While he was singing happy birthday and raising millions of dollars on Friday, the tension showed by Sunday.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- A bad stretch for Mitt Romney just got worse, and Republican insiders now are growing increasingly pessimistic about the GOP presidential nominee's chances of winning the White House.

The latest heartburn for these insiders is Romney's refusal to back down from his statement that nearly half of Americans believe they are victims dependent upon government.

After his remarks, made to donors at a private fundraiser in May, came to light in a video, the candidate defended his position - and did so again Tuesday. He told Fox News: "I know some believe that government should take from some to give to the others. I think that's an entirely foreign concept."

Publicly, Romney's campaign shrugs off the criticism. Aides say Romney will try to shift the debate back to the specifics of his vision for the country in hopes of curbing President Barack Obama's momentum before the first debate on Oct. 3 - and then seal the deal.

But, at least this week, there are doubts in GOP circles that he can prevail.

"This is a worst case scenario in some respects," Republican strategist Steve Lombardo said a day after Romney's remarks roiled the campaign. Obama has been painting Romney as an out-of-touch elitist, and Lombardo said the remarks "tend to reinforce pre-existing perception."

"Anytime that happens a campaign has to worry," Lombardo said.

The remarks were just the latest headache for Romney seven weeks before Election Day and with early voting well under way.

Romney critics and backers alike point to his misstep-filled trip abroad in July as an early signal of worry. Then came Romney's nominating convention, where Hollywood actor/director Clint Eastwood stole the show with a rambling conversation with an empty chair representing the president.

Obama's well-received convention followed. And so did a boost for the president in state and national polling.

Last week, Romney tried to use anti-American unrest in the Middle East to seize political advantage, only to be criticized for prematurely assailing the commander in chief before knowing all the facts, including that a U.S. ambassador had died. Then there were reports of infighting among his staff, and calls from Republicans for Romney to do more than just criticize Obama on the economy.

Heeding that advice, Romney began the week aiming to focus more on giving voters a better sense of what he would do as president. Then his remarks from the spring fundraiser surfaced, and he defended himself.

By Tuesday, Republicans were on edge. And some warned that Romney's road to the presidency was getting steeper.

Most of the more than a dozen GOP consultants interviewed for this story wouldn't openly discuss their concerns for fear of angering Romney's inner circle.

But there was an overwhelming sense that Romney needs to do something to shake up the race. Many Republicans said they view the upcoming debates as Romney's last chance to turn the tide - and even then it might be too late, given that a chunk of voters in key states will already have voted before the first debate.

Although they concede that the timing was bad, Romney aides insist he has nothing to apologize for. They say there is more than enough time to recover. They also point to larger polling gaps made up by Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in past elections, and to national tracking surveys that show Romney starting to recover.

Some Republicans see the same trends.

"It's been rough couple of weeks, but better for Romney to be going through a rough patch now than a month from now," said Sara Taylor Fagen, a former top political aide to President George W. Bush. "Forty-nine days is an eternity in politics, and the race remains very close."

Other Republicans fear that Romney isn't listening to advice from core staffers and is too involved in the day-to-day mechanics of the campaign, leading him to make mistakes he wouldn't otherwise make because he's not focused on his primary objective - persuading voters to back him. In GOP circles, there also are grumbles that the campaign is focused too much on the storyline of the day instead of articulating Romney's vision for the country, and that the campaign missed an opportunity to do that with a convention several said fell flat.

"It's incumbent on the Romney campaign to make it about Obama's handling of the economy," said Fergus Cullen, a former Republican Party chairman in New Hampshire. He's among the Republicans who think this is a temporary hiccup that will blow over, saying: "There are seven

weeks to go and the topic of conversation will change, literally, from day to day."

Several Republicans noted Romney's schedule of the past few days, saying he was squandering an opportunity to talk to voters in battleground states. He's spent the bulk of the week raising money across the country in states that are not competitive. His last public rally was Friday afternoon outside Cleveland.

It hasn't been an easy period for Romney on the road either.

While he was singing happy birthday and raising millions of dollars on Friday, the tension showed by Sunday.

An event scheduled for Sunday in Colorado was canceled because of a small plane crash at the Pueblo, Colo., airport near the planned rally. Then aides scrambled to respond to a Politico story filled with criticisms about the state of Romney's campaign. Immediately after giving a speech intended to signal a new strategy to right his campaign, Romney faced his latest challenge when the secretly taped-video of the May fundraiser popped up.

It dominated the campaign news for several hours before the campaign called an impromptu news conference at which Romney acknowledged that his comments were "not elegantly stated" but stood by them anyway.