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Debate over Social Security entering a potentially critical phase

BY RON HUTCHESON AND JAMES KUHNHENN
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON - (KRT) - President Bush is clinging fast to his plan for Social Security investment accounts as members of Congress head home to gauge support for the idea.

Starting this weekend, interest groups on both sides of the issue will splash the airwaves with ads in an attempt to sway public opinion during the two-week congressional recess. The mood in Congress when lawmakers return on April 4 could play a big role in deciding the fate of Bush's ambitious plan to overhaul the government retirement program.

Undeterred by evidence that he's holding a losing hand, Bush has put his prestige on the line in an all-out effort to let workers invest part of their payroll taxes in stock and bonds. The president, who's already traveled to seven states this month to promote his idea, will be back on the road next week for stops in Tucson, Ariz.; Denver; and Albuquerque, N.M.

"In the hell-bent-for-leather way that he's gone about it, it's as if there is no turning back," said Stephen Hess, a presidential scholar at the Brookings Institution. "The sand is running out of the hourglass. Time is growing short."

Bush and his allies want Congress to deal with Social Security as soon as possible to avoid entanglement with next year's congressional elections. Lawmakers are already nervous enough about changing a bedrock government program without the added pressure of election-year politics.

Democrats are almost solidly against Bush's plan. Republicans are more supportive, but many are withholding judgment rather than voicing support.

"This is a time for members of Congress to see whether he's making a sale or not. If he isn't, I think they're going to come back and want a new product," said John Rother, the director of policy at the AARP, which opposes Bush's approach.

In a clear sign that Bush's plan is in trouble, Rep. Roy Blunt of Missouri, the third-ranking House Republican, said most GOP lawmakers are more interested in listening to voters than promoting Bush's plan during their spring break.

"Our members are going to be out there vigorously talking about Social Security, but only a few of them are gonna be selling a plan," Blunt said. "Some of them will embrace that proposal. Some of them will say, 'Do you have a better idea?'"

If recent polls are any guide, lawmakers aren't likely to hear any outpouring of support for Bush's ideas.

A nationwide Harris poll released Friday found that 58 percent of Americans said they disapprove of Bush's position on Social Security.

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The question, asked of 2,630 adults on March 8-14, didn't offer any details on Bush's plan.

The polling company called the results "clearly bad news for the White House."

Partisans on both sides see the congressional break as a prime opportunity to influence congressional opinion.

AARP is launching a nationwide ad campaign this weekend aimed at workers who are too young to join the seniors' organization. Polls show that younger Americans tend to be far more receptive to personal investment accounts than senior citizens.

AARP's television and radio ads, targeted at workers roughly between ages 30 and 50, cast Bush's plan as a massive overreaction to the problems facing Social Security. Current projections show that payroll taxes will fail to keep pace with promised benefits starting in 2018.

"Looks like the drain's clogged. ... We're going to have to tear down the entire house," a homeowner tells his wife in one AARP ad.

Ads from Bush's allies portray the president as a courageous leader who's willing to tackle a tough problem.

"Some people say Social Security is not in trouble ... just like some thought the Titanic was unsinkable," says an ad sponsored by Progress for America, a conservative group. "President Bush wants to rescue Social Security now - before we hit the iceberg."

Although Bush says he's open to almost any idea that would help Social Security meet its obligations to the aging baby boom generation, he's refused to budge from his insistence on private investment accounts. Bush and other administration officials acknowledge that the accounts would do nothing to solve Social Security's future financial difficulties.

In fact, diverting payroll taxes to private accounts would add to Social Security's problems until the new system is fully in effect. If private accounts work as planned, investment income could be used to offset benefit cuts in traditional Social Security.

"This isn't the solution to Social Security," Bush told a crowd in Orlando, Fla., on Friday. "It is a part of the solution to Social Security."

Opponents of the idea say Bush's insistence on personal accounts is the major roadblock to compromise. Lawmakers from both parties have floated various proposals to shore up Social Security, including raising the retirement age, scaling back future benefit increases or lifting the current \$90,000 cap on the amount of income that's subject to payroll taxes.

Others have suggested personal investment accounts as an add-on to Social Security, without any diversion of payroll taxes. The add-on accounts would be similar to IRAs.

"If he signs a bill that has some element of private accounts and no increase in payroll taxes, I think he can declare victory," Rother said. "He's put himself in a position where he almost has to sign something."

But Bush shows no signs of retreating from his approach, and supporters predict that he'll ultimately get his way.

"This will go through 10 to 20 near-death experiences. It will be counted out 15 times before there's a real debate on the floor of the House of Representatives," former Republican Party Chairman Ed Gillespie said. "There's no substitute for passion in the political process, and Bush has passion for this issue."

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