

Obama's grim performance in Wednesday's debate was the final straw for many swing voters, reports Christina Lamb from Denver

AS A financial consultant, Julie Arden is used to making tough decisions. As a swing voter and mother of four, she finds herself torn.

Her son is gay and she supports same-sex marriage, which should make her a Democrat. But over the past four years, like many Americans, Arden, 51, has watched her family income dwindle.

"Earnings have gone down and costs up," she said. "Petrol has rocketed; grocery prices are ridiculous. We've stopped taking vacations and started a [vegetable] garden. We've three children at university, which is a struggle, and one due to graduate from Columbia, and one of his friends have jobs."

She added: "I've told my son I'll fight with him for gay marriage, but before you can do that you have to be able to get people working."

Her friend Marie Rentsios, 48, has been out of work for five months. Her daughter uses birth control pills for medical reasons which the Republicans think should not be covered by health insurance. But she worries that the costs of Barack Obama's healthcare legislation for employers will damage her husband's restaurant business.

"I happen to be Greek and just came back from there and know how bad it is when government spending gets out of control," she said.

Both women have switched their votes back and forth between parties. They were leaning towards the Republicans and when they watched last week's presidential debate on television, Mitt Romney's unexpectedly strong performance clinched it.

"We thought Romney killed Obama," Arden said. "All the planets aligned and the Mitt we were hoping was there came out. Obama should know if you can't lead a debate you can't lead a country."

Middle-class suburban women in swing states such as Colorado are the pivotal voters both sides are desperately trying to win over in an election that suddenly looks too close to call.

In a Quinnipiac poll the day before the debate, Obama was ahead among women voters by an astonishing 18 points. Women generally find Obama more likable than Romney. They have been turned off by Republicans by the party's so-called war on women, with its opposition to government funding for contraception and abortion even after rape.

But David Gergen, a political consultant who has advised four presidents, said Romney was clearly targeting women in his debate performance.

"The most graceful thing he did was subtly make more people — more women — feel more comfortable with him, that he wasn't sort of extreme, that he had an understanding and was empathetic."

Romney's main hope of attracting women voters is by appealing to their wallets. Since Obama took office in 2009, average incomes for the

Desperate housewives wowed by fizzing Romney

Marathon man v gaffe machine

One is a deer hunter obsessed by extreme workouts and nicknamed the Brain of Congress; the other is renowned for his verbosity, for eating large helpings of pie and for giving slobbering kisses to strangers on the campaign trail.

This week Paul Ryan and Joe Biden go head to head in Kentucky, the bourbon capital, in the only vice-presidential debate before next month's election. It is expected to be a far starker contrast than that of their running mates last week.

The pressure is on for Ryan to match Mitt Romney's commanding performance in the first presidential debate, and for Biden to repair some of the damage done by President Barack Obama's underwhelming effort. Obama's political adviser, David Axelrod, got the first jab in by calling Ryan "Marathon Man", a reference to his claim — recently exposed as false — that he had run a marathon in less than three hours. Even so, Republicans expect

the quick-thinking Ryan, 42, to run rings around the former senator, 71.

"Biden's a gaffe machine," said Brett O'Donnell, a Republican strategist who was Romney's debate coach in 2008. The Veep, as he is known, was caught on microphone saying "big f***** deal" when Obama signed his healthcare policy into law and last week he delighted Republicans by saying the middle class had been "buried for the last four years".

In May he announced his support for gay marriage, forcing Obama to follow suit months before he had planned to. Afterwards the president said Biden "probably got out a little bit over his skis".

The two men get on well, however, and a new book by Bob Woodward suggests Biden has considerable influence on policy. On the campaign trail, Biden's working-class roots in a Pennsylvania Irish Catholic family are useful for appealing to blue-collar workers.

middle 20% of American households have dropped 4%.

Despite promises that he would build prosperity from the bottom up, inequality has grown under his administration. The poorest 20% have seen incomes fall by more than 7%. In real terms, they are lower now than they have been at any time since 1985.

Nowhere is this battle more obvious than in Rentsios's home county of Arapahoe, one of two suburbs of Denver, along with Jefferson, that must be won to secure victory in Colorado. This is a new swing state. It was once solidly Republican, but Obama won here by nine percentage points in 2008. Hispanics now make up a fifth of the population and overwhelmingly vote Democrat.

"The state has grown a lot and as it has grown it has become more Democratic," said Seth Masket, professor of politics at Denver University. "We've had a lot of people moving in from the West Coast and a lot of Latinos, to a point where the presidential vote is very much up for grabs."

So important is Colorado that the Obama team has set up 59 field offices and the president has made 10 campaign visits. Romney has made seven. The television is saturated with political advertisements, with Democrats outspending the Republicans.

"Arapahoe is one of the great bellwether counties," Masket said. "It's not an exaggeration

to say this looks like a year in which how this county votes is how the state will vote is how the nation will vote.

"This is where the persuasion campaign is concentrated and one of the great persuadable areas is suburban women, particularly mums."

To try to win them over, the Obama advertisements focus on social issues. "I think Romney would definitely drag us back," says a woman in one ad, referring to Romney's pledge to cut off funding for the Planned Parenthood federation.

Romney's ads focus on the economy and jobs, warning: "The US can't afford four more years of this."

"President Obama says he's

creating jobs," says the narrator in the latest commercial. "But he's really creating debt."

Such arguments resonate with Angela Lawson, an Arapahoe mother who supported Obama last time. "I was mesmerised by what he was supposed to be but, as he got into his presidency, I feel like my middle-class stature dwindled and in four years I've had no rise while food prices have got higher, as have gas prices and energy. I'm living pay cheque to pay cheque."

For her the debate, watched by 67m people, was the last straw. "Obama was so meek," she said. "He just didn't seem to care."

Not only did Obama fail to

answer Romney's points but he constantly looked down, scribbling on a piece of paper. He was "there in body but not spirit", wrote Eugene Robinson, a Washington Post columnist.

It has been suggested Obama was overconfident and taken back by a different Romney from the one he expected; rusty, having not debated for four years; uncomfortable without a Teleprompter; or uncertain about how to react.

"His biggest asset is his likability and the strategy was to take the high road," one campaign adviser said.

It was the first big mistake in an effective campaign that seemed to have set the president on course for victory.

An insiders' account on the Politico website claimed Obama knew he had messed up the moment he walked out of the debate but did not realise how bad it had been until he watched it and saw his grim demeanor.

While Team Romney was sending out triumphant emails proclaiming "victory in sight" and boasting of one of its best fundraising nights, there was panic in Obama's Chicago HQ.

Angry donors and supporters jammed the phone lines while Obama's team quickly put out statements denouncing Romney's debate claims as lies. They argued that the challenger had yet to explain how he would simultaneously cut

taxes, maintain the defence budget and reduce the deficit.

Both men went straight back on the campaign trail, Romney to press his advantage and Obama to recapture his mojo.

An aggressive Obama was almost unrecognisable from the night before. "I met this very spirited fellow who claimed to be Mitt Romney," he told a rally in Denver. "But it couldn't have been Mitt Romney because the real Mitt Romney has been running around the country for the last year promising \$5 trillion in tax cuts that favour the wealthy... The fellow on stage said he didn't know anything about that."

Republicans, who had been tearing their hair out over their candidate, were exuberant. "This was knockout," said Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York. "I've been to many presidential debates and haven't seen one so one-sided since Kennedy-Nixon."

At a meeting of conservatives in a hotel at Denver airport the next morning, Senator Marco Rubio was cheered when he walked in and cast aside the Teleprompter. "What's this?" he asked. "Is President Obama coming?" He was followed by Romney, making an unscheduled appearance and almost swaggering with excitement.

Obama enjoyed some relief on Friday when the unemployment rate dropped to 7.8%, the lowest since he took office, although there were allega-

tions that the jobs report had been deliberately skewed.

"Unbelievable numbers," tweeted Jack Welch, the former boss of General Electric. "These Chicago guys will do anything... Can't debate so change numbers."

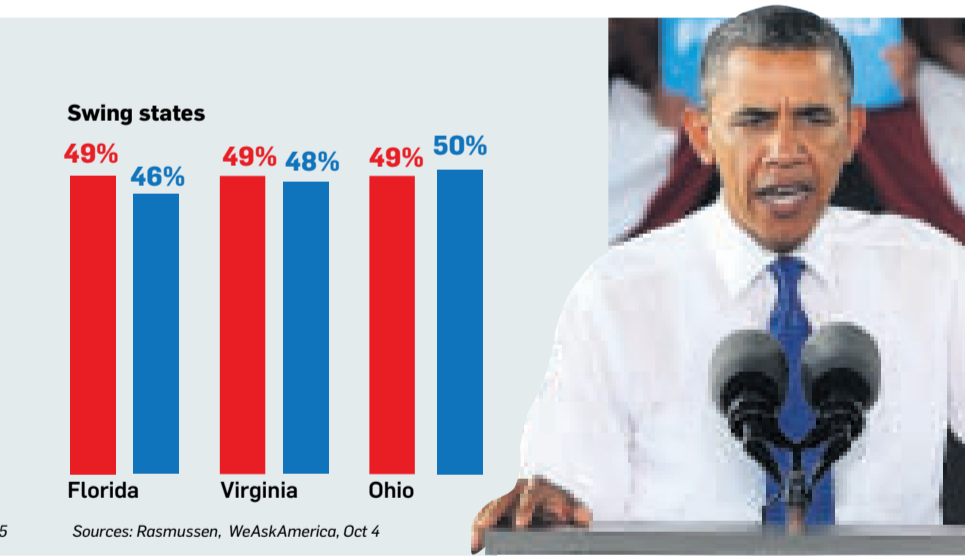
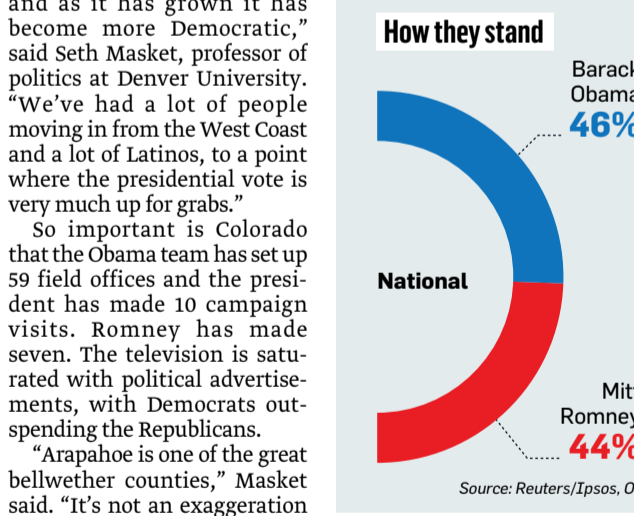
The first polls since the debate showed the damage had been done, however. Obama's national lead has shrunk from five points to two. More importantly, Romney has moved ahead in the key swing states of Florida and Virginia and gone from eight points to just one behind in Ohio.

Steve McMahon, a Democratic strategist who has worked on three presidential campaigns, points out that incumbents often do poorly in the first debate but this rarely matters. He recalls how John Kerry outperformed George W Bush in 2004 before going on to lose the election.

"Once Obama gets his sea legs, things will change," he said. "But there's no question that Romney has shifted the trajectory. The campaign was slipping away from him, everybody could see it. He's stopped the slide and we now have a race, but I don't know if he reversed it."

IN NEWS REVIEW

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ANDREW SULLIVAN, P4



Chavez defiant as 'lowlife pig' dares Venezuela to oust him

Girish Gupta
Caracas

WITH his opponent snapping at his heels, Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's populist president, may come to regret equipping his country with one of the most sophisticated electronic voting systems in the world.

In the old days, it was easy to tinker with ballot boxes — and Latin America's strongmen often did. But Chavez, in power since 1999 and with no desire to relinquish control of the government or the nation's vast oil revenues, might have to consider more muscular means if he is to avoid being booted out of office in today's election.

Fears of what might happen in Venezuela should Chavez lose have been growing since Henrique Capriles, his rival, unified a hitherto unimpressive opposition and persuaded many of the country's poor — Chavez's core supporters — that it is time for the country to move on.

Opinion polls are widely divergent, with some showing Chavez, 58, with a slim lead

and others giving the advantage to Capriles, 40.

With media, oil money and mobs at his service, Chavez clearly has the advantage. Although many Venezuelans seem fed up with their troubles, including one of the highest murder rates in the world, government workers live in fear of losing their jobs if they do not vote for the leader.

"The government has sown this fear," Capriles said, adding that the reluctance of people to speak their mind skewed opinion polls in favour of Chavez.

"If we can overcome the fear, I believe we can win this election by a million votes."

As the campaign entered its final days, the charismatic Chavez seemed to have lost none of the dynamism for which he is famous despite a battle with cancer and long periods in which he vanished from public life to undergo treatment in Cuba.

Jumping onto the stage at rallies, singing songs and playing an electric guitar, he inspired an almost religious fervour among his supporters.

"Long live the rain," he shrieked in a closing rally on Thursday when hundreds of thousands of people braved a thunderstorm to hear him speak in the capital, Caracas.

Earlier this year, as his motorcade headed to the airport for treatment in Cuba, he credited God for his survival of cancer. "I dreamt a while ago of Christ who came and said, 'Chavez, rise, it is not time to die, it's time to live'. Inde-

pendent of my personal destiny, this revolution already has its own momentum and will not be stopped," he said.

It is hard to imagine him meekly surrendering power and abandoning the "Bolivarian revolution" — which takes its name from Simon Bolivar, his hero, who liberated several Latin American countries from Spanish rule in the 19th century.

Chavez and his cronies have

taken over all sectors of life in Venezuela, and images of the leader beneath his trademark red beret seem to be emblazoned on every wall.

His face dominates television screens day and night as, in a manner reminiscent of Fidel Castro, he harangues his countrymen, often for hours on end, on subjects from agriculture to "Yankee imperialism".

In one speech last year he raised the possibility that

Washington had developed a secret, cancer-inducing technology that it had used to target enemies such as himself and other left-wing Latin American leaders.

Another conspiracy theory popular among his opponents has it that Chavez's illness might be a myth designed to distract the public's attention from the country's problems and to win sympathy. If so, it does not appear to be working.

Complaining not only of rising crime, but regular power blackouts and runaway inflation, many Venezuelans have had enough.

"If socialism's so good, why isn't the whole world socialist?" asked Cesar Jimenez, a cobbler drinking a beer in his shop in a slum overlooking Caracas. Jimenez said he had always voted in the past for Chavez. This time he is leaning towards his rival.

With good looks and an easy-going manner, Capriles has had no difficulty in winning over large crowds and is particularly popular among women. He has turned up at rallies on his motorbike and played basketball in the back streets with young supporters.

Chavez does not appreciate the threat to his rule. "We're going to pulverise you," he announced with characteristic bluntness at one point. "You're a lowlife pig."

In what appeared to be an effort to intimidate the opposition, two Capriles activists were killed last Saturday while a third remains in a critical condition.

Shots have been fired at other opposition activists, stones have been thrown and vehicles set alight. Capriles has blamed the president.

"It is you [Chavez] who want this scenario," Capriles said last month, "you who want to spread fear, you who want Venezuelans to continue fighting each other."

However, many regard Chavez as a hero for using more of the country's oil wealth than his predecessors to help the masses. In Ciudad Caribia, a flagship city built for the poor just outside Caracas, residents are in no doubt who they will vote for.

"I vote for the president," declared Angelica Perez, 33, "because he is the only one who has done anything for Venezuela."

Chavez, for his part, has never sounded anything but supremely confident. Among his memorable sayings is: "It would be easier for a donkey to pass through the eye of a needle than for the opposition to win the elections."

Talk your way out of this, Presidente, Profile, page 25



Hugo Chavez is in a tough fight with Henrique Capriles, right, who has had no difficulty winning over large crowds



ARIANA CUBILLOS/MIRAFLORES PALACE

BREXAN SNYDER/REX
Mitt Romney's performance in the debate, watched by Denver students, below, has put his campaign back on track

