Presidential Candidates Vie for Votes of Older Americans

Now that the Presidential primary season is over and it’s clear that Democratic U.S. Sen. Barack Obama (IL) will be running against Republican U.S. Sen. John McCain (AZ), national attention is focusing on the upcoming party conventions and the race for the White House this fall.

KEY VOTING GROUP. Recent articles in The Wall Street Journal (May 27, 2008), The Atlantic (May 10, 2008) and USA Today (May 18, 2008) have all described seniors as a critical constituency group that both Presidential candidates will be trying to win in November. In several key electoral states, older voters represent a significant portion of the vote. In Ohio and Pennsylvania, for example, primary-election surveys showed that people over 65 were between 22 percent and 29 percent of all voters at the polls.

In the last Presidential election, the Republicans won the majority of over-65 voters. George W. Bush won 52 percent and John Kerry 47 percent. Four years earlier, however, the senior vote was reversed: Democrat Al Gore beat Republican Bush by 50 percent to 47 percent (Ralph Nader won 2 percent). As a result, seniors are now considered to be a real “swing” constituency and, therefore, up for grabs.

GALLUP POLL. A Gallup Poll analysis in June had this to say: “Perhaps one of the greatest divides in the 2008 election will be along age lines, with Obama demonstrating great appeal to younger voters, but not faring as well among senior citizens. Obama leads McCain by 23 points among voters aged 18 to 29, while trailing McCain by 12 points among those 65 and over.”

McCain, of course, is nearly 72 years old and many seniors initially may feel more comfortable with a contemporary. At the same time, they may not be fully aware of his record on retirement issues – particularly his strong support for the privatization of Social Security (see sidebar on p. 2).

Obama, on the other hand, is a strong supporter of the Social Security system and an opponent of privatization. He thinks the system is far from perfect but believes the current version protects the energy, our passion, our strength and do all we can to help elect Barack Obama the next President. We will act to keep America’s reputation in the world.

Our union is proud of our members’ efforts over the past months in support of U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton. They worked their hearts out. We completely agree with Sen. Clinton that: “The way to continue our fight now – to accomplish the goals for which we stand – is to take our energy, our passion, our strength and do all we can to help elect Barack Obama the next President of the United States.”

High Drama on Road to Medicare Bill

In July, Congress passed an important Medicare bill that improves the program for all beneficiaries. Getting it to the President’s desk, however, was no slam dunk.

The legislative battle began this spring, in the face of a re-elected President’s attempt to reduce Medicare’s physician reimbursement rates. While there was bi-partisan agreement that a cut could result in fewer doctors accepting Medicare patients in the future, there were also stark differences in how party leaders approached the opportunity to protect Medicare beneficiaries.

MEDICARE IMPROVEMENTS. House Democrats – led by Ways and Means Committee Chair Charles Rangel (D-NY) – crafted a bill (H.R. 6331) that made modest steps to reduce the big federal subsidies paid to Medicare Advantage (MA) plans – the private insurance options that replace regular Medicare.

Continued on page 2

AFSCME Endorses Obama

On June 19, by a unanimous vote of the International Executive Board, AFSCME endorsed U.S. Sen. Barack Obama to be the next President. Here are excerpts from the public announcement:

Barack Obama has mobilized a historic movement to reclaim the greatness of America. With his leadership, our nation will rise up to rebuild the middle class at home and restore America’s reputation in the world.

The choice could not be more clear: We can elect Obama – a champion for working families – or we can elect John McCain and have four more years of George W. Bush’s disastrous policies. We need a change now.

AFSCME will mobilize more members and invest more resources than ever before to help Sen. Obama win the White House. We will activate an army of 40,000 AFSCME activists and help produce an unprecedented turnout in November.

Our union is proud of our members’ efforts over the past months in support of U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton. They worked their hearts out. We completely agree with Sen. Clinton that: “The way to continue our fight now – to accomplish the goals for which we stand – is to take our energy, our passion, our strength and do all we can to help elect Barack Obama the next President of the United States.”

Continued on page 4
AFSCME Retirees Fight Medicare Advantage

One reason why Medicare Advantage (MA) plans have grown so rapidly is that insurance companies have started marketing the plans to larger employers, promising to share a portion of the federal subsidy. Companies such as John Deere, Sears and Xerox have already succumbed. Thousands of their retired employees have been removed from Medicare and employer-sponsored Medicare supplements and placed in private MA plans.

EMPLOYERS SWITCH TO MA. The public sector has taken the bait as well. Encouraged by a desire to cut retiree health costs, the state of West Virginia, Michigan school employees, Ohio school employees and the City of Houston are just some of the governments and retirement systems that have switched to MA.

The Pennsylvania story is particularly hard to swallow. There, Gov. Ed Rendell made a decision on his own to make the switch. He never consulted with AFSCME or the state legislature. Pennsylvania state retirees were told to choose an MA plan by May 1, 2008. Rendell also raised their co-pays for prescription drugs.

Before the plan took effect, Pennsylvania Council 13, Retiree Chapter 13 and the International Union fought back. When meetings with Rendell’s staff proved fruitless, letters were sent to all Chapter 13 members, urging phone calls and postcards to the governor.

CONGRESS HEARS. Chapter 13 Pres. Dan Mazur and other chapter leaders attended subchapter meetings throughout the state, informing members and urging them to protest. Council 13 Exec. Dir. David Filman even traveled to Washington to testify before Congress, citing the shortcomings of MA plans and urging a rollback in their generous federal subsidies.

Meanwhile, word got out that some of the major medical centers in the state, including the University of Pittsburgh and University of Pennsylvania networks, refused to accept the state’s primary MA plan—citing low reimbursement rates and slow payment schedules. State retirees were so concerned that they stampeded the governor’s information meetings, causing traffic jams on the interstate.

Despite the uproar, however, Rendell has refused to back down. The retirees have started looking at possible legislative strategies to restore their benefits.

Mc Cain Calls Social Security “Dishracle”

At a town hall meeting in Denver in July, Republican Presidential candidate John McCain (R-AZ) agreed with a young woman in the audience that Social Security probably won’t be there when she needs it. Showing no faith in America’s great family protection system, McCain added the following comments:

“Americans have got to understand that we are paying present-day retirees with the taxes paid by young workers in America today. And that’s a disgrace. It’s an absolute disgrace, and it’s got to be fixed.”

To that, International Pres. Gerald W. McIntee had a strong response: McCain just doesn’t get it.

“Social Security has always been a pay-as-you-go system. Workers provide for their parents, just as their children will provide for them. This is nothing new and it’s a great reason for the system’s huge success. What’s a disgrace is that this is news to John McCain.”

It’s true that, over the last 70 years, the system has occasionally needed minor correction. But, once corrected, Social Security keeps on ticking,” McIntee said. “The way the system works is ingenious and should make us all proud. Social Security is part of our great heritage as Americans.”

McCain has been very clear on what he’d do to “fix” Social Security if he’s elected president. The day after his Denver remarks, McCain told CNN that he supports “privatization of accounts” for younger workers. This reflected his statements in an in-depth interview with The Wall Street Journal earlier this year.

The Journal noted that a centerpiece of McCain’s first White House bid in 2000 was “a plan to divert a portion of Social Security payroll contributions to fund private accounts, much as President Bush proposed unsuccessfully.” Because it was unclear from McCain’s 2008 campaign website as to whether he continued to hold that position, The Journal asked him where he stands today.

“I’m totally in favor of personal savings accounts,” he told them. “As part of Social Security reform, I believe that private savings accounts are a part of it — along the lines that President Bush proposed.”

In talks with McCain campaign officials, The Journal was told that McCain intends to keep Social Security solvent by “reducing the growth in benefits.” According to the newspaper, options being considered include raising Social Security’s full retirement age to 68 and reducing cost-of-living adjustments.
Rugola Testifies Against GPO/WEP

International Vice Pres. Joe Rugola of Ohio, executive director of OAPSE/AFSCME Local 4, testified before Congress this spring in opposition to two unfair Social Security offsets that affect thousands of public retirees who did not pay into the system on their government jobs. Appearing before the Social Security Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee, Rugola said the Government Pension Offset (GPO) reduces or eliminates Social Security spouse benefits and “disproportionately impacts low-wage workers, particularly women.”

Both the GPO and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) take many public retirees by surprise, Rugola said. He noted that the WEP significantly reduces the Social Security benefits that public employees earned themselves, on other jobs. “Over 700,000 retired federal, state and local government employees are currently affected by the WEP,” and can lose as much as $340 a month in Social Security benefits.

AFSCME currently supports several reform solutions to the unfair GPO and WEP. These include S. 206/H.R. 82, which repeals both offsets; S.1245/H.R. 2988, which would exempt $1,200 of combined monthly Social Security spouse benefits and public pension benefits before the GPO reduction is applied; and H.R. 726, which would provide $2,500 of monthly Social Security and public pension benefits before the WEP offset is gradually phased in.

Contribute to AFSCME PEOPLE

Public Employees Organized for Political & Legislative Equality

It’s getting tougher out there, with rising gas prices, food packages getting smaller and the cost of everything going up and up. Our incomes just don’t cover as much as they used to. We know our government should keep an eye on these problems and take the necessary actions to correct them, but that means electing men and women who understand people’s needs. Once they’re elected, it means we have to make sure they do the right thing for average citizens.

Passing more humane laws and providing necessary services for our communities are obvious priorities, not just for retirees but also for working families. There are many different ways for AFSCME retirees to help elect candidates who will do what’s right.

One way is to register and vote. Another is to become active in your retiree chapter and work with others to promote the needs of seniors and workers. Yet another is to volunteer for candidates who demonstrate real concern.

Another important way is to become active with AFSCME’s PEOPLE committee – the political and legislative arm of the union. Thousands of AFSCME retirees are now regular financial contributors to PEOPLE – a voluntary fund that helps the union elect and educate worker- and retiree-friendly officials. This year’s elections are crucial. From local to federal races, Americans want to see movement in a positive direction on the economy, health care and other issues that are so vital to all of us.

If you are a retiree who wants to see progressive change, please fill out the form below and make a donation to AFSCME PEOPLE. Send the form and contribution to: AFSCME Retirees; Attn: PPL 1625 L Street, NW; Washington, DC 20036.

AFSCME PEOPLE can COUNT on AFSCME Retirees

Name: _____________________________ Retiree Chapter: _____________________________
Address: _____________________________
E-Mail: _____________________________
City: _____________________________ State: ________ ZIP: __________
Phone: _____________________________
Contribution Level:  ____ Amount $ _______  ____ MVP ($100 – includes MVP jacket)
Circle MVP Jacket Size:  ____ S  ____ M  ____ L  ____ XL  ____ 2X  ____ 3X  ____ 4X  ____ 5X
☐ My check is enclosed  ☐ I prefer to pay by credit card (complete below)
Name on Card: _____________________________ Expiration Date: _____________________________
☐ VISA  ☐ MasterCard  ☐ Discover  ☐ American Express
Card Number: _____________________________
Signature: _____________________________

In accordance with federal law, the PEOPLE committee will accept contributions only from members of AFSCME and their families. Contributions or gifts to AFSCME PEOPLE are not deductible as charitable contributions for federal income tax purposes.

My authorization of this charge is voluntary and I understand that it is not required as a condition of membership in any organization.

ConsumerTIME

Healthy Flying Tips

Air travel is one of the quickest modes of transportation. But between flying anxiety and long lines at airport security, flying can be less than enjoyable. Use these tips from New York’s Rochester General Hospital to help ensure your time in the sky is safe and relaxing.

Take Your Seat:
• Wear clothes that allow you to easily adjust to changes in cabin temperature. Loose, breathable layers are best.
• To avoid being interrupted during your sleep, wear eyeshades. They effectively block out light while letting everyone know you don’t want to be interrupted.
• When seated, make sure your safety belt is fastened.

Motion Sickness:
• Book a window seat on the left side of the plane. Motion sickness that’s caused by flying anxiety may be reduced by imitating the normal position for driving.
• Stick to water. The effects of motion sickness are increased by consuming alcoholic beverages.
• For the smoothest ride, reserve a seat located over the wings of the plane.
• Focusing on a fixed point in front of you can help relieve oncoming motion sickness. It’s also helpful to open your air vents.

Moving Around the Cabin: Staying seated for an extended period of time can have adverse effects on your health. For air travelers, so-called “economy-class syndrome” can cause deep vein thrombosis, so it’s a good idea to walk up and down the aisles or perform simple stretches in order to improve blood flow. Try these exercises the next time you’re “grounded” to your seat (always consult with your doctor before starting any exercise regimen).

Shoulder Shrug: To loosen up your shoulders and arms, pull your shoulders up towards your head and slowly rotate them backwards. Lower your shoulders to the starting position. Repeat ten times.

Ankle Rolls: Point your right foot outward. Slowly roll your toes toward you, flexing your foot. Continue around until your toes are pointed outward again. Repeat five clockwise circles and five counterclockwise circles. Switch feet and repeat.

Leg Lifts: Place your feet flat on the floor. Raise your right leg and extend it until you feel a stretch in your calf angle, then raise your legs as high as you can comfortably. Hold for ten seconds and release. Repeat with left leg.

When you arrive at your final destination, take a few minutes to walk around. It will not only revitalize you, but also acclimate you to your new surroundings.

Continued from page 2

$20,000. Unfortunately, it didn’t succeed on the first try, but Terry remains hopeful that talks over the summer will lead to a more successful bill this fall.

James Howell, executive director of AFSCME Council 15, recently hosted an organizing committee meeting of retiree activists – the first step in creating a new AFSCME retiree chapter. Participants came from New Haven, Waterbury and Bridgeport to discuss organizing strategies and the nuts and bolts of starting a chapter. Chapter 15 will be the first AFSCME retiree group to consist wholly of retired police officers. Howell is pictured here, far left, along with Council 15 Pres. Paul Ariola, second from right, and retiree leaders.
In a May 21 editorial entitled “Medicare’s Much Too-Hard Sell,” The New York Times called for an end to federal subsidies for private Medicare Advantage (MA) plans, which are designed to replace traditional Medicare.

The Times editorial opened by saying that the Bush administration had proposed new regulations to curb the often “deceptive, hard-sell tactics” of insurance companies that sell MA plans to seniors, but failed “to eliminate the root cause of the problem: the high subsidies that prop up these plans and make them so attractive to high-pressure marketers.” The average MA subsidy is 13 percent more than the cost of services under regular Medicare, with the private-fee-for-service plans getting an average 17 percent more. “The unjustified subsidies will cost the government more than $50 billion from 2009 to 2012,” the paper said.

“These subsidies help private plans woo beneficiaries away from the traditional program. And they create a big incentive for insurers to maximize sales through aggressive, sometimes unscrupulous, marketing.”

Medicare from page 1

Medicare and are gradually privatizing the system. The bill also re-ins MA private-fee-for-service (PFFS) plans that fail to guarantee access to area doctors and hospitals. Lack of service providers is a growing problem for PFPS-plan participants.

BILL PASSES HOUSE. In June, H.R. 6331 passed the House with overwhelming bi-partisan support. The vote of 359 to 55 was so strong, it encouraged Senate Democrats — led by Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus (D-MT) — to introduce the bill as well.

President Bush made it clear, however, that he’d veto any bill that included changes to Medicare Advantage plans, which he strongly favors. Senior groups protested, saying Bush was favoring insurance companies over the interests of beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, Senate GOP leaders took their cue from Bush and tried to block the bill with a filibuster just before the Senate’s July 4 recess. Ending a filibuster requires the support of 60 senators. Democrats were joined by nine Republicans, but still failed to reach the required 60 by a single vote. Unfortunately, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) was unable to be on the floor that day, as he was recuperating from surgery for his recently diagnosed brain tumor. Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) came off the campaign trail, however, to vote in favor of the bill.

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) chose not to vote at all.

SNOWE EXPLODES. One of the nine Republicans who tried to end the filibuster was Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME). She was furious about her party’s allegiance to private MA plans over the best interest of all Medicare beneficiaries and questioned why taxpayers should be subsidizing profit-making insurance companies. Here’s what she had to say:

“For those who suggest subsidies should be maintained, they must answer some critical questions: When will these plans be economically viable? When will savings be realized by the taxpayers who are providing these subsidies to private insurance companies — in fact, far more than the traditional fee-for-service?

“When will more effective care be demonstrated? Again, they don’t provide for prevention, effective disease management, screenings or many of the tests that are so essential today. … What costs must the rest of Medicare bear as a result of these anti-competitive subsidies?”

KENNEDY SAVES DAY. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), in full agreement, vowed to bring up the bill again after the recess — setting the stage for a dramatic confrontation on July 9. That afternoon, another vote was taken to end the GOP filibuster. This time, the chamber erupted in a standing ovation as Sen. Kennedy arrived in the hall to vote for the bill. The Senate’s leading champion for Medicare and universal health care left his sick bed to cast his vote, and went right back home to Massachusetts as soon as victory was declared.

It was quite a victory. Once Kennedy made certain that 60 votes would be achieved, Republican senators starting reconsidering their earlier objections. The final vote to end the GOP filibuster was 69 to 30. John McCain was the only senator who failed to appear and cast his vote.

The Senate immediately approved H.R. 6331 by unanimous consent, ensuring enough votes for an override of a Presidential veto.