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## Romney's challenge: Convincing GOP he can win

By Jonathan Martin

Poll after poll indicates the presidential campaign is a dead heat, but you wouldn't know it from talking to many Republican professionals. If you gave them truth serum, they would tell you they think Mitt Romney will lose.

Romney's likability gap, it turns out, extends to some members of his own party.

There are two simultaneous versions of the White House race taking place right now. In the public eye, Romney is consolidating the GOP behind his candidacy. Most all the holdouts - including House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell - are getting behind the presumptive nominee and making the case for his candidacy.

But under the table, there is pervasive pessimism among Republicans about Romney's prospects this fall. It's apparent in rampant discussions about which Republicans will run in 2016 - talk that obviously presupposes a loss in November - and it's downright glaring in private conversations with GOP officials on Capitol Hill and in consulting shops across Washington.

And the skepticism about Romney isn't just a Beltway phenomenon. Rank-and-file Republican voters are also uncertain he can win, though it's the chattering class that is most bearish.

The bed wetters, as White House adviser David Plouffe would call them, may ultimately be proven wrong or change their tune altogether. Polling patterns have a remarkable way of altering the conventional wisdom among insiders and Romney is enjoying some success on that front in recent days.

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But he recognizes the danger posed by the downcast assessments of his candidacy and is taking steps to reach out to Republican opinion shapers and activists. Among his first tasks as nominee-in-waiting is to convince members of his own party that he can win.

Some of that strategy is playing out in a very public way. There's a reason why, even after he's locked up the nomination, the former Massachusetts governor is still doing talk radio appearances on the Breitbart network and Laura Ingraham show as well as appearing on [Fox News](#), where he has teed up endorsements from big name Republicans. It's the same reason why Romney is making an appearance at the RNC state chairs meeting later this week in Arizona and giving the commencement speech to the evangelical Liberty University next month.

Behind the scenes, Romney and his campaign are just as engaged in shoring up support from Republicans. Some of the outreach is done by the candidate himself. Romney, for example, phoned Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels to secure the Hoosier's endorsement. And he met with a small group of conservative elites, including Ed Meese and David Keene, when he was in Washington for a speech earlier this month.

Much of the stroking, though, is being done by Romney's advisers, who have divided up responsibilities. His point man with movement conservatives, Peter Flaherty, called evangelical leaders Tony Perkins and Gary Bauer within hours of Rick Santorum's withdrawal from the race last week.

Ed Gillespie, the former RNC chairman who has become a senior adviser, has spent considerable time on the phone during his first weeks aboard the campaign as well as sitting down with a mix of establishment and conservative Republicans who were lukewarm about Romney.

Former Minnesota Gov Tim Pawlenty, a frequent Romney surrogate, has been helping to bring the GOP governors in line.

Romney's top policy hand, Lanhee Chen, has held two conference calls in just in the past month with congressional policy aides, including the top issues staffers for Boehner and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor.

Zac Moffatt, Romney's digital director, has been wooing conservative bloggers.

Ron Kaufman, the longtime Romney confidante and Massachusetts Republican committeeman, is the liaison with

members of the RNC and is in Arizona this week working the party leaders.

"The campaign is very focused on doing this sort of outreach in a very methodical way and we'll do it through Election Day," said Romney adviser Kevin Madden.

Some of the grumbling is from conservatives who were sympathetic to Romney rivals in the primary and believe firmly that the party will have a difficult time beating President Barack Obama with a less-than-pure nominee.

Asked why a conservative-dominated party keeps nominating establishment candidates for president, Perkins carped: "Maybe Republicans don't like to win?"

Privately, some Republicans are dispirited because their Mormon, mandate-backing standard-bearer gives away two lines of attack against Obama - that he's an exotic figure who pushed through a massive health care overhaul.

Tucker Carlson, the conservative commentator and editor-in-chief of the *The Daily Caller*, said publicly what many on the right are thinking at a speech last week to the **Cato Institute**.

"There are only two people in world history who have signed laws containing an individual mandate," said Carlson, according to *The Washington Examiner*. "One's the president, the other's running against him. So somehow, out of 315 million Americans, the Republican Party managed to find the one guy who couldn't run on Obamacare."

Some Republicans are making the best of it by noting that the party's conservative base will keep Romney's feet to the fire and asserting that he's largely a vessel.

"This is not Taft-Eisenhower or Goldwater-Rockefeller," said anti-tax leader Grover Norquist, who said he feels better now about winning than he did a month ago. "We're not nominating a candidate to tell the party what direction to go. All of them ran as Reagan Republicans. We know what we're doing and who we are - we just want a guy to sign the bills."

Put simply, "We're electing a coach of a team that knows the plays," Norquist said.

John McLaughlin, a longtime GOP pollster, lamented some of the self-inflicted wounds from the primary - "He's been running for president for five years and he hasn't released his taxes?" - and said Romney had to craft a concise message.

"They have the opportunity to win because the country is in serious economic trouble," McLaughlin said. "What's missing is Romney has yet to develop a message of hope and confidence that he can pull America out of its decline."

What's notable is the degree of pessimism from establishment Republicans, the crowd that was deathly afraid of Rick Santorum or Newt Gingrich becoming the standard-bearer this fall. It may be a temporary affliction, but it seems as though the fatalism that traditionally marked the Democratic Party has taken hold in the GOP.

"You go through two cycles when incumbents win and people will talk themselves into thinking it's historically inevitable," said *Weekly Standard* Editor William Kristol.

Kristol was a relentless Romney critic during the primary but now chuckles at his own bullishness about November.

"I was not a big Romney booster, but now I'm more confident he can win than many of his supporters," he said.

Part of the skepticism over Romney's chances owes to the simple facts of Obama's incumbency and an improving economy.

But there are other factors, most notably a primary that not only became heated but that also shined a light on Romney's vulnerabilities.

"With the primary process, he was not able to communicate a consistent message that would contrast him with the president," said Florida GOP Chairman Lenny Curry. "Even within his own party, he was getting hit for being a job creator."

Curry said Republicans would rally around Romney in the coming weeks, but acknowledged "it's going to take some catching up."

"Obama has the advantage just because of history, money and incumbency," observed the Floridian.

What particularly worries Republican operatives, though, is that the weaknesses the primary revealed may be fundamental - and not fixable.

It's not just that Romney's Bain Capital background got an airing, but that his string of gaffes demonstrated how

difficult it will be for him to connect to the general electorate.

"There doesn't seem to be anything that the campaign or he can do to correct the fact that he's an awkward guy," said a GOP strategist. "There's no solution to that."

A second Republican operative noted that the primary was also damaging to Romney in the view of the political class because of their "dim view of the field."

"It was the fact that it took him so long to sort it out," said the Republican. "As it went along, you could feel the discouragement."

Romney loyalists say that the griping from the Beltway crowd owes not only to lingering primary issues but something more personal - they feel unloved.

"The last two presidential campaigns have been run out of Washington and this campaign is being run out of Boston, in part by the next generation of operatives," a Romney insider said.

The cool feelings toward the all-but-certain GOP nominee, however, are not limited to the political class.

A Tampa focus group earlier in the week of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents was unanimous when asked whether they agreed with one participant who urged Romney to not "shade [his] answer to a question that matches what you think the particular audience you're in front of wants to hear."

Nine of the 12 members of the focus group, sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, said they were definitely or probably voting for Romney - but only half of the group said they thought he was going to win.

The most common lament: they just don't know who Romney is at his core and are uncertain that he's a "regular guy," as one participant put it.

The good news for Romney is that the members of the group were anxious to learn more about the Republican and were open to being persuaded.