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Barry Goldwater, Conservative Politics, and Senior Rights, 1969-1978

Both scholarly and popular narratives have documented Barry Goldwater's controversial remarks over Social Security during the 1964 presidential campaign. Goldwater's stance on senior entitlements after he returned to the Senate in 1969, however, has received less attention. This paper will explore the ways in which Goldwater reinvented himself as a champion of older Americans in an era in which political figures increasingly sought to win the "senior vote." As I will argue in this paper, Goldwater and other prominent Republicans shaped policies aimed at increasing the financial independence of seniors to fit the conservative movement's broader agenda of reforming federal tax policy and passing right-to-work legislation. I will focus on two specific areas. First, I will discuss efforts to remove the earnings limitation for Social Security recipients. Here, Goldwater continued his attack on "big government" in the 1970s through the indirect means of liberalizing Social Security benefits. For conservatives, removing the earnings limitation represented neither an extension of the senior-rights agenda nor an expansion of benefits but rather a means to critique taxes, federal bureaucracy, and Democratic leadership—all of which, according to the conservative critique, gave rise to soaring inflation and eroded the security of retirees living on fixed incomes. The second half of this paper will examine the relationship between the Right and the movement to ban mandatory retirement in the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas many accounts of federal aging policy frame the fight against age discrimination in employment as a new civil rights cause, my paper points to the ways in which the senior rights movement neatly complemented the conservative movement's assault on organized labor and federal policies. Goldwater and others appropriated the ideas of liberation and independence at the heart of senior politics, employing the language and logic of the "right to work" as a universal right of Americans of all ages. Overall, this paper will argue that conservatives such as Goldwater embraced senior politics in this period as a way of undermining the liberal state and promoting a longstanding agenda of economic, political, and legal reform.