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Social Security: Words, Polls, and Facts

WASHINGTON, DC—The air is full these days of polling results about Americans' attitudes toward Social Security, its financial condition, and various reform proposals. But as polling experts agree, the way questions are worded and even the order of the questions can affect the outcome.

This was certainly true a decade ago, when a prominent organization published a poll it claimed demonstrated that young Americans—members of Generation X—had greater confidence in the existence of alien life from outer space than in their prospects of receiving Social Security benefits when they retired. The “UFO poll,” although fundamentally flawed, received widespread attention in the news media.

Later independent polling by the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) showed that, in fact, Social Security still beat the aliens. To be sure, members of Generation X have reservations about Social Security, the EBRI poll found, but they continue to look to it as an important source of retirement income.

These days, two phrases are shaping up as especially important. “Privatizing” Social Security has been found to draw a negative reaction from the public, according to recent press reports, while “personal accounts” seems to be received much more favorably.

Words have power—as do the way opinion polls are designed and conducted. As the EBRI research showed, the words people use and the way they use them can make a big difference.

EBRI is a nonpartisan research institute and does not lobby or take sides on legislation. EBRI has no position on Social Security reform, other than that elected officials consider all the facts and develop sound public policy based on objective and accurate information.

The complete EBRI study rebutting the UFO–Social Security argument is available online at www.ebri.org/SSProject/EBRISSOPN.pdf

EBRI information resources for reporters is available on its Web site at www.ebri.org/SSProject/report.htm

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