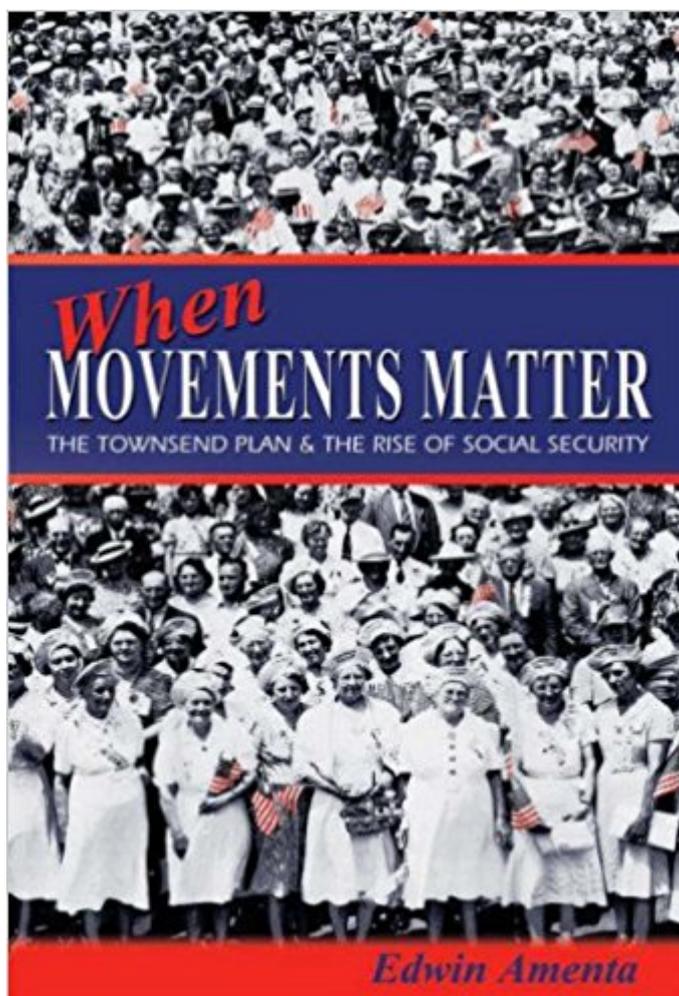


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# When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan And The Rise Of Social Security (Princeton Studies In American Politics: Historical, International, And Comparative Perspectives)





## Synopsis

When Movements Matter accounts for the origins of Social Security as we know it. The book tells the overlooked story of the Townsend Plan--a political organization that sought to alleviate poverty and end the Great Depression through a government-provided retirement stipend of \$200 a month for every American over the age of sixty. Both the Townsend Plan, which organized two million older Americans into Townsend clubs, and the wider pension movement failed to win the generous and universal senior citizens' pensions their advocates demanded. But the movement provided the political impetus behind old-age policy in its formative years and pushed America down the track of creating an old-age welfare state. Drawing on a wealth of primary evidence, historical detail, and arresting images, Edwin Amenta traces the ups and downs of the Townsend Plan and its elderly leader Dr. Francis E. Townsend in the struggle to remake old age. In the process, Amenta advances a new theory of when social movements are influential. The book challenges the conventional wisdom that U.S. old-age policy was a result mainly of the Depression or farsighted bureaucrats. It also debunks the current view that America immediately embraced Social Security when it was adopted in 1935. And it sheds new light on how social movements that fail to achieve their primary goals can still influence social policy and the way people relate to politics.

## Book Information

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One of the ideas behind the Townsend Plan was that due to mechanization and future inventions, less workers would be needed in the future than in the past. This view was held by most of the economists in the 1930's. Townsend's idea was that if you remove the very young and the very old from the worker pool, the remaining people could be fully employed. The Townsend plan of paying a government pension of \$200 per month to every worker over age 60 would remove the older workers from the worker pool of labor. Townsend's concept was well illustrated on the chart in the book, "The Span of Life from Birth to Death". The author points out several weaknesses of the Townsend Plan. The \$200 per month was exorbitantly high (about \$40,000 per year in 2012) dollars. Maybe Townsend set the amount so high because it got older people to join his movement, and they could always bargain back to something less. Another weakness was how to pay for the plan. One of his proposals was a 2% transaction tax, but back then and even today, nobody has any idea of how many total transactions there are. Townsend was also not a politician, so he had no idea how to move Congress or the President politically. Townsend was also not the best person to pick to lead a major social movement. He lacked many skills and eventually dumped his partner, who was the organizing brains behind the movement. The author speculates the Townsend Movement is not better remembered today because of several reasons. Not many records exist today of the movement, compared to the massive archives about Social Security. There were also no great writers about the movement in its heyday. The Great Depression is also not a period people want to remember.

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