

Washington Post Friday, October 24, 2008;

ANALYSIS

Polls Point to Struggle for McCain

Obama Leads in Battlegrounds, but GOP Nominee Plans to Keep Fighting

By [Dan Balz](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, October 24, 2008; Page A01

For [John McCain](#), the batch of battleground state polls released yesterday brought almost universally bad news. The Republican nominee's path to the presidency is now extremely precarious and may depend on something unexpected taking control of a contest that appears to have swung hard toward [Barack Obama](#) since the end of the debates.

McCain's advisers acknowledge that his way back is difficult, but they maintain that there is a way. It requires a combination of smart campaigning, traction for his arguments and what the McCain team hopes will be fears among the electorate at the prospect of a Democrat in the White House with expanded Democratic majorities in Congress.

McCain plans in the closing days to focus on taxes and spending, national security, and what one adviser called "the perils of an Obama presidency with no checks and balances."

The campaign will point to congressional Democrats' claims about the agenda they plan in the new Congress, Obama's "spread the wealth" remark to "Joe the Plumber" and [Sen. Joseph R. Biden](#) Jr.'s comment that his running mate would be tested internationally early in his presidency.

"We will focus like a laser on those messages in the closing days," said the McCain adviser, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk about strategy.

McCain's team dismisses the most dire polls -- those showing the race nationally with a double-digit lead for Obama. Advisers believe the contest's margin is in the five-to-seven-point range, about the same deficit, they say, that then-Vice President Al Gore faced at this time eight years ago against then-Gov. George W. Bush. (A Washington Post poll at the same point in the 2000 race showed a tie.)

In the advisers' analysis, the margin narrows or widens based on events. The uproar over Obama's comment to plumber Joe Wurzelbacher tightened polls, they said, and the endorsement of Obama by former secretary of state Colin L. Powell widened them. But their bet is that things will settle quickly, and then they will attempt to

move the margin steadily toward the too-close-to-call range heading into Election Day, Nov. 4.

Still, the McCain team has no illusions about the situation, knowing that the environment is extraordinarily difficult for a Republican.

The depth of their challenge was made plain yesterday by eight surveys produced by the Big Ten Battleground Poll. Obama not only leads in all eight Midwestern states by hefty margins but has improved his standing since the last time the group surveyed these states.

The numbers are startling. Obama leads by 12 points in Ohio, 11 in Pennsylvania and 13 in Wisconsin. In Michigan, where McCain's campaign has pulled out, Obama's lead is 22 points. In Indiana, a strong red state, his lead is 10 points, larger than in other recent polls.

Quinnipiac University also released polls yesterday from Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida that show Obama leading in all three. In these surveys, his lead in Pennsylvania is 13 points. In Ohio, which is a must-win for McCain, Obama's lead is 14 points.

The one bright spot for McCain, if you can call it that, is Florida, where his opponent's lead is just five points and slightly narrower than it was the last time Quinnipiac surveyed the state. But that's not really a cause for celebration: McCain can't afford to lose Florida any more than he can afford a loss in Ohio.

There may be quibbles with the particular margins in particular states, but the direction of these surveys is consistent with almost all national polls, which show Obama's lead approaching or slightly into double digits.

The Washington Post-ABC News tracking poll has been holding steady this week, showing Obama's advantage at around 10 points. Gallup has had it between five and eight points, depending on its model for determining the most likely voters. The Pew Research Center put it at 14 points. The NBC-Wall Street Journal poll showed a 10-point lead for Obama earlier this week.

Peter Hart, who helps conduct the NBC survey, said that "what has been a tight and competitive race for six months has suddenly and dramatically opened up in Barack Obama's favor."

Hart concluded that after months of doubts, voters "have reached a comfort level with Barack Obama." In contrast, he said, McCain faces significant doubts "that he matches what Americans are looking for in terms of change or hope and optimism for the future."

There are certainly some polls that portray a different race. Some show Obama's margin in mid-single digits, and one poll this week showed Obama with a lead of a single point. Some pollsters see those variations and deduce that in a year like this, with the economy in such distress, the electorate is highly volatile. Be wary, they say, of drawing broad conclusions from even several polls at any given moment.

But even accounting for that volatility, there is no question that McCain is currently losing this race. By what margin is another question. If Obama's lead nationally is in high single digits, then, if past patterns hold, the battleground states are within a few points up or down from that margin.

Take Ohio as an example. Republican presidential candidates generally run a few points better there than they do nationally. That means if McCain can trim the margin to low single digits nationally, he would be in a position to win Ohio. But if the national race looks closer to a 10-point difference, then his hopes of winning the state diminish dramatically. The same dynamic holds for Florida.

What all the polls, battleground and national, point to is that Obama now has multiple routes to 270 electoral votes, the winning number, while McCain has to win virtually everything that is competitive. Pollster.com lists seven tossup states. All were won by President Bush four years ago.

Many analysts have long predicted that the race could stay close until the end but that it could pop open in the final weeks -- and if that happened, it would most likely go in Obama's direction.

The reasons are obvious. The economic meltdown has turned an anxious country into a stressed country. Voters are enormously pessimistic about the future, and that's harmful to McCain as the nominee of the party that holds the White House. In the Big Ten polls, the economy dominates: 61 percent of those surveyed in Ohio and Pennsylvania and 67 percent in Indiana cited it as the top issue.

"The Wall Street collapse has created a very bad headwind," Dick Wadhams, the Republican Party chairman in Colorado, said yesterday morning.

McCain is also weighed down by Bush's unpopularity. The president's approval rating is under 30 percent, and in many of the battleground states, it is far below that. That means the GOP nominee has to win over lots of voters who are unhappy with the performance of a Republican president.

It is often said that the race for the White House is not one campaign but 50, as the candidates battle for electoral votes in one state after another. That's true in tight

races, but when the margins open up, it's too much for a candidate to fight state by state.

Obama said this week that he expects the race to tighten in the final 10 days. Some Republican strategists believe that will happen, making some battlegrounds more competitive than current polls suggest.

McCain is hammering his rival on taxes and readiness, and the question is whether, as voters focus on a possible Obama presidency, there will be second thoughts. That is what McCain must hope for, given the headwinds he is now facing.