

Nation

Between the Lines

By Mark Halperin

► **President Barack Obama's** lead has widened slightly after the conventions in Tampa and Charlotte, rattling Republicans ... ► Beyond the poll numbers, the causes of near panic are many ... ► **Mitt Romney's** team failed to produce a tight, winning convention (symbolized by the Clint Eastwood spectacle and the absence of any star speaker who wowed like **Bill Clinton**) ... ► Romney's glaring

omission of the U.S. troops serving abroad in his Tampa acceptance speech added to GOP worries

about Obama's national-security edge with voters ... ► A series of small errors and confusing statements from Veep hopeful **Paul Ryan** has heightened concerns about his readiness for his upcoming debate with **Joe Biden** ... ► Republicans recognize they may have to carve a path back to the White House without the electoral votes of Ohio, Michigan or Pennsylvania—the political equivalent of drawing an inside straight ...

► Conservatives like **Rush Limbaugh**, **Laura Ingraham** and a bevy of Fox Newsies ringing the alarm have suggested that the doubts they expressed last year about Romney's ability to defeat Obama are coming true ... ► Boston is bristling at the avalanche of suggestions from the peanut gallery about tactics, strategy and performance ...

► Romney's aides acknowledge they are going through a tough stretch but believe their renewed television ad campaign, the upcoming debates and a still tepid economy will soon restore the race to a virtual tie ... ► Meanwhile, senior Democrats say the President is overdue for a bad news cycle or two himself, and if Romney can take advantage of it, the challenger will be right back in the game and these early-September GOP worries will transform from a decisive moment into one more ephemeral wrinkle.

WORD OF THE WEEK

whip•flop

n. A flip-flop so quick, it gives you whiplash

See: Hours after Mitt Romney said on Meet the Press that there were parts of Obamacare he liked, including coverage for pre-existing conditions, a Romney aide explained that he was not advocating a federal insurance mandate. Bay Area Council's senior policy adviser Micah Weinberg coined the phrase on Twitter



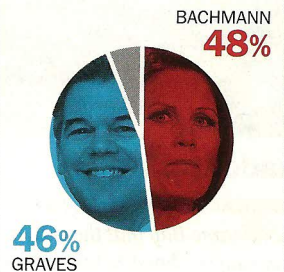
HANTAVIRUS



Visitors who have contracted the deadly, rodent-borne virus at Yosemite National Park this year as of Sept. 6. Three have died. Park officials have closed some campsites

For Bachmann, Trouble at Home

MINNESOTA She's fresh off a presidential run and the reigning queen of Congress's Tea Party caucus, but Representative Michele Bachmann is no lock for re-election. The well-funded firebrand is nearly tied with novice Democratic challenger Jim Graves in Minnesota's newly redrawn 6th District; a recent Democratic poll found Graves winning independents by 15 points. Upshot: for the first time in three terms, Bachmann's seat isn't safe.



SALTON STENCH Southern California stinks—and air-quality investigators have traced the rotten-egg odor to dead fish in the 376-sq.-mi. Salton Sea

CLINTON, LIMBAUGH, INGRAHAM, BACHMANN, MOUSE: GETTY IMAGES (5); SALTON SEA: NICK UT—AP; GRAVES: COURTESY JIM GRAVES; WHIPFLOP: ILLUSTRATION BY BROWN BIRD DESIGN FOR TIME