

With proposed overhauls to Social Security, Christie putting himself in company of political losers | Opinion

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By Carl Golden

Remember the warning: "When you're up to your backside in alligators, it's hard to remember your original intention was to drain the swamp."

It was taped to office walls and thumb-tacked to bulletin boards as a reminder that no matter how well-motivated the purpose, it's wise to keep in mind the potential risk to life and limb.

With his proposal to overhaul the Social Security system and Medicare, Gov. Chris Christie waded into the bog and the gators are circling.

Calling for changes in the eligibility criteria for Social Security benefits has historically been a political loser, arousing the ire of current recipients and those nearing retirement age. As individuals and members of organizations whose clout at the polling booth is well-documented, they've thrown the fear of retribution into members of Congress over any proposal affecting their benefits.

Gov. Christie's strategy represented a trade-off: he would accept the criticism over suggesting a raise of the retirement age and imposing a means test for beneficiaries in return for praise for the courage to take on the thorny issue of entitlement reform.

The strategy was also designed to separate Gov. Christie from other potential contenders for the Republican presidential nomination, to draw a contrast between the "tell it like it is govt. vernor" and the others who, by inference, lack the will to face up to difficult issues.

Not surprisingly, the reaction to Gov. Christie's proposals was swift and critical.

He was accused of breaking the compact between government and working men and women who contributed to Social Security throughout their careers.

Critics said his ideas would punish those who saved diligently and invested wisely, looking forward to guaranteed Social Security income.

Gov. Christie defended increasing the full retirement age to 69, arguing that life expectancy had risen significantly since Social Security was enacted in 1933.

Means testing has always been the flashpoint in discussions of entitlement programs and Gov. Christie drew criticism for recommending benefits be eliminated for individuals with incomes above \$200,000 a year.

The proposal taps into the seeming incongruity of Social Security payments to those in above average economic circumstances.

Is it fair to provide Social Security benefits to multi-millionaires? Should a line be drawn between successful businesspersons, athletes or entertainers, for instance, and middle-class wage earners?

While all have paid into the system and are entitled to benefits, does it not reek of unequal treatment for a government program to view them as identical?

Absent from the governor's program, however, was a suggestion that gains supporters whenever reforms are mentioned – raising or eliminating entirely the cap on income above which Social Security payments cease to be deducted.

Taxing income which exceeds the current limit of \$118,000 has the potential, its supporters argue, to solve the funding dilemma in short order. They point out that the majority of working Americans never reach the limit and, consequently, pay into the system year in and year out while contributions from wealthier individuals can end after a few months.

Gov. Christie rejected this argument, saying increasing or abolishing the limit is tantamount to a tax increase, a contention his critics claim fits with his consistent anti-tax posture and protecting the rich, endearing him to the conservative wing of the national Republican Party.

There has been considerable speculation that Gov. Christie damaged himself by raising entitlement reform, that it is an issue that has always dragged down those who become involved in it.

He has opened himself to pushback from senior citizens – a potent voting bloc – and invited criticism that he is looking out for the wealthy at the expense of the middle class.

Others contend that Gov. Christie has fallen out of the top tier of possible presidential candidates in any event and focusing on radical changes in Social Security will not re-energize his as yet undeclared candidacy.

Gov. Christie, however, has made his point rather emphatically; he's entered the swamp with the goal of draining it. He'd better keep at least one eye on the gators, though.

Contributed by senior contributing columnist with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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