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Social Security debate changing

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Republican strategists say they have won the debate about Social Security's long-term insolvency and are preparing to plunge into the next fight over President Bush's plan to help fix the program with private investment accounts.

After more than a month of town hall meetings nationwide by the president and Republican lawmakers preaching that Social Security is in danger of going bankrupt, a majority of Americans accept Mr. Bush's warning.

"More people have come to understand the structural problems facing Social Security's solvency over the last two months, and thus, the issue has become more important to them," Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman said in a memorandum to RNC members last week.

A recent Gallup Poll found that Americans, for the first time, list Social Security as the No. 1 domestic issue at 12 percent, ahead of the economy (10 percent), health care (9 percent) and terrorism (9 percent). Last week, the Battleground 2006 poll said that Social Security was the "number one problem for the president and Congress to deal with."

A recent ABC/Washington Post poll reported that 72 percent of Americans say Social Security is heading toward a crisis that will require major reforms to keep it solvent. Gallup said 51 percent of Americans say that legislation is needed to change the system.

A survey by Ayres McHenry & Associates Inc., a Republican polling firm, said 66 percent of Americans older than age 55 agree the program needs to be reformed.

"There is growing polling evidence that significant segments of the public now understands that there are unexaggerated problems ahead of the system if we don't do something to change course," said business lobbyist Dirk Van Dongen, a key White House adviser.

"The battle we are fighting is to convince the Congress that something needs to be done to fix Social Security, and if you look at it through that model, the campaign has been very effective," said Derrick Max, who heads the Coalition for the Modernization

and Protection of American Social Security. The group has been working with the White House to promote Mr. Bush's proposal.

"At some point in the second phase of this campaign, we will start talking about solutions and personal accounts-based reform," he said.

The White House campaign to convince Americans that the retirement program is in trouble was further helped last week when Social Security's trustees said the system will begin paying out more in benefits than it receives in taxes in 2017 and will go broke in 2041.

But there is also growing evidence that the administration heads into the next round of debates about Mr. Bush's plan with increased support.

The Gallup Poll reported that 58 percent of Americans say that any reform should "include a provision that would allow people who retire in future decades to invest some of their Social Security taxes in the stock market and bonds."