



COMMENTARY TODAY

Presidential politics: It's the swing states, stupid

BY DAVID SCHULTZ

Presidential public opinion polls are perplexing. A recent Washington Post poll declared rising gas prices are sinking Barack Obama. According to the poll, his disapproval rating is 50 percent, while disapproval of his handling of gas prices stands at 65 percent. Overall disapproval on the handling of the economy is at 59 percent. Similarly, a New York Times survey found a crash in Obama's approval and a sudden rise in disapproval, reversing fortunes from just a few weeks prior. Other polls find that in head-to-head contests with Mitt Romney, the two are in a statistical dead heat.



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We should ignore all of these polls — not simply because they are snapshots in time more than eight months before the November elections but because they are national opinion polls reflecting aggregate opinion across the country. As Florida 2000 taught us, one can win the popular vote in a presidential election (as Al Gore did) but still lose the presidency in the Electoral College. What matters most is winning 270 electoral votes. The presidency is a battle not across 50 states but in 50 states.

What complicates the race to 270 is that with the exception of Maine and Nebraska, the remaining 48 states plus the District of Columbia award their electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. Whichever candidate wins a plurality of the popular vote in a particular state wins all of its electoral votes. Thus the general election is both about winning states and amassing delegates.

Why is all of this important? Simply put, the presidential race is over in 36 states that are either reliably Democratic or reliably Republican. No one seriously thinks a Republican is going to win New York, and even though Romney is Massachusetts' former governor, neither he nor any other Republican has a prayer of winning there in November. Conversely, even though Romney recently proved unable to prevail in GOP primaries in Alabama and Mississippi, the good news for him and Republicans is that no Democrat is going to win there. The race for the presidency is simply over in these states; Democrats in Texas and Republicans in California might as well do something else besides casting presidential votes in November.

Obama is reasonably assured of winning California (55 electoral votes), Connecticut (7), Delaware (3), Hawaii (4), Illinois (20), Maine (4), Maryland (10), Massachusetts (11), New Jersey (14), New York (29), Oregon (7), Rhode Island (4), Vermont (3), Washington state (12) and Washington, D.C. (3). And despite protests from Republicans that Minnesota (10) is competitive, that is a fairy tale, especially this year when the constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage

(and, perhaps, an additional measure to add a right-to-work question to the November ballot) will backfire on Republicans and deliver progressives to the polls. Thus, Obama starts with 15 states (plus D.C.) and 196 electoral votes.

Conversely, Romney or any other Republican nominee is reasonably assured of winning Alabama (9), Alaska (3), Arkansas (6), Georgia (16), Idaho (4), Kansas (6), Kentucky (8), Louisiana (8), Mississippi (6), Montana (3), Nebraska (5), North Dakota (3), Oklahoma (7), South Carolina (9), South Dakota (3), Tennessee (11), Texas (38), Utah (6), West Virginia (5) and Wyoming (3). Moreover, it was luck in 2008 that Obama won Indiana (11) and that is not in the cards this year. This is a total of 21 states and 170 electoral votes.

This means a total of 14 states, with 172 electoral votes, are potentially in play. These swing states will determine the outcome of the election and within them, swing voters — roughly 10 to 15 percent of the electorate — will make the difference. Thus, the battle for the presidency is really over what a handful of swing voters do in 14 swing states. These states are Arizona (11), Colorado (9), Florida (29), Iowa (6), Michigan (16), Missouri (10), Nevada (6), New Hampshire (4), New Mexico (5), North Carolina (15), Ohio (15), Pennsylvania (20), Virginia (13) and Wisconsin (10).

Now some of the states are debatable as swing. It is a long shot for Democrats to win Arizona even with a strong Hispanic turnout. It was also a stretch for them to win Virginia and North Carolina in 2008, and it will be even more difficult for them in 2012. In hopes of winning North Carolina, Democrats are holding their convention in Charlotte. But there is no evidence that there is a convention bump; Minnesota's hosting of the 2008

Republican National Convention is the most recent case in point.

Similarly, Republicans consistently see Pennsylvania as one that they can win, but the Keystone State, as well as Michigan, remains more Democratic than Republican. The last time the GOP won Pennsylvania was in 1984 with Ronald Reagan. In the case of Michigan, Republicans' decision to run against the auto bailout seems to be a losing strategy. Thus, the original 14 state list could be reduced to nine, leaving Obama with 226 electoral votes, and a Republican nominee with 211. This leaves 97 electoral votes that will clearly be contested.

But for the sake of argument, stay with the original 14 swing states. What

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will motivate choices among the swing voters in these 14 states? Consider who these voters are and the issues that concern them: They are the unemployed, struggling middle class affected by the economy and unemployment; those affected by rising gas prices; and moderate women worried about recent debates over reproductive rights and birth control. Potentially these groups and issues overlap, making it difficult to decide which is the most important or will tip the balance in the election.

But assume for a moment that this presidential election is similar to many others in that it is an economic referendum on the incumbent — then it is the economy that is the main issue. How is the economy doing in these swing states? As the table here indicates, it is a mixed picture.

Let's do a rating system. Look at the unemployment rate in terms of being above 7 percent or below. Except for

FDR and Reagan, no incumbent has won re-election with an unemployment rate greater than 7 percent.

So: Assign one point for the president if the rate is below 7 percent, and one point for the Republican nominee if it is above 7 percent.

Do the same for median household income (\$50,599).

Finally, give Obama one point if his popular vote margin in 2008 was greater than 5 percent, give the Republican nominee one point if John McCain won by more than 5 percent, and award no points to either side if the margin was less than 5 percent.

Thus, in the case of Ohio, its median income is below the national average (one point for the Republicans), its unemployment is above 7 percent (one point for Republicans), and Obama's margin of victory was less than 5 percent (zero points). Total them up and the sum is +2 for Republicans. Florida comes in as dead even, as does New Mexico — true swing states. Michigan and

Pennsylvania are swings that slightly favor Republicans, with Colorado and Nevada slightly in the Obama camp.

Assume for the sake of argument all of the states break in the direction of the rating system. Obama would pick up an additional six states and 48 electoral votes, giving him a total of 244. A Republican nominee would pick up six states and 90 electoral votes, for a total of 260. Two states, Florida and New Mexico, with a total of 34 electoral votes, would then determine the winner.

Of course this system is not flawless. As noted above, Michigan still seems ripe for Obama to capture again if the auto bailout is the issue. Slide this state to him and subtract it from the GOP. Conversely, Virginia seems out of reach given its more moderate to conservative swing voter base. Subtract it from Obama and give to the Republican nominee. Do the same for Pennsylvania. This gives an adjusted total of 267 electoral votes for Obama and 237 for the Republican. Finally, assume New Mexico breaks for Obama because of the large Hispanic vote but that Florida goes Republican because of the economy. This would leave Obama with 272 electoral votes to the Republican 266. Obama wins in this scenario, but barely.

Additionally, the rating system misses issues such as how passionate the base is in voting for the party nominee or how other events could alter the electoral landscape. But overall the picture is clear: As of now, the national polls are truly meaningless thanks to their failure to capture what is happening in a handful of crucial swing states that will decide the 2012 presidential election.

Swing state comparison

State	Med. Household Income (\$)	Unemploy. Rate	2008 Winner/Margin	Total Points	Electoral Votes
Arizona	47,093	8.7	McCain + 8.52	Republican +3	11
Colorado	59,669	7.8	Obama + 8.95	Obama +1	9
Florida	45,350	9.6	Obama + 2.82	neutral 0	29
Iowa	50,504	5.4	Obama + 9.53	Obama +2	6
Michigan	47,871	9	Obama + 16.47	Republican +1	16
Missouri	47,460	7.5	McCain + 0	Republican +2	10
Nevada	53,082	12.7	Obama + 12.49	Obama +1	6
New Hampshire	66,303	5.2	Obama + 9.61	Obama +3	4
New Mexico	43,998	7	Obama + 15.13	neutral 0	5
North Carolina	43,275	10.2	Obama + 0.33	Republican +2	15
Ohio	46,752	7.7	Obama + 4.59	Republican +2	18
Pennsylvania	49,826	7.6	Obama + 10.35	Republican +1	20
Virginia	61,544	5.8	Obama + 6.3	Obama +3	13
Wisconsin	51,484	6.9	Wisconsin + 13.9	Obama +3	10

