

## Elders Rights Movement

The first social movements oriented toward elders developed in the 1930s during the Depression. Although aimed at the general population, Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement attracted many older people among its half-million members by its pension program proposal. After Sinclair's defeat in the 1934 California gubernatorial election, many older EPIC followers joined Dr. Francis Townsend's movement. The Townsend Plan for a monthly pension of \$200 funded by sales taxes built a national membership of 1.5 million by 1936 -- which melted away after the Social Security Act passed in 1935, establishing the Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) and Old Age Assistance programs. George McClain led a rival McClain Movement, which started in California as an offshoot of Robert Noble's "Ham and Eggs" organization and its effort to pass a state referendum for elders' benefits in 1938. McClain developed a California and a National League of Senior Citizens, which faded away in the 1940s.

Concerned with their own schemes, neither the Townsend nor the McClain Movements were significant forces behind the enactment of Social Security in 1935, which was designed by professional social insurance reformers as part of Roosevelt's New Deal response to massive unemployment and poverty during the Depression. The Social Security Act wrapped together legislation which established public assistance programs, unemployment insurance, and retirement insurance. Labor unions were busy with industrial organizing drives in the mid-1930s, and many union leaders still looked to win retirement and other benefits primarily through collective bargaining. Consequently labor was not a central force behind the enactment of Social Security in 1935. Labor quickly accepted Social Security Act provisions, and unions became a leading force behind subsequent amendments, particularly Medicare and Medicaid in 1965. The National Council of Senior Citizens was established in 1961 as the advocacy arm of retired union members, specifically with the campaign for Medicare in mind. The enactment of Medicare and Medicaid (Titles 18 and 19 of the Social Security Act) was a big victory over the American Medical Association, which opposed the legislation.

The increasing longevity and relative wealth of older people have greatly augmented their political clout. From 4 million people over 65 in 1890 (4 percent of the population), their number has grown to 29 million in 1990 (12 percent of a population of nearly 250 million). With the baby boom in retirement by the year 2030, one in every five U.S. residents will be over 65. AARP, formerly the he American Association of Retired People, now the largest of all non-profit membership groups with 38 million members, grew from an association to get insurance for retired teachers to a lobbying powerhouse in just two decades. The Gray Panthers, although a much smaller organization, symbolizes the growing activism of elders. The National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, a creation of the direct mail industry, joined the elders lobby in

1983 and -- in response to widespread criticism -- recently hired a substantial lobbying staff.

The 1961 White House Conference on Aging highlighted the problems of adequate health care, social services, and nursing home care facing the elderly. The Older Americans Act of 1965 established the federal Administration on Aging and a nationwide network of Area Agencies on Aging; nutrition amendments of 1972 added programs to feed older people. Civil rights of older people were also written into legislation. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects applicants and employees age 40 and over from discrimination, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 prohibits discrimination on the basis of age in programs receiving federal financial assistance. The age for mandatory retirement was raised to 70 in 1978 and eliminated for most workers in 1986. Catastrophic health insurance under Medicare passed in 1988, but ran into a firestorm of criticism for its extra tax bite on the more affluent elderly and was repealed.

Public programs for elders have worked: older people in American are better off than ever before. Where one in three elderly Americans lived below the poverty line as recently as 1960, only one in nine did in 1990. But well-being is not equally distributed -- rates of poverty among black and other minority elderly are much higher. Thus our media stereotypes of elders range from "greedy geezers" playing golf to impoverished widows eating dog food.

Health care for elders remains a major issue, particularly nursing care and catastrophic illness insurance. And at a time when more than 37 million people in the United States lack any health care coverage -- while we spend more per capita than in any other country on health care -- dealing with health care becomes a problem to be solved for the whole population. While some groups like Americans for Generational Equity argue that the share of national income going to the elderly is too high, others like Families USA are trying to find an intergenerational compromise that provides for elders while lifting the burden of poverty from younger generations as well.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

For a look at advocacy organizations, see Henry J. Pratt, *The Gray Lobby: Politics of Old Age* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976). William W. Lammers, *Public Policy and the Aging* (Congressional Quarterly Press, 1983) reviews the development of laws and programs. Ken Dychtwald and Joe Flower predict consequences of demographic trends in *Age Wave* (Bantam Books, 1990). For background on the founder of the Gray Panthers, see Maggie Kuhn with Christina Long and Laura Quinn, *No Stone Unturned: The Life and Times of Maggie Kuhn* (Ballantine Books, 1991). Upton Sinclair's EPIC campaign is described in Greg Mitchell, *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor of California and the Birth of Media Politics* (Random House, 1992).

Dr. Townsend's program is covered in Abraham Holtzman, *The Townsend Movement: A Political Study* (Octagon Books, 1975); and Edwina Amenta, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006). For background on AARP, see Charles Morris, *AARP: America's Most Powerful Lobby and the Clash of Generations* (Crown, 1996).