

Some in G.O.P. Express Worry Over '08 Hopes

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WASHINGTON, April 10 — Republican leaders across the country say they are growing increasingly anxious about their party's chances of holding the White House, citing public dissatisfaction with President Bush, the political fallout from the war in Iraq and the problems their leading presidential candidates are having generating enthusiasm among conservative voters.

In interviews on Tuesday, the Republicans said they were concerned about signs of despondency among party members and fund-raisers, reflected in polls and the Democratic fund-raising advantage in the first quarter of the year. Many party leaders expressed worry that the party's presidential candidates faced a tough course without some fundamental shift in the political dynamic.

"My level of concern and dismay is very, very high," said Mickey Edwards, a Republican former congressman from Oklahoma who is now a lecturer in public policy at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton. "It's not that I have any particular problem with the people who are running for the Republican nomination. I just don't know how they can run hard enough or fast enough to escape the gravitational pull of the Bush administration."

"We don't have any candidates in

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the field now who are compelling," Mr. Edwards said, adding: "It's going to be a tough year for us."

The Republicans made their comments a day before Senator John McCain of Arizona, once the party's presumed front-runner, is to give a speech intended to revitalize his troubled candidacy. In the speech, focused on Iraq, Mr. McCain will warn against making policy about the war based on "the temporary favor of the latest of public opinion poll" and assert that the administration's strategy for securing Baghdad is the right one, according to excerpts released Tuesday by his campaign. The other two leading presidential contenders are Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York and Mitt Romney of Massachusetts.

But Republicans around the country said the war was only one of the challenges facing Mr. McCain and the other candidates. Rick Beltram, a Republican county leader in Spartanburg, S.C., said that he found evidence of Republican despair as he sought to organize support for all the candidates as they visit his state, one of the most important in the Republican nominating process.

"I would say a lot of people are not turned on because they don't see a lot of bright spots out there," Mr. Beltram said. "Home prices are going down. Gas prices are going up. And the war keeps dragging on."

Fergus Cullen, the New Hampshire Republican Party chairman, said that a smart candidate could turn adversity to his advantage by figuring out a way to politely turn the page from the Bush era. "The situation with President Bush is allowing everyone to turn to a new campaign, and that is probably an asset to all the candidates," said Mr. Cullen.

Katon Dawson, the party chairman in South Carolina, said the candidates were facing a potentially polarizing fight among themselves, though he said he was confident the party would recover from any internal damage it suffered.

"We don't do well until we have a common enemy," Mr. Dawson said. "Right now, our enemy is ourselves."

Shawn Steele, the former Republican Party chairman in California, said the candidates were being dragged down by their associations with Mr. Bush as well as with the war. He and other Republicans argued that the candidates were in a difficult position as they tried to distance themselves from a president who is having so many difficulties, while at the same time not alienating

Republican base voters and donors who remain loyal to Mr. Bush and his foreign policy.

"It's a dying administration," Mr. Steele said. "There's a fatigue factor and there's a rubbing-off when it's not very smart to be closely associated with such low ratings."

Several Republican officials said one sign of the party's spirits was the spike of interest created when Fred Thompson, a former senator from Tennessee and an actor who has not run for national office before, signaled that he might enter the race. He is not the only Republican waiting in the wings to see if any or all of these candidates falter: Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker, has said he might enter the race later this year; Tommy G. Thompson, a former governor of Wisconsin got in last week; and Senator Chuck R. Hagel of Nebraska, a critic of the war, has not ruled out running.

Several Republicans said that while they were apprehensive about

'It's going to be a tough year for us,' a Republican said.

the state of play right now, they had by no means given up. Several said they took hope from the fact that hypothetical polls matching the party's leading presidential contenders with the Democratic presidential contenders — Mr. McCain and Mr. Giuliani of New York versus Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Senator Barack Obama of Illinois — showed the Republicans with an edge, even as so-called generic polls showed Americans were significantly more likely to say they would vote for an unnamed Democrat over an unnamed Republican next year.

Frank J. Fahrenkopf Jr., a former head of the Republican National Committee, said the party needed to move away from criticizing Democrats and associate itself with one winning issue if it is to have any hopes of holding on to the White House in 2008.

"What Republicans have to do here in the next year is do something other than complain about the Democrats," Mr. Fahrenkopf said. "What they have to do is take an issue — and I happen to believe the issue is immigration — they have to push very strongly for it."

Still, even the most optimistic Republican officials said they thought Democrats were in a stronger position in a presidential race now than at any time since 1996. They noted polls showing that an increasing number of Americans are calling themselves Democrats, as well as the fund-raising numbers from the first-quarter that showed Democrats presidential field had raised \$78 million, about \$27 million more than the Republicans.

Republican leaders pointed to a number of factors for the Republican malaise, including the perception that Mr. Giuliani, Mr. Romney and Mr. McCain were awkwardly altering their positions to appeal to conservative voters, and a general exhaustion that comes after having Republicans in power for more than eight years.

Representative Jack Kingston, a Republican from Georgia, said that the Democratic takeover of Congress and the continuing grim news from Iraq had rendered Mr. Bush nearly irrelevant.

"If he plays his cards right, he comes back to relevant," Mr. Kingston said of the president. "He is marginalized now."

Alan K. Simpson, a former Republican senator from Wyoming, said the party's presidential candidates were being whipsawed as they tried to appeal to conservative voters who have a history of strong views on issues like abortion and gay rights. "These tests are destroying the Republican Party," Mr. Simpson said.

Republican leaders said they saw little chance the party could capture the White House if conditions in Iraq do not improve noticeably over the next year.

"The war in Iraq and public opposition to it has put a pall on Republicans," said John C. Danforth, the former Republican senator from Missouri.

Representative Peter T. King, Republican of New York, said: "As long as the war appears not to be doing well, it's going to hurt Republicans."

The biggest problem, several Republicans said, is the disparity between the level of enthusiasm on display among Democrats and that on the Republican side.

"You're seeing a carryover of the energy and the enthusiasm and the momentum from the 2006 Democratic takeover," said Representative Adam H. Putnam, a Florida Republican. "Momentum is an important force in sports and politics and the momentum is clearly on their side."