versus responsible government (25%), (e) recommendations for market solutions (46%) versus government solutions (20%), and (f) favoring (45%) versus being against (25%) replacement of Social Security with private accounts.

After examining several cluster iterations based on the best fit of values across the six domains, we identified three advocacy coalitions and labeled them conservative (47%), progressive (33%), and nonaligned (20%). The results indicated that conservatives dominated the legislative hearings and that their values followed the market ideology. Most (68%) testimonies that we had classified through cluster analysis into the conservative coalition fell closer than one standard deviation (SD) from their group mean (−4.9) and deviated less within their group (0.75–1.91 SD) than the other coalitions. In comparison, although more than half (56%) of the testimonies classified into the nonaligned group contained no mention of values across the six domains. The values expressed by the witnesses in their testimonies mirrored the consistency of membership within coalitions. The conservative witnesses were more uniform in their expression of market values (77%) compared to the progressive witnesses, who expressed social contract values less frequently (58%).

Affiliations

To examine the values of the witnesses according to their affiliation type, we categorized the 36 entities in our study into eight major groups (see Figure 1).

The greatest number of testimonies were presented by witnesses associated with think tanks (n = 91), followed by government agencies (n = 60), Congress (n = 38), and membership/interest groups (n = 36). In their testimonies, witnesses associated with think tanks expressed predominantly (59%) market values across the six domains. Based on the testimonies of witnesses affiliated with the 11 think tanks, the cluster analysis classified eight think tanks as conservative, two as progressive, and one as nonaligned. More than half (52%) of the testimonies in the conservative coalition were from witnesses associated with think tanks (see Table 2). In comparison, only 8% of the progressive testimonies and less than 1% of the nonaligned testimonies were from witnesses affiliated with think tanks.

Witnesses from the six government agencies and two congressional agencies provided 68 testimonies. The cluster analysis classified three of the six government agencies as progressive, two as nonaligned, and one as conservative. The two congressional agencies were classified as nonaligned. Half (50%) of the testimonies classified into the nonaligned group were from witnesses affiliated with the U.S. government (including congressional agencies). Even so, many (39%) of the testimonies classified as progressive were from witnesses affiliated with the U.S. government. Although more than one quarter (29%) of their expressions reflected market values, witnesses from congressional agencies (Congressional Budget Office, Congressional Research Service) did not mention social contract values in their testimonies. A majority of the testimonies from government witnesses (41%) and congressional agencies (40%) contained no mention of values across the six domains.

Of the seven membership/interest groups, the cluster analysis classified three as conservative, three as progressive, and one as nonaligned. The membership/interest group testimonies contained slightly more expressions of social contract values (38%)
than market values (30%), and no value expressions across more than one quarter (26%) of the six domains. Based on the expressed values of witnesses, the cluster analysis classified all but 4 of the 36 membership/interest group testimonies into either the conservative ($n = 13$) or progressive coalitions ($n = 19$).

There were slightly more testimonies from congressional Republicans ($n = 20$) than Democrats ($n = 18$). Congressional witnesses expressed mostly market values (53%) in their testimonies, although many (40%) did not express their values across the six domains. Testimonies of congressional Republicans were classified as conservative and contained mainly market values (66%). Social contract values constituted less than 1% of the congressional Republicans’ testimonies. By contrast, testimonies provided by congressional Democrats were classified into the nonaligned coalition and contained almost an equal amount of market (31%) and social contract (38%) values.

Of the remaining affiliation groups, witnesses associated with academia expressed the largest proportion of social contract values (49%) in their testimonies ($n = 15$). Only three universities were represented in the study sample. Two of the four witnesses associated with academia were classified as progressive and provided 8 of the 15 testimonies. Witnesses associated with financial/consulting firms expressed mainly market values (74%) in their testimonies ($n = 13$). Of the three financial/consulting firms, two were classified as conservative, and one was classified as nonaligned. Witnesses from the two trade/professional associations expressed almost equal proportions of market (38%) and social contract (36%) values in their testimonies ($n = 7$).

### Distribution of Values

The frequencies of testimonies based on ideological content paralleled major historical, political, and economic events (see Figure 2). Increased incidence in expressions of market values coincided with the late-1994 Republican takeover in both houses of Congress and subsided with the downturn in the economy, tax cuts, the terrorist attacks, budget deficits, and the Medicare prescription drug legislation. Social contract values exceeded market values in only two years: 1993 (the first year of Bill Clinton’s presidency) and 2002 (the first year of the War Against Terrorism). Neutral values exceeded social contract values every year except 1999, the year after the federal budget achieved balance for the first time since 1969.

Across the 11 years, advocacy coalition members remained relatively stable within the conservative and progressive groups, denoting substantial consensus in their expressed values. Examination of the advocacy coalitions over time showed that in the years 1996 through 2000 (the period that saw the greatest frequency of testimonies) almost half (48%) of the testimonies were classified as conservative. Conservative testimonies during this period outnumbered progressive testimonies by more than two times on average. Testimonies classified as progressive ($n = 11$) exceeded conservative testimonies ($n = 5$) in years when the frequencies were fewer (1993, 2001, and 2002). Witness testimonies classified as
nonaligned were the majority in 1993 ($n = 7$) and 1994 ($n = 9$), as well as in 2003, when only government agencies were represented at the four hearings included in the study.

We were interested in tracking the frequencies of testimonies given by congressional Republicans and Democrats and the values they expressed due to their direct influence on policy. Congressional expressions of market values first appeared in 1994, whereas expressions of social contract values did not appear until 1997. Republicans provided testimonies in 6 of the 11 years of study hearings; Democrats provided testimonies in 7 of the 11 years (see Figures 3 and 4, respectively). Neither congressional party was represented in the hearings of 1993, 2001, or 2003. Republicans expressed mostly neutral values in 1994, 1996, and 2002; and equal expressions of neutral and market values in 1997. However, in 1998 and 1999 their expressions of market values far outweighed any other value expressions. Democrats expressed mainly market values in 4 years; in two of which (1996 and 2000) they expressed only market values. Democrats expressed mostly social contract values in 1997, equal expressions of social contract and market values in 1998, and almost equal expressions of social contract and neutral values in 2002.

**DISCUSSION**

This study has demonstrated through content and cluster analyses that one can interpret social policies, as well as policy options, as sets of values, and these as ideological models. The analyses showed that conservative testimonies dominated the legislative hearings, comprising consistent expressions of values aligned with the market ideology—values with objectives such as national savings, capital accumulation, limited government responsibility, and wealth based on individual risk. Market values oppose the structure and principles of Social Security and are contrary to public attitudes supporting Social Security. The social contract values behind the current framework of Social Security emphasize citizens’ financial security, a responsible society, and mutual protection based on shared risk. The findings suggest that the dominant ideology expressed is a product of a conservative Republican majority in Congress and reflects a growing conservatism in the Democratic Congress.
Network analysis was outside the scope of our study. However, consistency in the expression of values within the advocacy coalitions suggests a political network among think tanks, financial/consulting firms, membership/interest groups, and Congress within the conservative coalition; and, to a lesser degree, among membership/interest groups and academia within the progressive coalition. The dominance of market values in the testimonies implies a political inclination in Congress toward inviting witnesses with a distinct viewpoint to testify at the hearings, particularly witnesses from think tanks known to advance the market ideology. Moreover, the bipartisan emphasis on market values indicates a political imbalance in the congressional testimonies.

There was a clear pattern demonstrating that witnesses from government and congressional agencies expressed fewer ideologically weighted values in their testimonies than did other witnesses. Within the context of a conservative Congress, expressions of social contract values were not prevalent. Government witnesses whose testimonies were classified as progressive might have been career bureaucrats, as opposed to political appointees of the current Republican administration. The Federal Reserve Board was the only government agency classified as conservative, perhaps reflecting the views of its chair, Alan Greenspan. Witnesses from congressional agencies never mentioned social contract values; their testimonies were classified as nonaligned and the majority of their value expressions were neutral. Future research into the relational ties between witnesses in the advocacy coalitions might discern the existence and nature of political networks.

Study findings suggest that dominant members of Congress use the stability of advocacy coalition membership and their consensus on values to promote ideologically biased policy goals. The ascendancy of the market ideology in Social Security reform testimonies appears to be a product of the change in the legislature to Republican domination. When President Clinton took office, most of the testimonies were classified as nonaligned based on the values that the witnesses expressed. During 1993 and until late 1994 the houses were split—Democrats were the majority party in the House of Representatives, and Republicans were the majority in the Senate. By 1995, Republicans controlled both houses of Congress. Beginning in 1995 and concurrent with the Republican control of Congress, the testimonies of witnesses invited to the legislative hearings were coded largely as conservative. Future longitudinal studies might explore the ideological alignments that underlie politically motivated social movements.

We have identified the prevailing values in, and the contributors to, the Social Security reform debate over 11 years of federal legislative hearings. However, the validity and reliability of the coded data in this study were dependent upon several factors, including the witness’s representation of his or her values or beliefs, the hearing context, and the reliability of the coders. We postulate that witnesses’ testimonies were true representations of their values, although witnesses may attempt
to appeal to dominant members of Congress or be directed by the views of their superiors. Moreover, the hearing context depended largely on the topic chosen for discussion.

Findings that ideologies are central to the Social Security reform debate concur with previous research and substantiate arguments of scholars that values are the substance of policy choices (Burstein & Bricher, 1997; Estes, 1979, 2001a; Fischer, 1993; Heclo, 1998; Marmor, 2000; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993, 1994; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 2003). This study confirmed major assumptions of the advocacy coalition framework: (a) The two major coalitions were stable over the 11-year period; (b) there was substantial consensus within coalition members across the six value domains; and (c) the reform debate reflected significant disturbances external to the policy domain, mainly the shift in government to favor congressional Republicans. Although witnesses from federal administrative agencies were more centrist in their positions overall, they were not noticeably more centrist than other members of their coalition.

Identifying the determinants of political influence, in particular the role of ideology, is critical to ensuring a secure and democratic society. Most witnesses invited by Congress promoted market values for Social Security reform. Fewer witnesses expressed values that supported the social contract ideology behind the Social Security program. The conservative interests mask the essential task at hand—ensuring a reliable income in retirement and for life’s adversities—by labeling Social Security as a program that threatens to bankrupt the nation and framing the debate around value-laden economic objectives. Little attention is paid to the substantial public support for the program and for options that do not require changes to the structure or principles of Social Security. At issue is whether the values promoted by the dominant members of Congress contest or mirror those of the American public and focus on protecting U.S. citizens.

In conclusion, this study identified the dominant values that are signaling the ideological reasoning of actors and advocacy coalitions appearing at congressional hearings. Attendance at the hearings was not balanced, as measured by the frequencies of testimonies by witnesses from particular groups. Moreover, the alignment and consensus on values varied by advocacy coalition. A major finding is the contrast between the coherence of conservative testimonies, which favored values constituting the market ideology, and the inconsistency of progressive testimonies, which favored values composing the social contract ideology. Congressional Democrats, the historical defenders of entitlement programs, were ambivalent toward the fundamental structure and principles of Social Security. Juxtaposed with other groups of witnesses, congressional Democrats were the most inconsistent in their expression of values. We deduce from our findings that the dominant conservative interests sought to use their political influence to justify their positions and secure public acceptance and support. Yet public opinion polls indicate contradictory views on market values and high support for Social Security. Political regimes use ideologies to justify and
impose their position and will over others (Gramsci, 1971). The close alignment of the political with the moral dimensions of the debate is, as Gramsci argued, crucial to the path of attaining ideological hegemony and power. We anticipate that the coherence on one political ideological view (market) and the relative lack of consistency in another (social contract) will be highly consequential for the future of Social Security, U.S. politics, and the American public.

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Figure 4. Values expressed by congressional Democrats in their testimonies, by year and ideological orientation.
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