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Description

Senior citizens are sometimes called the "third rail" of American politics because of their political power. This report argues that as older Americans have received a proportionally larger percentage of federal spending, less federal money has been spent on children.

Keywords


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The Political Muscle of Senior Citizens
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Transcript

The Political Muscle of Senior Citizens

MARY ALICE WILLIAMS, co-host:
It's a voter block of active, aging Americans. Perhaps the biggest special-interest group around.

GARRICK UTLEY, co-host:
Talking about...

WILLIAMS: Garrick takes a look at them.

UTLEY:
Talk about gray power. We've seen it coming, this gray power, for a long time, and now it is here with real political force. Look at it this way. What gives the elderly their political muscle is not only their growing numbers, 34 million Americans get Medicare benefits, but also something else. The elderly are one special-interest group everyone can look forward to being part of, eventually. Time and again, gray power has forced Congress and the President to back down on plans to raise the fees for benefits for those over 65. Now, some may ask whether the elderly are getting too big a slice of the American pie, but no candidate in this election dares say, `Yes, they are.'

Providence, Rhode Island, the 1st Congressional District, the week before Election Day.

Mr. RON MAKELY: My wife may get a little jealous if we come up here and we keep meeting like this.

UTLEY: Republican incumbent Ron Makely may have differences with Democratic challenger Scott Wolfe about things such as Star Wars and gun control, but not about their number one constituency.

Mr. MAKELY: You must reflect the needs and concerns of your district, and when you have senior citizens who make up a large part of your district, it's important that you represent their interests.

Mr. SCOTT WOLFE: Older people vote at a much higher rate than younger and even middle-aged people, and so it's extremely important for anyone seeking political office to pay a lot of attention to older people and their concerns.
UTLEY: And a lot of attention is paid. At the John F. Kennedy Senior Residence in Pawtucket, Federally subsidized, challenger Wolfe sends his 71-year-old mother with a team of seniors to set up refreshments.

Mrs. WOLFE: I’m the mother. There he is. The handsomest boy on the block.

UTLEY: When the candidate arrives, he brings along another star attraction, a Kennedy. This one is Patrick, son of Senator Ted, a Rhode Island state representative.

Mr. PATRICK KENNEDY: You know, President Kennedy said that the truest measure of a society is the way in which it treated its senior citizens.

UTLEY: Next morning, Makely is pressing the flesh at a Halloween party at the Woonsocket Senior Center which is supported by Federal and state tax funds. If you think these candidates know something, you're right. Every politician in America knows it by heart. They know that people over 65 out vote every other age bracket. In the last off-year election, only one in five of the youngest group voted. Each older group did better. The seniors did best of all, almost two-thirds of them voted.

Of course, what is not on the chart are the millions of Americans who cannot vote at all, children. Partly for that reason, the past two decades have seen two social revolutions in America. In 1970, 25 percent, that's one of every four elderly Americans, lived in poverty. Today, the figure has declined to about one in 10. The bad news is about America's future. In 1970, 15 percent of American children were growing up in poverty. Today, that figure is over 20 percent—one in five—and it is rising. Even as they battle for the elderly vote, the politicians insist that they don't want to help the old at the expense of the young.

Mr. MAKELY: And I think it's every dangerous for us to have inter-generational disputes.

UTLEY: But, in fact, there is a generational struggle for the tax dollar, and the seniors have the big battalions. If you eliminate defense and interest payments, 47 cents of every Federal dollar today goes to help Americans over 65. We spend, perhaps, 1/6th as much on our children. America’s senior citizens have become the third rail of politics because of clout and fear. The fear is justified.

Mr. MAKELY: If you now tell these senior citizens who are often just barely making it, 'We're going to change your income. We're going to do away with services,' they have a legitimate insecurity not knowing what's going to happen, because they don't have the ability to earn more income.

UTLEY: Nevertheless, America's expanding elderly population and their exploding medical costs will divert more and more resources from anything else this country wants to do with its money.

Mr. WOLFE: What do you think I should do when I get to Washington?

Unidentified Woman: I think you ought to say a prayer.

Mr. WOLFE: Thank you. Thank you. We all need to say a prayer.

UTLEY: So prayers are fine, but what is needed are some decisions about what is important, who gets what in our nation, and what are we prepared to pay for it.