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# Newsweek Politics

## Tricks of the Trade

Republicans are worried. Can stagecraft save Bush on Social Security?



David Y. Lee / Polaris for Newsweek

'Regular folks': The president in Westfield, N.J., with handpicked participants

By **Holly Bailey, Richard Wolffe and Tamara Lipper**

Newsweek

March 14 issue - The White House likes to call them "regular folks"—people with real-life questions about the president's agenda. Only some are more regular than others. Carlos Huertas was billed as a concerned grandfather and hard-working engineer when he

sat onstage next to President Bush to talk about retirement accounts in downtown Tampa, Fla., last month. "The thing I like about the proposed reforms in Social Security," Huertas said, "is that, just like I do on the 401(k), I can invest in the market where I get a better return." The president nodded his head in agreement. "We're not talking about, you know, needing to become a great financial analyst in order to make decisions," Bush told his town-hall-style audience.

Small wonder that Bush found Huertas so convincing. The Florida granddad is an activist for FreedomWorks, a conservative group founded by former vice presidential nominee Jack Kemp and Dick Armey, the former House GOP leader. FreedomWorks campaigned heavily for Bush's re-election last year and now fights for his plan to overhaul Social Security. That means more than the normal run of TV ads and grass-roots campaigning. FreedomWorks officials tell NEWSWEEK they have worked closely with the administration to coordinate the town halls, often suggesting names of the people onstage. At least five of its activists have appeared with Bush, and the group has bused hundreds to eight of his events in recent weeks. By the group's own tally, at least one third of the audience in Tampa were FreedomWorks members.

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The president took the show to Westfield, N.J., last week, where he talked with a small business owner, a stay-at-home mom and a recent college graduate. Bush received respectful coverage from the town's newspaper, the Westfield Leader, which said the meeting was simply meant to "gauge opinions of New Jerseyans." In fact, a day before the event, an advance team of White House officials held a dress rehearsal for the participants so they could fine-tune their testimonials. They do this before each show, usually with a stand-in playing Bush. It helps the people "say things clearer," says one FreedomWorks member.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan says it shouldn't be surprising that the administration would work with a group like FreedomWorks, since the goal is to sell the president's plan. "If they are involved in the issue and understand what's at stake, that's what we're looking for," he says. "We're looking for real-life examples."

Part infomercial and part daytime talk show, the tightly controlled "Conversations on Social Security" are the president's main platform for selling the biggest domestic priority of his second term. Over the next two months, the White House plans a national roadshow of 60 events with the president and other senior officials. Their goal: to turn around public opinion that has steadily drifted against Bush's beloved idea of diverting payroll taxes into private accounts. Between December and February, support for personal accounts fell from 54 to 46 points, according to polling by the Pew Research Center. Democrats, who took to the road with their own staged town-hall events last week—one "college student" who appeared was actually a Democratic activist—have had success branding the president's plan as risky and unaffordable.

But it's not just the public that the president has to win over. Since the Social Security debate began late last year, Republicans on Capitol Hill have grown increasingly vocal in doubting Bush's prospects for success. Many members have held town-hall meetings of their own. But unlike the president, they didn't hand-pick the participants, and some faced tough questioning. Sen. Rick Santorum, the third-ranking Republican in the Senate, was heckled by college students at one event.

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##### Social Security: Bush's Uphill Battle

**Eleanor Clift**, NEWSWEEK Contributing Editor/  
TV Commentator



Eleanor Clift

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A Bush loyalist, Santorum seemed to admit last week that the party was losing ground. "We are behind in focusing our message on the youth," he wrote in a memo obtained by NEWSWEEK, "mostly because we have needed to reassure current retirees and those nearing retirement." He argued for a shift in strategy, focusing less on personal accounts and more on retirement security. "At present, people are not yet convinced that they will have more financial security as a result of the President's proposal."

The White House couldn't disagree more. The president's aides say they are not going to drop, or downplay, the private accounts. "You've got to demonstrate there's something in it for the individual," said one senior adviser. Moreover, the White House says its focus will remain on winning over current retirees, who are the most resistant to changing the system—even though their benefits would stay the same under the president's plan.

All the same, the president's travels this week suggest a shift toward boosting his own troops, instead of just pressuring moderate Democrats. Bush will visit Shreveport, La., home to Jim McCrery, the GOP chairman of the House Subcommittee on Social Security. The president says he'll just keep pounding the podium until the country comes to see things his way. But the early slide in the

polls suggests there are limits to the powers of White House stagecraft. In a debate shaped by Congress and outside pressure groups, it is becoming harder for the president to control the script once he steps off the stage.

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