



McCain struggles to overcome econ gap

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Uncertain economic times have returned Americans to a pre-Sept. 11 mind-set, according to recent polling, placing John McCain at a disadvantage on pocketbook issues reminiscent of the failed reelection campaigns of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter.

At a time when American financial insecurity is at record levels and national security issues have taken a back seat to economic worries, McCain's Washington experience has failed to convince voters that he is more qualified to handle the economy. Only 31 percent of Americans say McCain is the candidate "better able to improve economic conditions," according to a recent CBS/New York Times Poll, compared with 51 percent for Obama. That lead has held stable for months.

Obama is even seen as being better "able to deal with taxes" — traditionally a winning issue for Republicans — by a 47 percent to 36 percent margin. One month earlier, voters preferred McCain on the tax issue, 44 percent to 39 percent.

"They are in trouble," Democratic pollster Mark Mellman said of the McCain campaign.

"The structure of the election works against the Republican party at all levels," he added, emphasizing the economy first.

Indeed, as recently as November 2007, twice as many voters said the war in Iraq, rather than the economy, was their chief concern, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

Today, Pew finds that concern over the economy is double the level of the war in Iraq, 44 percent to 19 percent. Over the same period, the portion of Americans most worried over gas prices rose more than eightfold, from 2 percent last November to 17 percent by summer.

The polling deficit McCain faces on economic issues harkens back to July 1992, when 78 percent of Americans disapproved of the first President Bush's stewardship of the economy, and June 1980, when 74 percent of Americans disapproved of Carter's management of the economy.

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President George W. Bush's management of the economy has placed him in the company of both his father and Carter. This month, 71 percent said they disapprove of his economic policy according to the CBS/New York Times Poll.

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McCain, as nominee of the party in control of the White House, appears to be paying an incumbent's price for the state of the economy, dragged down by Bush but also by his own missteps.

CBS/New York Times polling has found that about six in 10 Americans believe that should McCain win the presidency, he "would generally continue his predecessor's economic policies."

But it is a statement he made last year that continues to haunt him as Democrats relentlessly criticize him for the confession that "the issue of economics is not something I've understood as well as I should."

More recently, one of his top economic advisers, former Sen. Phil Gramm, delivered another blow to his campaign by referring to the United States as a "nation of whiners" and stating that Americans were in a "mental recession."

Gramm resigned last week, saying in a statement, "It is clear to me that Democrats want to attack me rather than debate Sen. McCain on important economic issues facing the country."

For McCain, the timing of Gramm's remarks couldn't have been worse.

With the national home lending crisis as a backdrop, gas prices rose by one-third over the past year and now bob at the record level of about \$4 per gallon, according to the American Automobile Association. The Labor Department reported that June was the sixth consecutive month of job losses.

Now inflation may be on the horizon. The Labor Department reported last week that consumer prices rose in June at the second-fastest pace in about a quarter century; it marked the largest one-year rise since 1991, when the elder Bush began to see his popularity crater, along with the economy.

In an attempt to address what is becoming a defining issue in the campaign, McCain recently embarked on a swing that took him from Maine to Colorado to the industrial Midwest, where he talked about jobs, taxes and gas prices.

For his part, McCain is no longer so humble about his economic credentials. "I have far more experience on the economy than Sen. Obama. I'm very strong on the economy," he told NBC television on Monday.

The presumptive GOP nominee has also adjusted his tone.

In mid-January, McCain told voters in Michigan, the state with the nation's highest unemployment rate, that "some of the jobs that have left the state of Michigan are not coming back," bluntly adding, "They are not. And I am sorry to tell you that."