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## Social Security Plan's Support Dwindling

Most Don't Back Bush Idea, Poll Finds

By *Richard Morin and Jim VandeHei*

Washington Post Staff Writers

Thursday, June 9, 2005; Page A04

President Bush yesterday said his plan to restructure Social Security would improve the program's long-term stability without shrinking the retirement income of older Americans. But a new Washington Post-ABC News survey found a clear majority of the public does not believe that.

The poll found that 56 percent said the president's plan to couple new personal retirement accounts with a reduction in guaranteed benefits for most Americans would cut the overall retirement income of seniors. About a third -- 32 percent -- said Bush's proposals would result in future retirees receiving more money.

More troubling for a president who took a political risk by advocating reductions in future guaranteed benefits for all but the poorest Americans is that an even larger majority said the Bush plan would not fix the system's financial problems. More than six in 10 -- 63 percent -- said the proposals would not improve the long-term financial stability of the Social Security system, while 32 percent said it would.

"My strategy is pretty simple: explain the problem to the American people, and keep explaining it and explaining it, and assuring seniors that you're going to get your check," Bush said in a speech to members of the Associated Builders and Contractors trade association. "And then at some point, the people of this country are going to say to Republicans and Democrats alike: Why aren't you doing something about the problem?"

Yet the findings suggest that Bush's ongoing campaign to win support for his proposals has produced few clear gains for the White House. If anything, his standing with the public on the Social Security issue is lower now than it was in mid-January.

According to the poll, 62 percent of respondents said they disapproved of the way he was handling Social Security, an increase of seven percentage points since January. Fewer than half -- 48 percent -- support a voluntary plan to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market, a key change advocated by Bush, while 49 percent reject private investment accounts, down from 51 percent last month but still a five-point increase since mid-December.

More worrisome for the president is that support for personal accounts drops to 27 percent if it is coupled with a reduction in the growth of guaranteed Social Security benefits for future retirees, a provision the White House is considering.

"I'm confident we can get something done. I really am," Bush said. "I don't care what all the naysayers say, or the people that are so political they can't . . . get out of their current mind-set here in Washington."

Deep partisan divides continue to fuel the debate over Bush's Social Security proposals. A majority of Republicans -- 63 percent -- said the president's plans would improve the financial health of the system, while even larger majorities of Democrats (85 percent) and political independents (72 percent) disagreed.

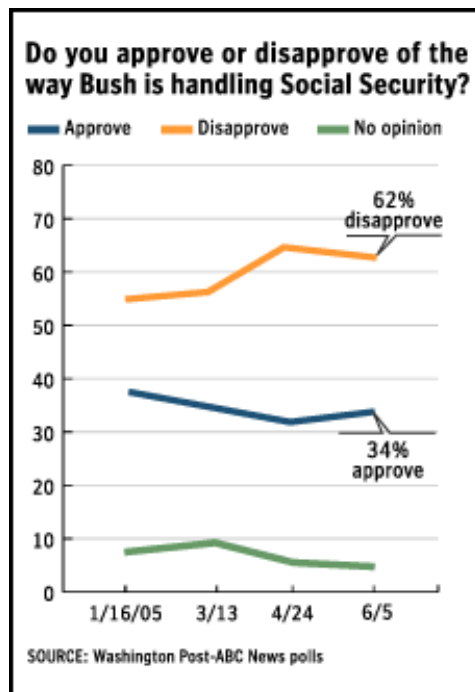
Republicans were less certain that Bush's proposals would benefit seniors financially. Less than half -- 47 percent -- said future retirees would collect more money under the Bush plan, while 39 percent disagreed. Majorities of Democrats (74 percent) and political independents (58 percent) predicted that seniors would be hurt, not helped.

The president is making some headway with the main target of his campaign -- younger Americans. A strong majority -- 71 percent -- of those younger than 30 endorsed private investment accounts compared with 27 percent of those age 65 or older.

But young people are sharply divided over whether Bush's proposals would produce greater wealth for seniors, as the president has predicted: 44 percent of those younger than 30 said his plan would decrease a retiree's income, while 43 percent predicted it would mean more money for seniors in their retirement years. Older Americans are more certain: Strong majorities predict that the president's plans would mean less income for future retirees.

A total of 1,002 randomly selected adults were interviewed June 2 to 5 for this survey. The margin of sampling error for the overall results is plus or minus three percentage points.

Assistant polling director Claudia Deane contributed to this report.



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**Post-ABC Poll**

**➤ Poll Data With Trend (PDF)** Results from a Washington Post-ABC News survey of 1,002 selected adults nationwide, conducted June 2-5.

**Graphic**



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