



## Dem strategists see landslide

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October 9, 2008 04:32 AM EST

Three weeks of historic economic upheaval have done more than just tilt a handful of once reliably Republican states in Barack Obama's direction. Democratic strategists are now optimistic that the ongoing crisis could lead to a landslide Obama victory.

Four large states John McCain once seemed well-positioned to win — Virginia, North Carolina, Ohio and Florida — have in recent weeks shifted toward Obama. If Obama were to win those four states — a scenario that would represent a remarkable turn of events — he would likely surpass 350 electoral votes.

Under almost any feasible scenario, McCain cannot win the presidency if he loses any of those four states. And if Obama actually captured all four states, it would almost certainly signal a strong electoral tide that would likely sweep the Southwestern swing states — Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada — not to mention battlegrounds from New Hampshire to Iowa to Missouri.

One month ago, Democratic strategist Paul Maslin, who closely tracks the electoral map, thought that perhaps Democrats would win by a couple of percentage points. At best, he thought Obama might earn a slight majority as Democrats earned in 1976, the last time the party's presidential nominee cracked the 50 percent barrier.

"Now it's a whole different world," Maslin said. "The economy is way beyond 1992. In 1980, it was the Iran hostage crisis and the economy. I've never seen an issue take this kind of prominence."

Gallup finds that 69 percent of Americans believe the economy is the most important issue facing the nation. The second most cited issue, the war in Iraq, is named by only 11 percent of voters.

Bill Clinton's former pollster Doug Schoen calls this the "economic tsunami."

And it's this tsunami that has altered the electoral map in a way that Obama himself could not.

"The Obama campaign did a lot of important foundation work to expand the Democratic map. And I give them credit for that," Maslin said. "But the real expansion of the map is coming from an outside event, namely the economy, and not the tactics of the Obama campaign."

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Obama has not changed the map, Schoen said. The map has changed because, in light of the economic turmoil, "McCain has become an almost unacceptable alternative" to President Bush.

According to Gallup, only one in four Americans have a positive view of the president, the lowest rating of Bush's presidency. That is only one point above Richard Nixon's floor, 24 percent — which he registered when disgrace forced the first presidential resignation — and just three points higher than the lowest public approval ever, which was notched by Harry Truman in 1952 during the Korean War.

Only 9 percent of Americans are "satisfied" with the direction of the United States, the lowest level since the question was first asked by the Gallup, in the late 1970s.

Nearly six in 10 Americans believe that the United States could be on the verge of entering an economic spiral similar to the Great Depression, according to a CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll conducted over the weekend.

"These events are conspiring against McCain," said Tony Fabrizio, the pollster for 1996 Republican nominee Bob Dole. "The only thing that we can hope is that these circumstances change in terms of being off the front page.

"We are playing defense in places we shouldn't," he continued, speaking of the electoral map. "It will take something ground-shaking, earth-shaking," to reorient the map to where it was even one month ago.

It was only a month ago that McCain seemed poised to overcome the public's poor view of the Republican Party, having literally lifted the GOP's prospects with his own and largely escaped the political dead weight of President Bush.

That changed on Sept. 15, when the stock market tumbled 505 points and McCain observed that "the fundamentals of our economy are strong" before pivoting to use the language of an "economic crisis."

"McCain could have changed the direction of the river. He could have opposed the bailout. Made clear it was a massive bailout loaded with pork. And he was not a party to the Bush-Obama plan," Schoen said.

"Barring a terrorist attack," said Maslin, "in the face of what's happened to the United States economy, the world economy, in the last two weeks, how does this trend reverse itself?"

Multiple surveys in the past two weeks, like the CNN/ORC poll, have shown Obama with his highest level of support in the general election.

Until Sept. 15, Obama had reached 50 percent support in the Gallup tracking poll only once, at the peak of his Democratic convention bounce. Since Sept. 15, Obama has hit the 50 percent mark or higher eight times, including in the past five days.

On Tuesday, Obama surpassed the 50 percent threshold and now leads McCain 52 percent to 41 percent, the largest margin of the campaign.

That same tracking shows that in the past 12 days, Obama's support has stabilized between 48 percent and 52 percent, while McCain's has stabilized between 41 percent and 44 percent, outside the bounds of the fleeting fluctuations that gave Obama his last 9 point lead following his international trip in late July.

Many veteran GOP and Democratic pollsters who have been skeptical of Obama's effort to win red states like North Carolina now believe the economic turmoil has put them well within reach.

"Here, events have made the economy dramatically the issue. More people are concerned about the economy now than even in 1992," said Mark Penn, who has served as both Hillary Rodham Clinton's and Bill Clinton's pollster. "What we are seeing is more and more voters who are saying they are voting on the economy because I don't have any confidence from McCain and George Bush that they can handle the economy."

Obama is seen by double-digit margins in multiple polls as the more capable economic steward. Briefly, following the GOP convention, McCain had drawn about even on the question.

"There is the complete utter loss of faith in GOP politics," argued Jim Jordan, a Democratic strategist. "This is chickens coming home to roost in a way that was almost unimaginable a year ago."