



## McCain map strategy prompts questions

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According to most polls, Barack Obama holds a double-digit lead in Iowa, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and Wisconsin, all states that many political strategists and pollsters believe are too far gone at this late date for John McCain to win.

Still, McCain's campaign soldiers on in those Democratic-leaning states, committing its most precious commodities — time and money — even as the Republican nominee struggles to lock up the red states he likely must sweep to win the presidency.

It's a head-scratching strategy that is leading even some Republicans to wonder why the McCain campaign hasn't written off places such as Iowa and Pennsylvania and strategically retreated to ensure victory in more favorable red state terrain — such as Virginia and North Carolina — that it absolutely cannot afford to lose.

"It seems to me the world has changed, but they are living in an old construct. You pull out of Michigan and you stay in Pennsylvania. You stay in Iowa?" asked Tony Fabrizio, the pollster for 1996 Republican nominee Bob Dole.

"Look, I've been in their position. I know what it's like when the world comes crashing down around you in a presidential race," Fabrizio continued. "I used to have a saying in 1996 that is absolutely applicable to these guys in 2008: Denial is not a river in Africa."

But, he noted, "on what planet do you not adjust to protect the states that you absolutely need to win to get to 270?"

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Iowa is perhaps the most often cited example of McCain's seemingly misplaced priorities. According to Pollster.com, McCain hasn't led Obama in a single Iowa poll in 2008; the closest he came was a 45-percent-to-45-percent tie in mid-September before the market meltdown. In a variety of polls taken since then, Obama's lead has grown to where the RealClearPolitics polling average pegs the gap at 12 points.

Still, through late September, McCain continued to buy ads on TV stations across the state and has campaigned in Iowa, both with and without running mate Sarah Palin, as recently as Saturday.

"It does not make much sense to me," said J. Ann Selzer, who conducts the Des Moines Register's poll. "When we saw what the poll numbers were [in Iowa], we thought it's no longer a tossup state. And no one thinks it is, except the McCain campaign. It just feels, to me, undisciplined."

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McCain’s recent schedule, in fact, reads like a tour through Obama country, with visits in state after state where polls reflect double-digit polling leads for the Democratic nominee. Last Thursday and Friday, McCain was campaigning in Wisconsin, where the latest Quinnipiac University poll has Obama up 17 points. On Saturday, McCain was stumping in Iowa, where the latest RCP average has him down 13 points.

Palin campaigned across Pennsylvania last Saturday — as she and McCain did Tuesday — where a Muhlenberg College/Morning Call poll released Oct. 16 gave Obama a 16-point advantage. On Wednesday, Palin was on the hustings in New Hampshire, where the latest RCP average pegged Obama with a 10-point lead.

Terry Madonna, director of the Pennsylvania’s Franklin and Marshall College Poll, finds it “a little confusing” — if for no other reason than the expense — that McCain continues to compete so heavily in the Keystone State.

“I would not be surprised if, in the next two weeks, he doesn’t pull a Michigan in Pennsylvania,” Madonna added, “if the race does not go down into single digits.”

McCain’s campaign spent \$1.645 million advertising in Pennsylvania between Sept. 28 and Oct. 4, while he was being outspent by Obama in Ohio by about a half-million dollars, in Missouri by more than 2-to-1, in Florida by more than 3-to-1, in Virginia by about 4-to-1 and in North Carolina by more than 8-to-1, according to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, an arm of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Fabrizio urges McCain to move resources out of Pennsylvania now in order to protect the “must wins” and focus on the more competitive swing states.

“I don’t know how you pour so much money in Pennsylvania,” he said. “My guess is you can buy Nevada and Colorado for about the same amount you can buy Pennsylvania.”

A Republican familiar with McCain’s internal polling contends the campaign’s positioning in Iowa, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin is “much better” than public surveys indicate.

McCain’s campaign believes that because many of these Democratic-leaning states became competitive when McCain surged in the polls in early September following the GOP convention, they can again become competitive.

Should that become the case, Rich Beeson, the Republican National Committee’s political director, remains confident that McCain can overtake Obama on that terrain.

Beeson insists Republicans retain their traditional advantage on getting their supporters to the polls, despite Democrats’ enhanced microtargeting apparatus and Obama’s extended push to register new voters.

“Our field goal unit is still very, very good,” Beeson said, emphasizing that the RNC has been “test-driving” and refining their voter-file and microtargeting operation for more than a decade.

Mike DuHaime, the McCain campaign's political director, said there are “no plans to pull out” of any swing states or winnow down the campaign's offensive strategy.

“Every state we are competing in, we feel there is a solid chance of winning,” DuHaime said.

The McCain campaign believes that its decision to pull out of Michigan proves it is willing to make tough choices when warranted.

In Wisconsin, McCain is relying on the state's northern region including Green Bay, as well as on the state's narrow margin in recent presidential cycles; in Minnesota, the campaign is looking to the traditionally Democratic Iron Range to put it over the top. In New Hampshire, the campaign continues to view McCain's strong showings in the 2000 and 2008 primaries as evidence of solid support.

In Pennsylvania, McCain's campaign views its positioning as equal or better to Bush in the south central part of the state, in cities such as York and Lancaster. And it believes McCain is considerably more palatable to Democratic voters in southeastern Pennsylvania, particularly in the Philadelphia suburbs, than Bush was four years ago. The campaign also believes there is a large contingent of former Hillary Rodham Clinton supporters behind McCain in the state.

“We see it much closer than what we've seen publicly,” DuHaime said of the public polling in Pennsylvania.

“The Obama campaign sent the biggest surrogates you could have to Pennsylvania last weekend,” he said, noting Bill and Hillary Clinton's rally there Sunday. “So clearly [the Obama campaign doesn't] think it's locked up.”