

Rumblings of party unease start bubbling to the surface

GLOBAL INSIGHT



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in Washington

A collective shiver ran down Republican spines in the wake of the Democratic party convention and the bounce it delivered to Barack Obama, and nothing Mitt Romney's campaign has said since has reassured them.

Yes, the laws of political gravity should ensure that a bounce in an opinion poll, as with a ball, peters out and Mr Romney's pollster, Neil Newhouse, on Monday dismissed the jump as a "sugar high" which would not last.

But the 3 per cent-plus lead Mr Obama established over Mr Romney in the RealClearPolitics polling average, after they went into the convention in a tie, is bringing the long-submerged Republican rumblings about their candidate to the surface.

The Romney campaign's fundamental case for victory reiterated in Mr Newhouse's lengthy memo has not changed since the former Massachusetts governor joined the presidential race last year.

"The reality of the Obama economy will reassert itself as the ultimate downfall of the Obama presidency," Mr Newhouse said, "and Mitt Romney will win this race." But the "reality of the Obama economy", however you view it, has been apparent for nearly four years. Since April, when Mr Romney secured the Republican nomination, jobs growth has stalled again.

Despite this, throughout this year, Mr Romney has never once led Mr Obama in the head-to-head polling average. And he has a slender lead in just one of the nine battleground states, North Carolina.

There is little margin for error here. Mr Romney has to win most of these states to take the White House, which makes his lagging status in places like Ohio even more worrying.

Mr Romney has always wanted the election to be a referendum on the economy. Two months from polling day, Mr Obama's campaign has managed to frame it as a choice. Mr Romney is largely running a national campaign, recalibrating messages about a single issue, the poor economy, for each important state, in the hope that a tidal wave will wash over Mr Obama.

The president's advisers,

by contrast, are picking off people by sorting through the demographic balances in battleground states, with more targeted, messages sliced according to ethnicity, gender and propensity to vote.

To quote from an excellent new book about the modern science of election campaigns, *The Victory Lab*, by Sasha Issenberg, the personalised messages that sway voters are delivered with "a perfectly disarming touch of intimacy".

The Obama campaign, which had to build its election-winning model from the ground up in the face of opposition from the Democratic establishment in 2008, excels at this approach. The Romney campaign is still learning.

Then there are Mr Romney's own small missteps in recent days. Out of the blue, he said on Sunday that he might keep parts of Mr Obama's health reform, muddying his big

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message that he would repeal the unpopular law.

At the weekend, he appeared on stage with Pat Robertson, the veteran televangelist, who advised a caller to his TV show on Monday worried about his wife's misbehaviour to "become a Muslim" so "you could beat her".

Mr Romney's courting of Mr Robertson at this stage baffled some Republican strategists.

As Charlie Cook the veteran political commentator in Washington, put it: "It is becoming clear that if President Obama is reelected, it will be despite the economy and because of his campaign; if Mitt Romney wins, it will be because of the economy and despite his campaign."

No one is dancing a jig in the Obama camp. They expect the race to be close until polling day.

Mr Romney also has a chance to shine in three debates in October, a forum he excelled in during the primaries. But unlike on those occasions, he will be facing a seasoned opponent.

At least Mr Newhouse, the pollster, is right on one point. The economy is bad and is not likely to get any better before polling day. But the wave Mr Romney has banked on to sweep Mr Obama from office is still nowhere in sight.

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