The Presidential Election I: The Electoral College

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POL 106: The Presidency

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Outline

1. The electoral college: nuts & bolts
2. The electoral college in practice
3. Electoral college inversions
4. Who benefits from the electoral college?
5. What's the alternative?

The Design of the Electoral College

The Electoral College

- The Electoral College is the electoral system used in the US to elect the president
- No other country in the world uses this system
- This is a plurality winner-take-all electoral system at the state level
- Every state has electoral votes equal to its number of senators (2) + number of House members (variable)

The Electoral College

- Each state's number of electoral votes loosely correlate with its population
- Why? House members are allocated (mostly) proportionally among the states
- However, Senate seats are wildly **malapportioned**
  - This is because different states have different ratios of voters to representatives
- The end result is that the electoral college is *less* malapportioned than the Senate, but *more* malapportioned than the House

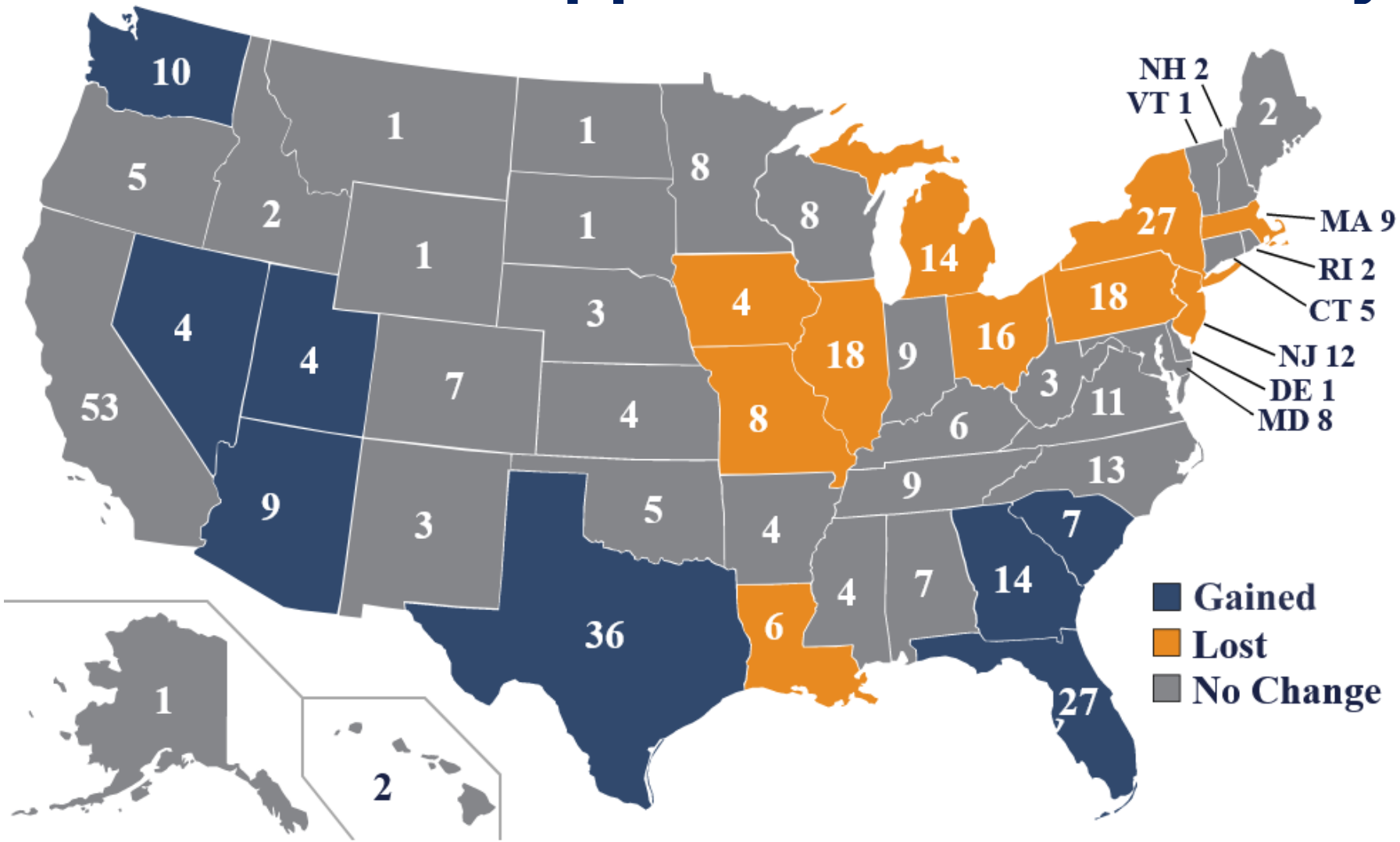
Malapportionment

- **Apportionment** is the process of dividing a country (or state) into electoral districts

- **Malapportionment** occurs when different districts have different ratios of voters to representatives

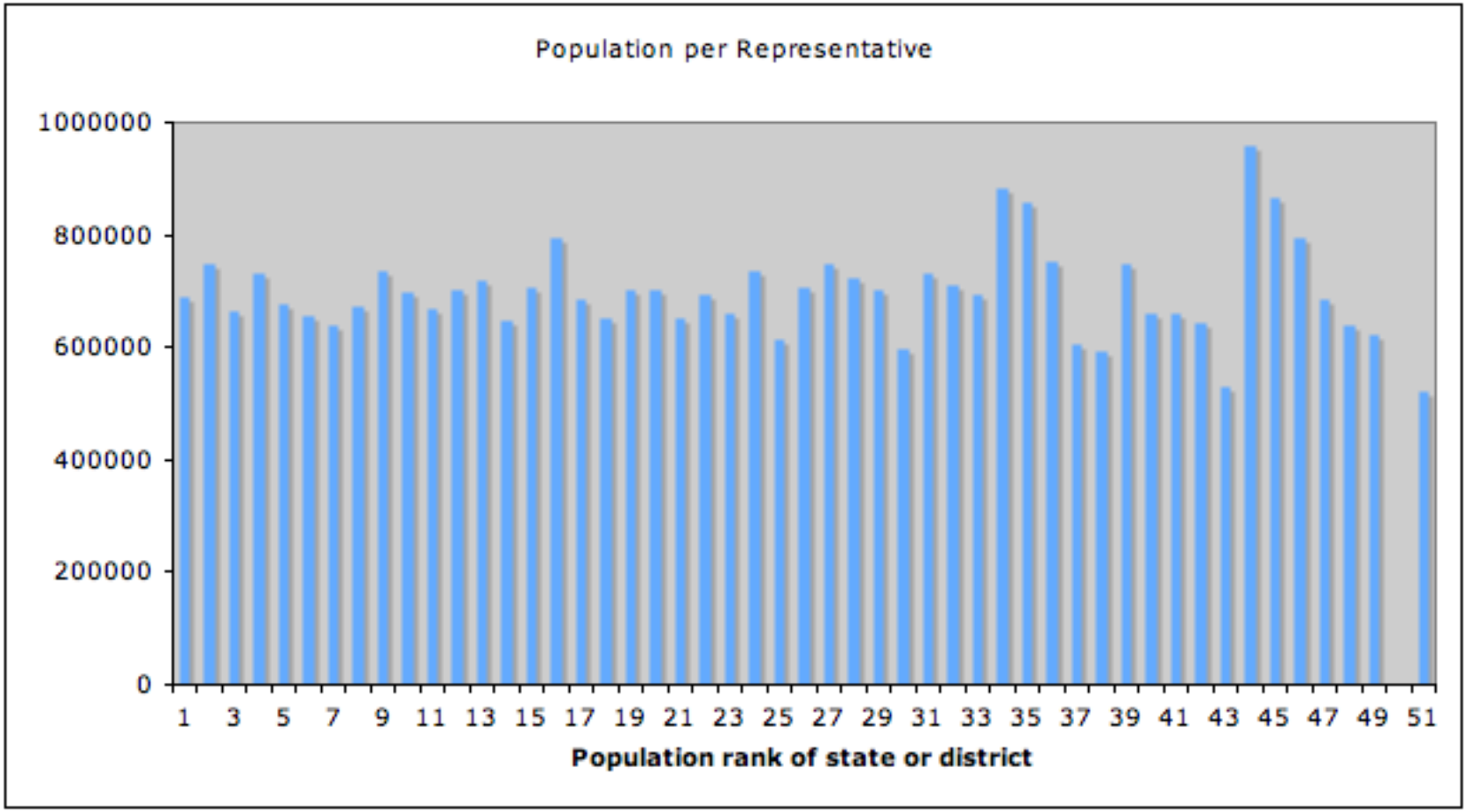
- The US Senate is one of the most malapportioned legislatures in the world – the House is fairly average
  - States are allocated House members proportional to their populations
  - Every state receives two senators, regardless of population

The House is Apportioned Decennially

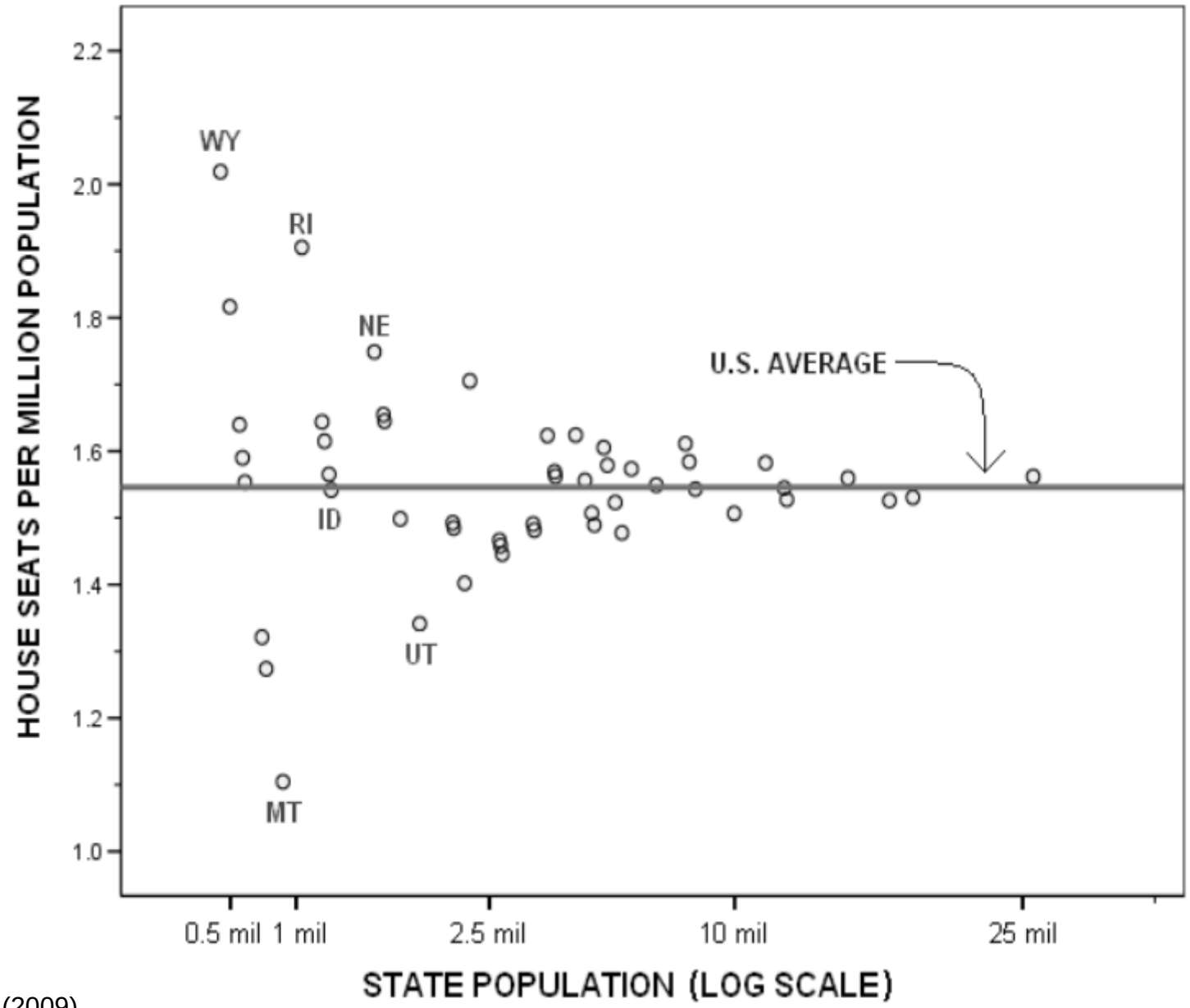


Source: Wikipedia

Malapportionment in the House

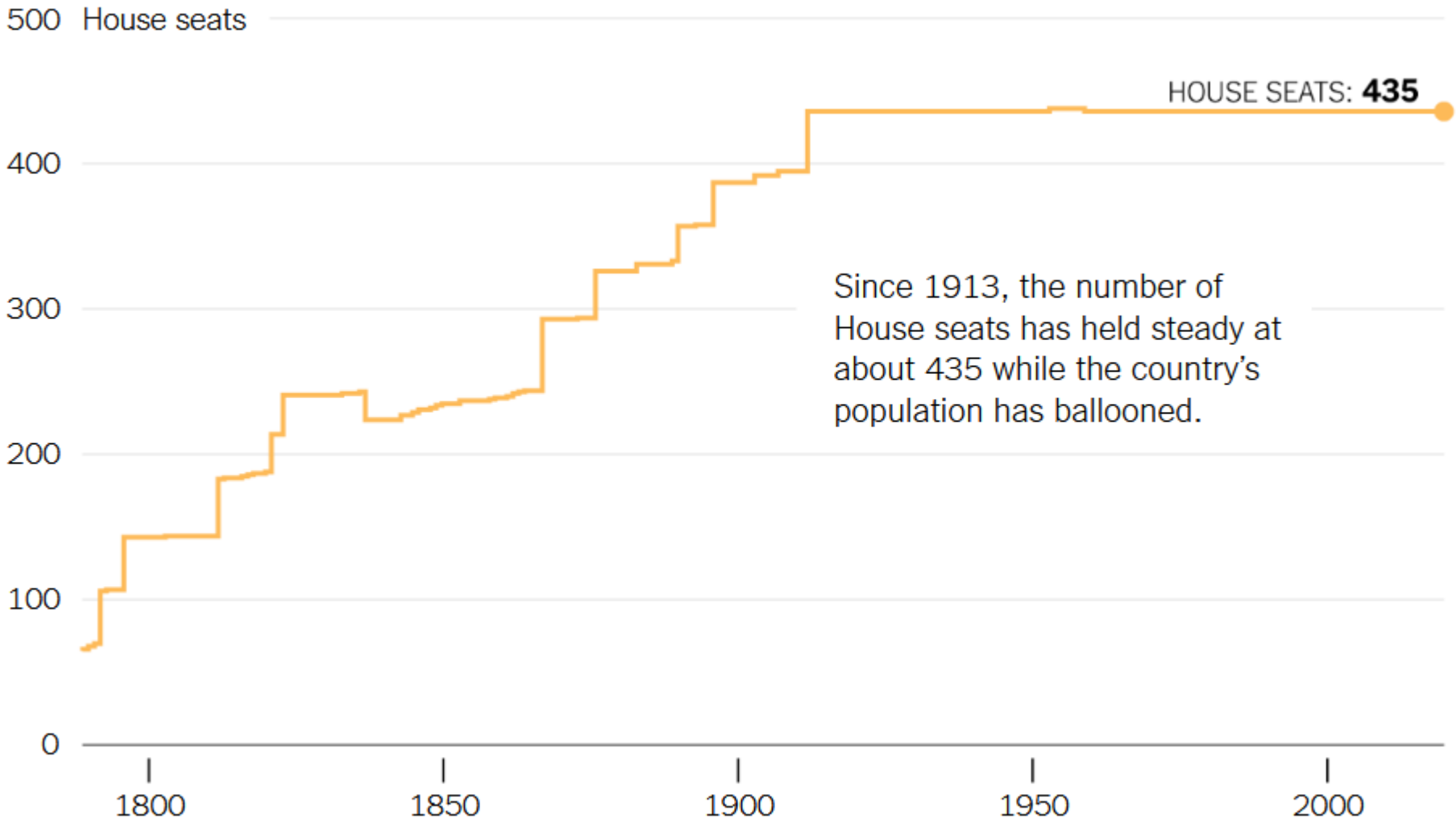


Source: Wikipedia

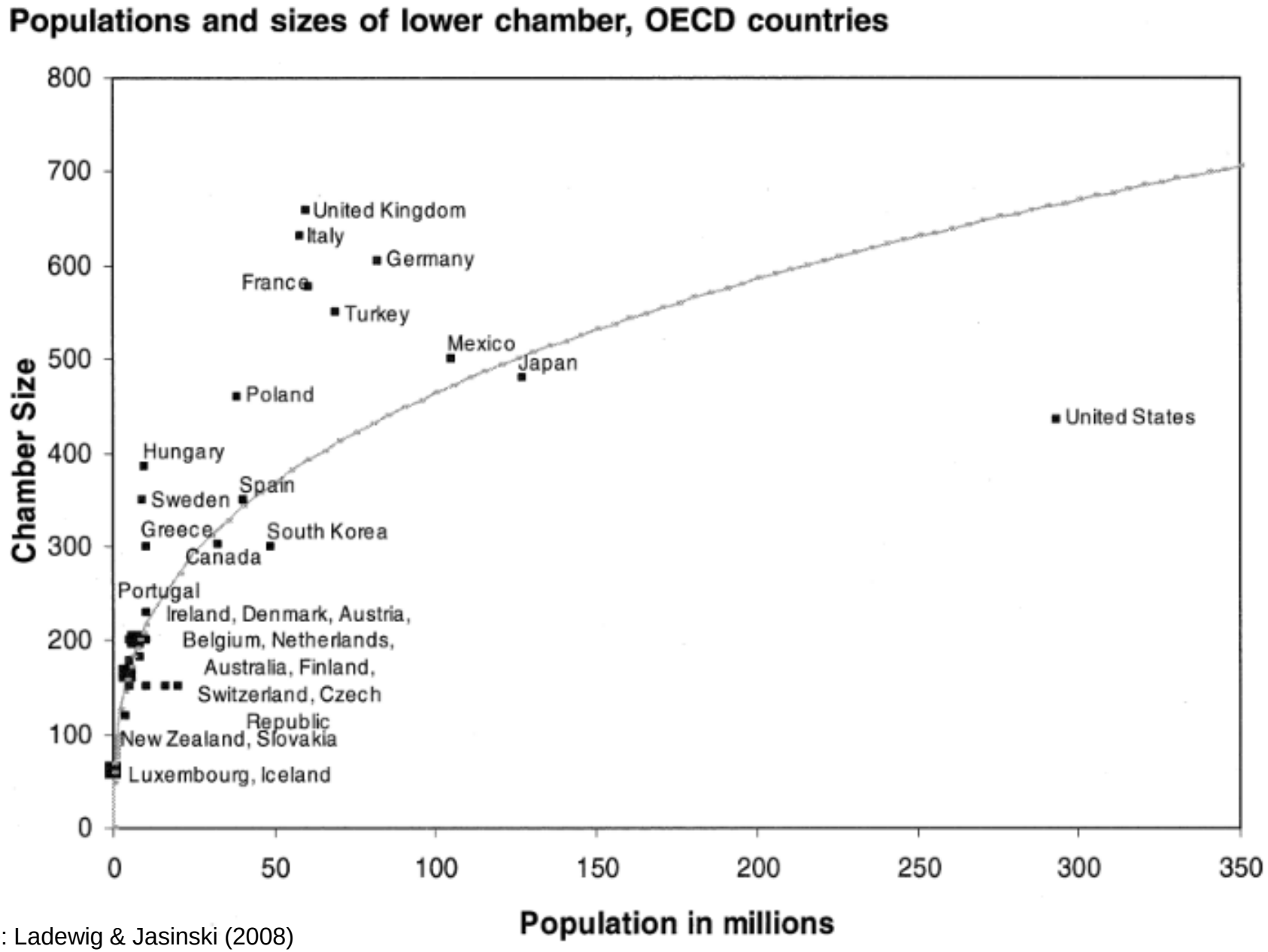


Source: Miller (2009)

Why Is There Still a Little Malapportionment?

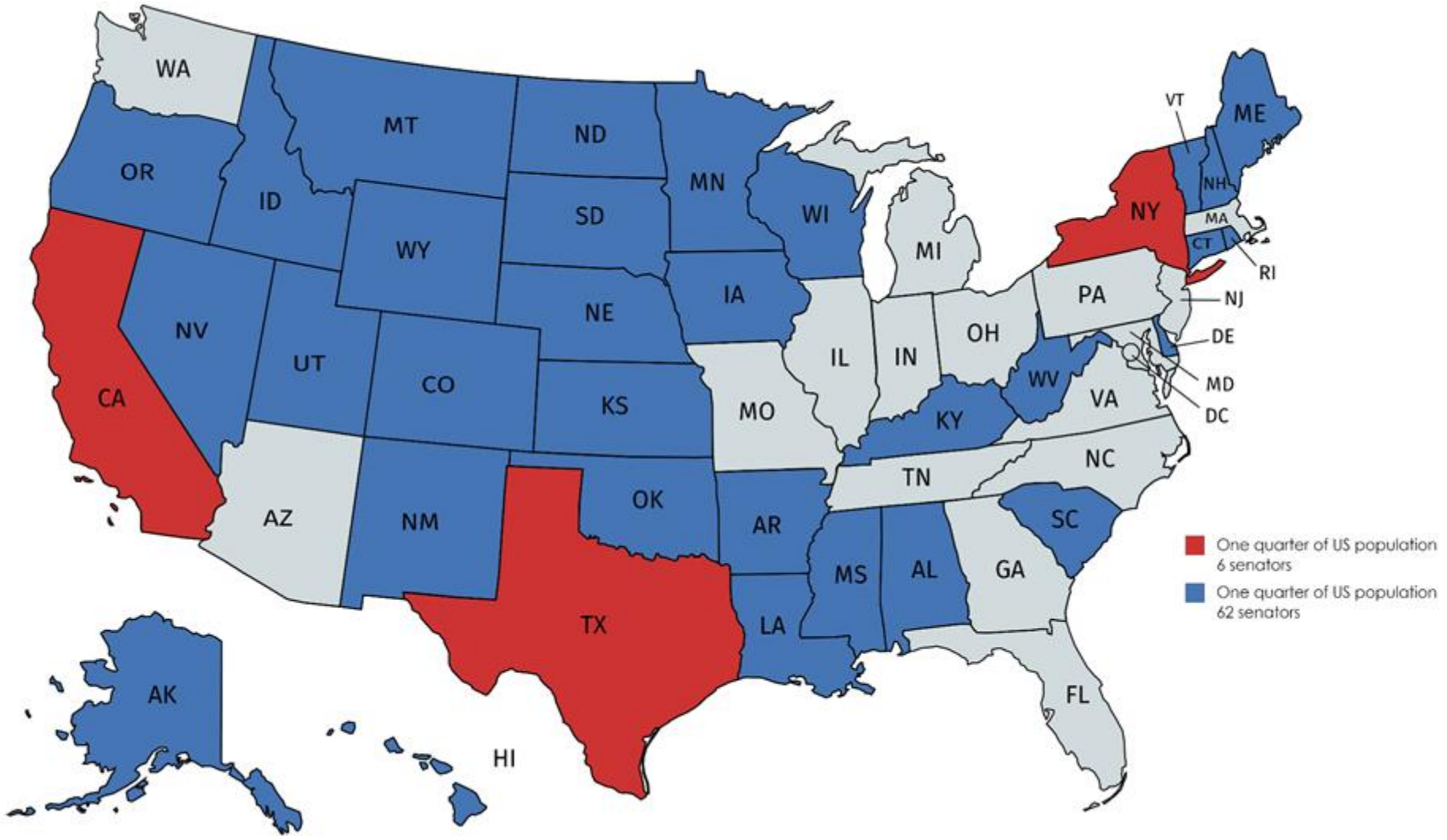


Source: *New York Times*



Source: Ladewig & Jasinski (2008)

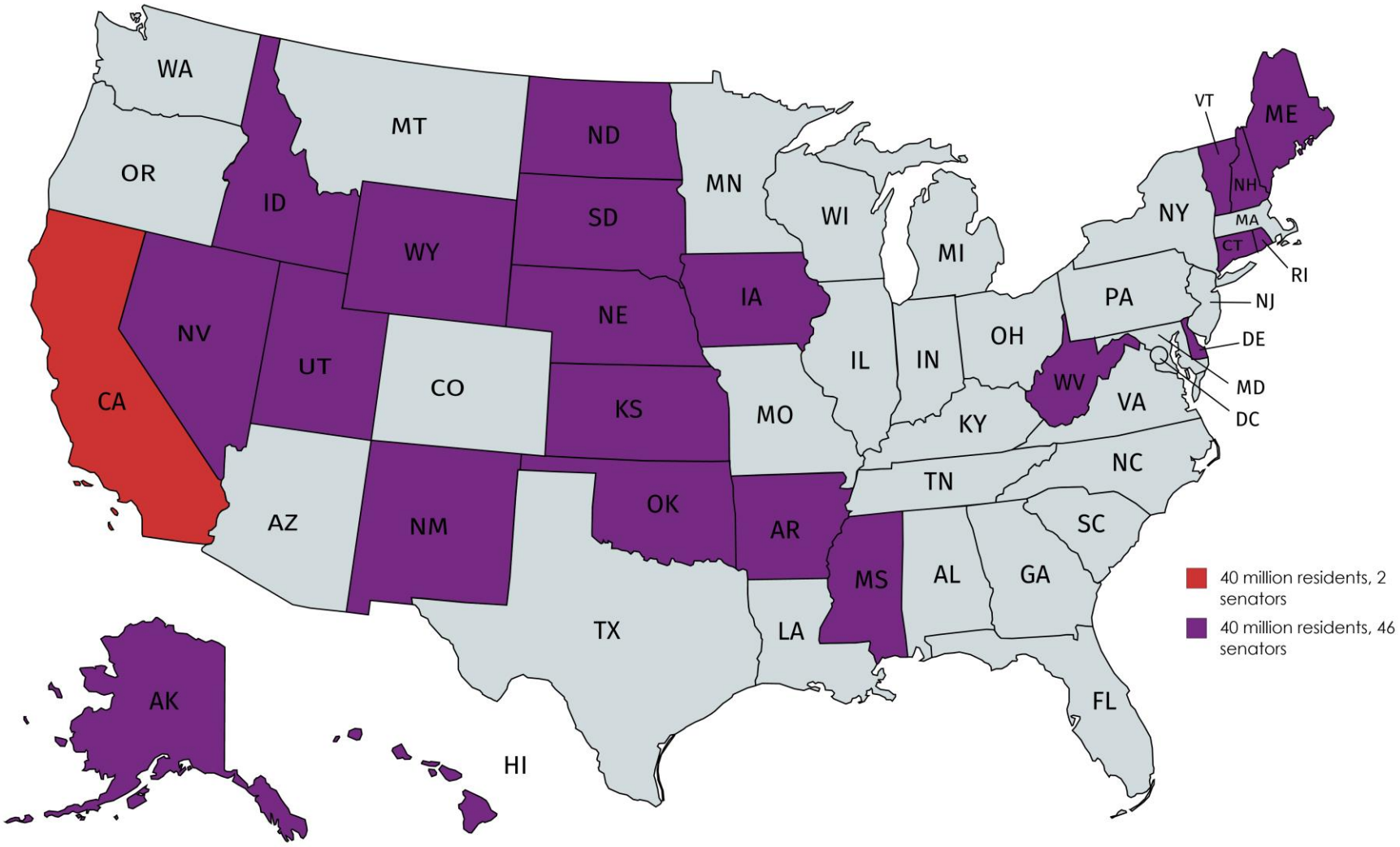
Malapportionment in the Senate



Source: Liptak (2013)

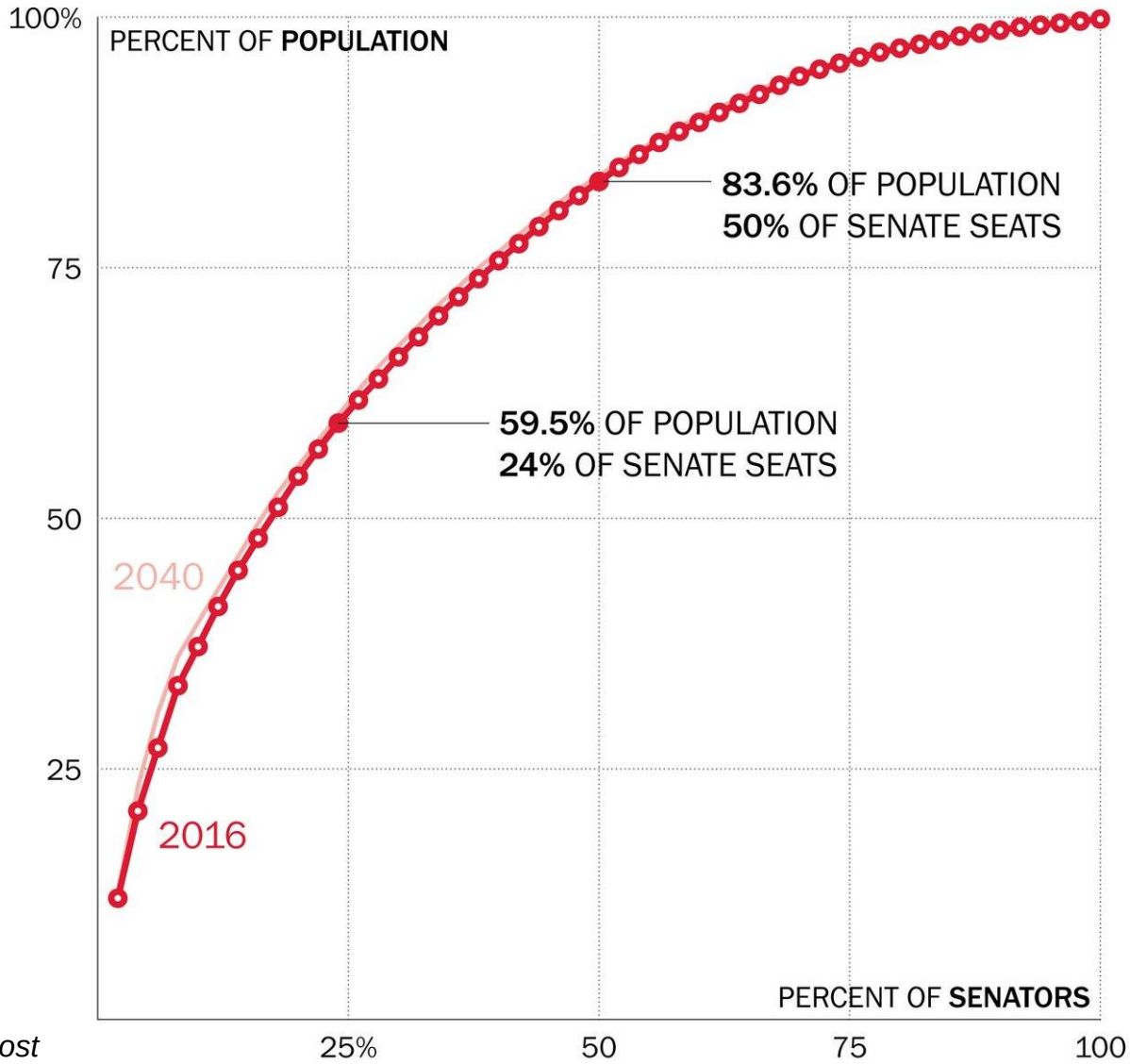
Source: Liptak (2013)

Malapportionment in the Senate



Relationship between population and representation

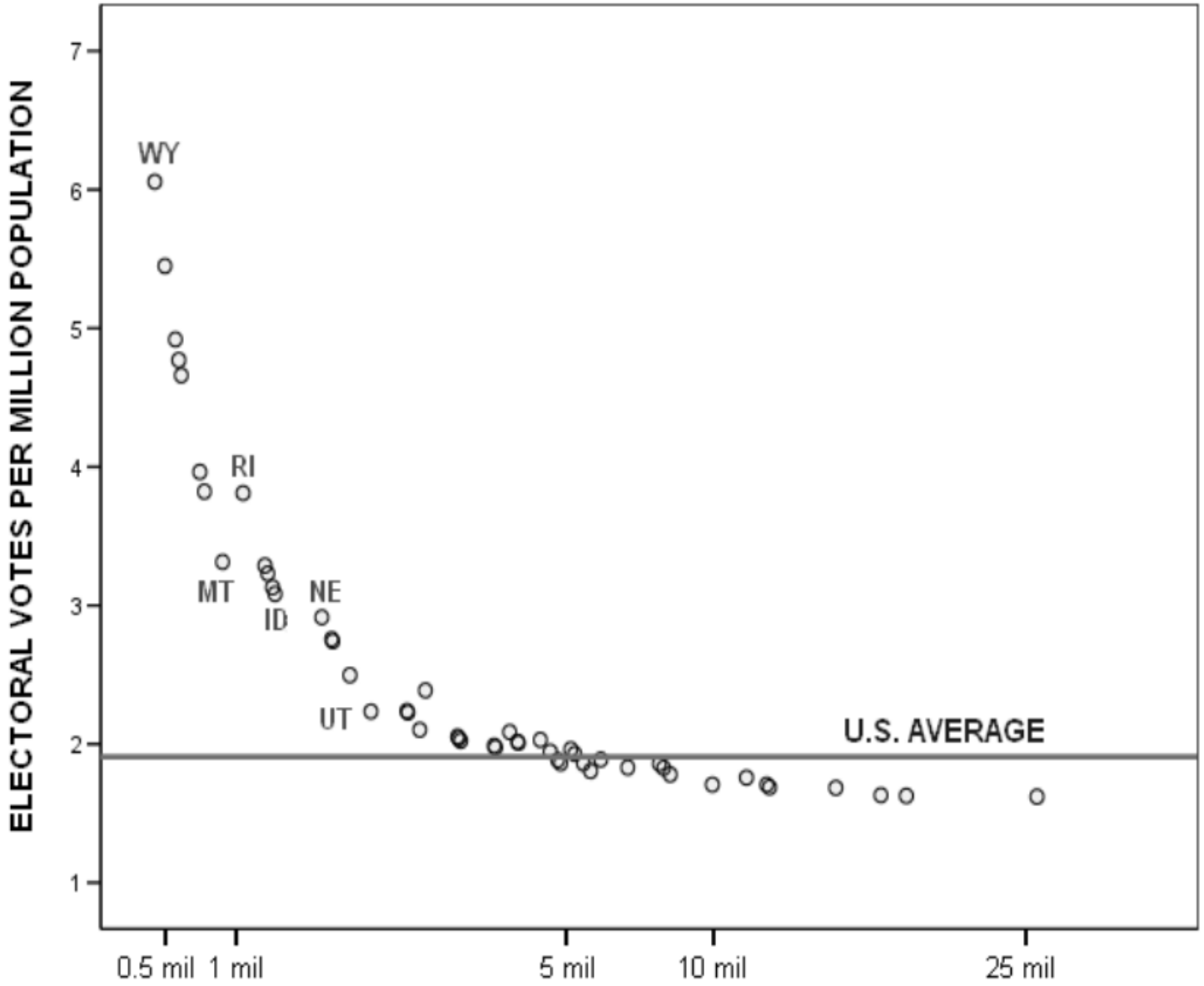
Population data from the Census Bureau. Projections from Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.



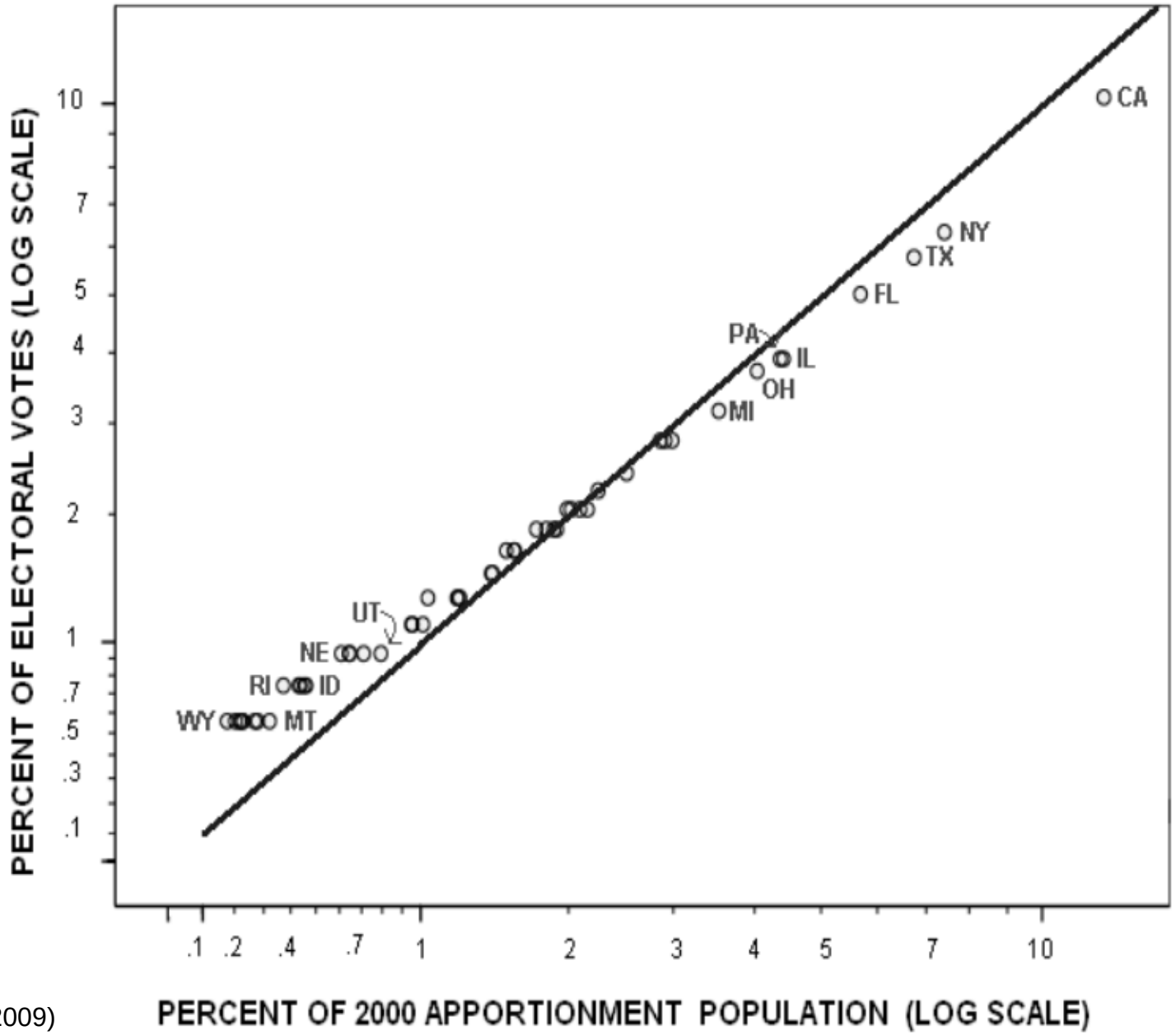
Source: *Washington Post*

The Electoral College

- The end result is that the electoral college is moderately (but not severely) malapportioned
- The formula to determine electoral votes overrepresents small stats because it is determined by House members + Senators
  - Not strictly proportional to population
- Thus, small states are overrepresented
  - Though not nearly as much as they are in the Senate



Source: Miller (2009)



Source: Miller (2009)

The Electoral College In Practice

How the Electoral College "Normally" Works

- The electoral college winner and the popular vote winner usually align

- In fact, the electoral college serves to exaggerate the margin of the popular vote winner
  - In other words, it looks like their victory is bigger than it actually is in the popular vote

- Why? Remember, each state is **winner-take-all**

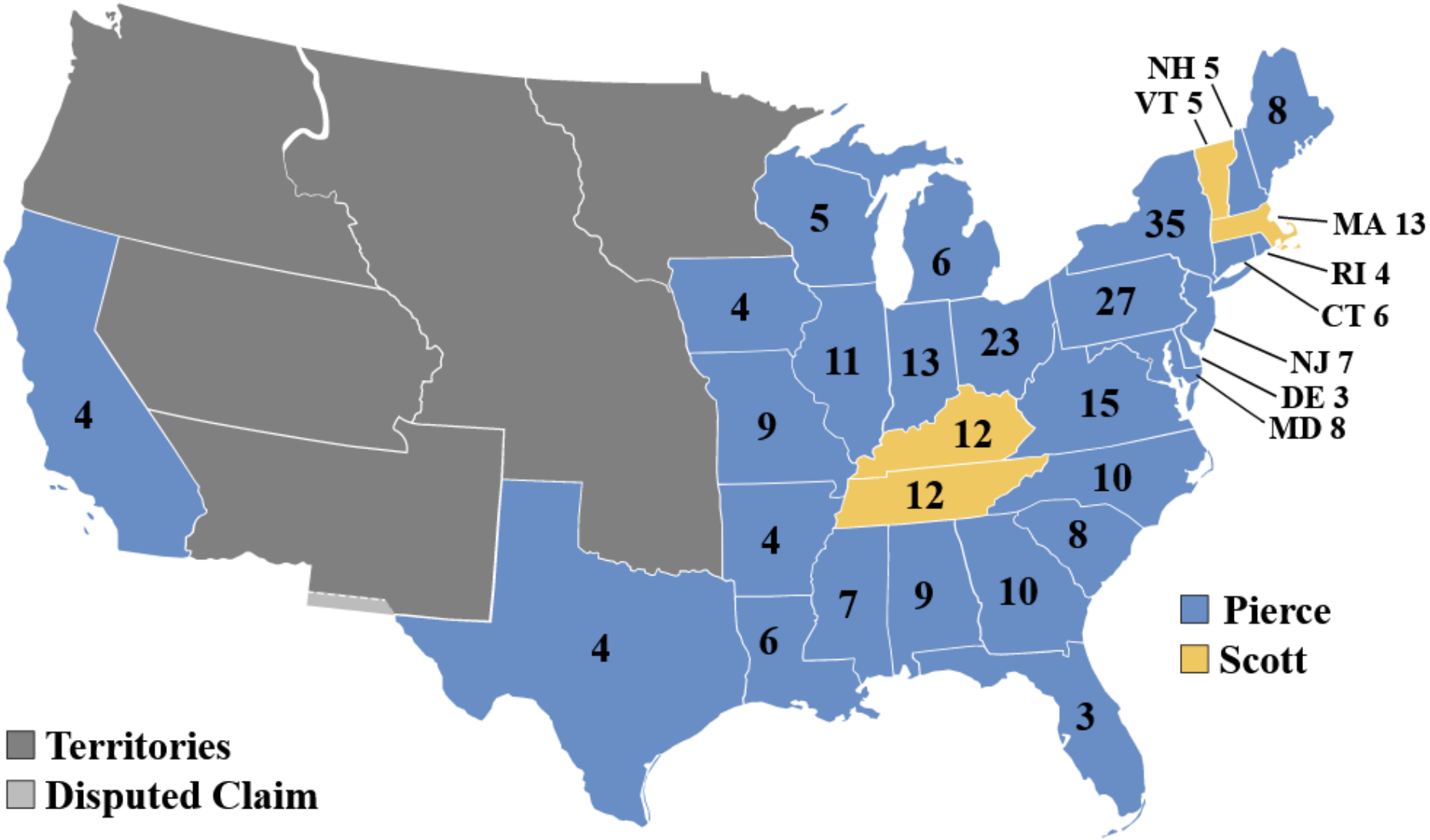
- A candidate who narrowly wins a state nevertheless gets *all* its electoral votes

1852 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Winfield Scott	Whig	43.9	42
Franklin Pierce	Democratic	**50.8**	**254**

- This race was a personality contest, with little policy differences between the candidates

EV needed to win: 149



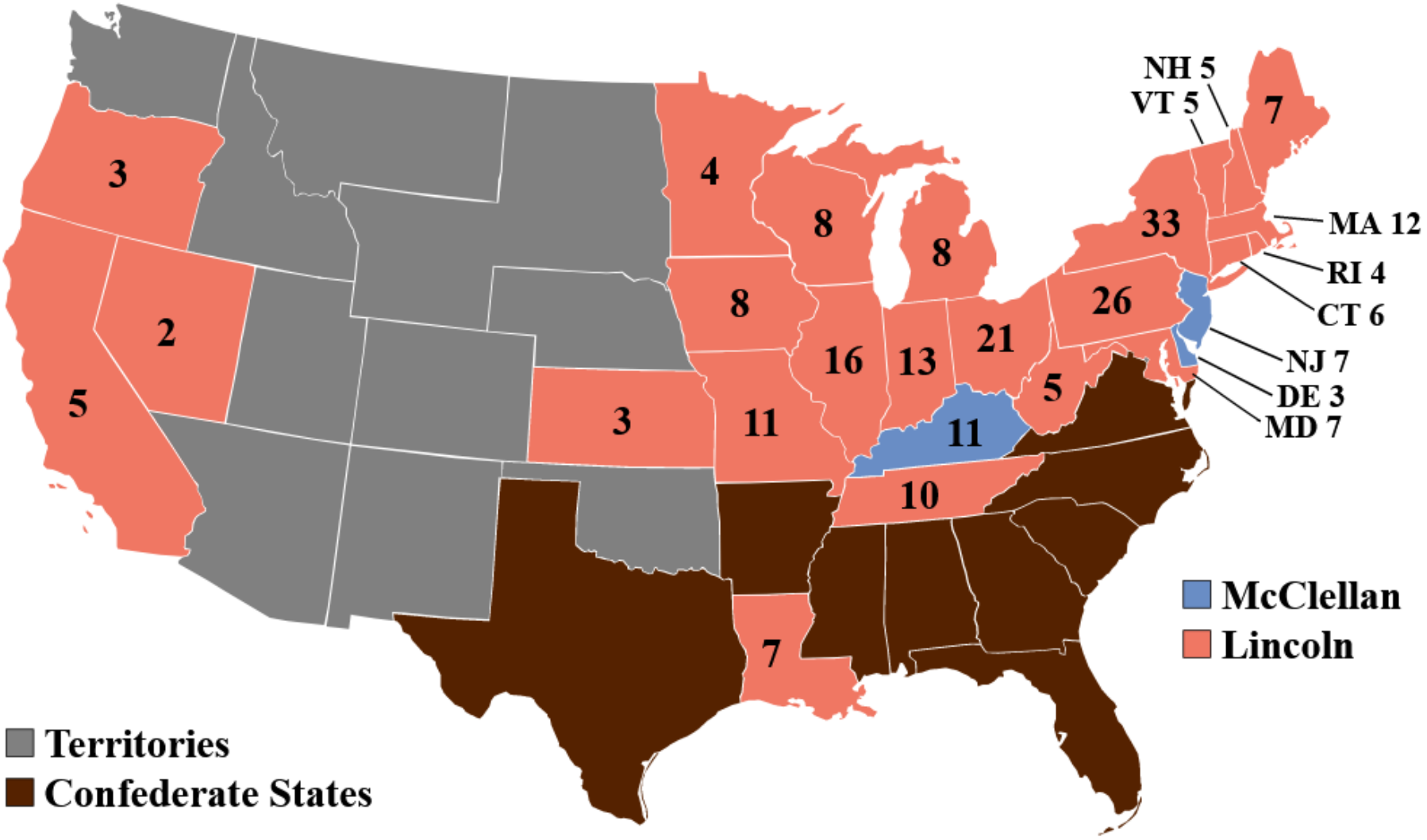
Source: Wikipedia

1864 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Abraham Lincoln	Republican	**55**	**212**
George McClellan	Democratic	45	21

- This was during the Civil War!

EV needed to win: 118



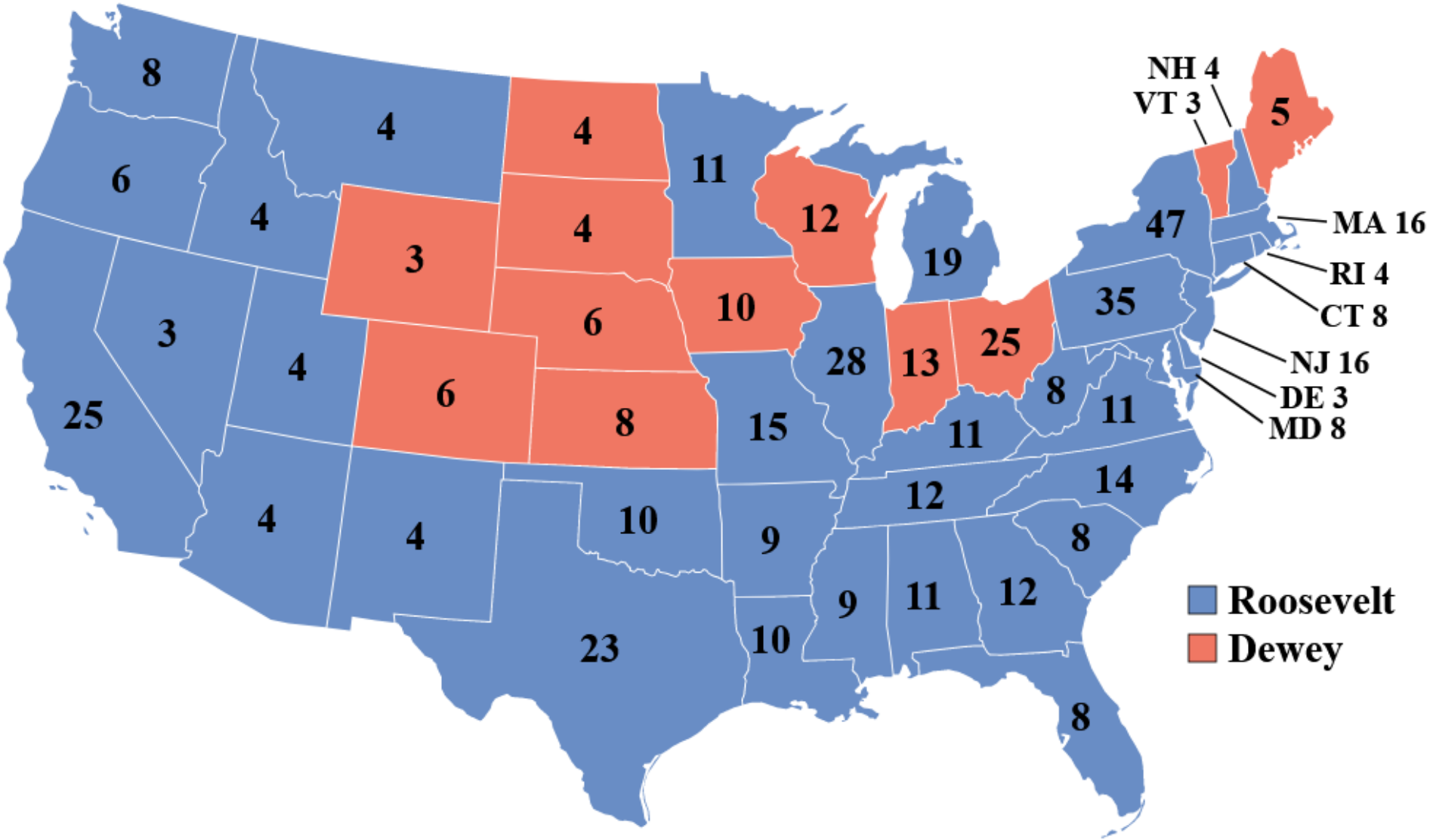
Source: Wikipedia

1944 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Thomas E. Dewey	Republican	45.9	99
Franklin D. Roosevelt	Democratic	**53.4**	**432**

- FDR is running for his *fourth* term

EV needed to win: 266



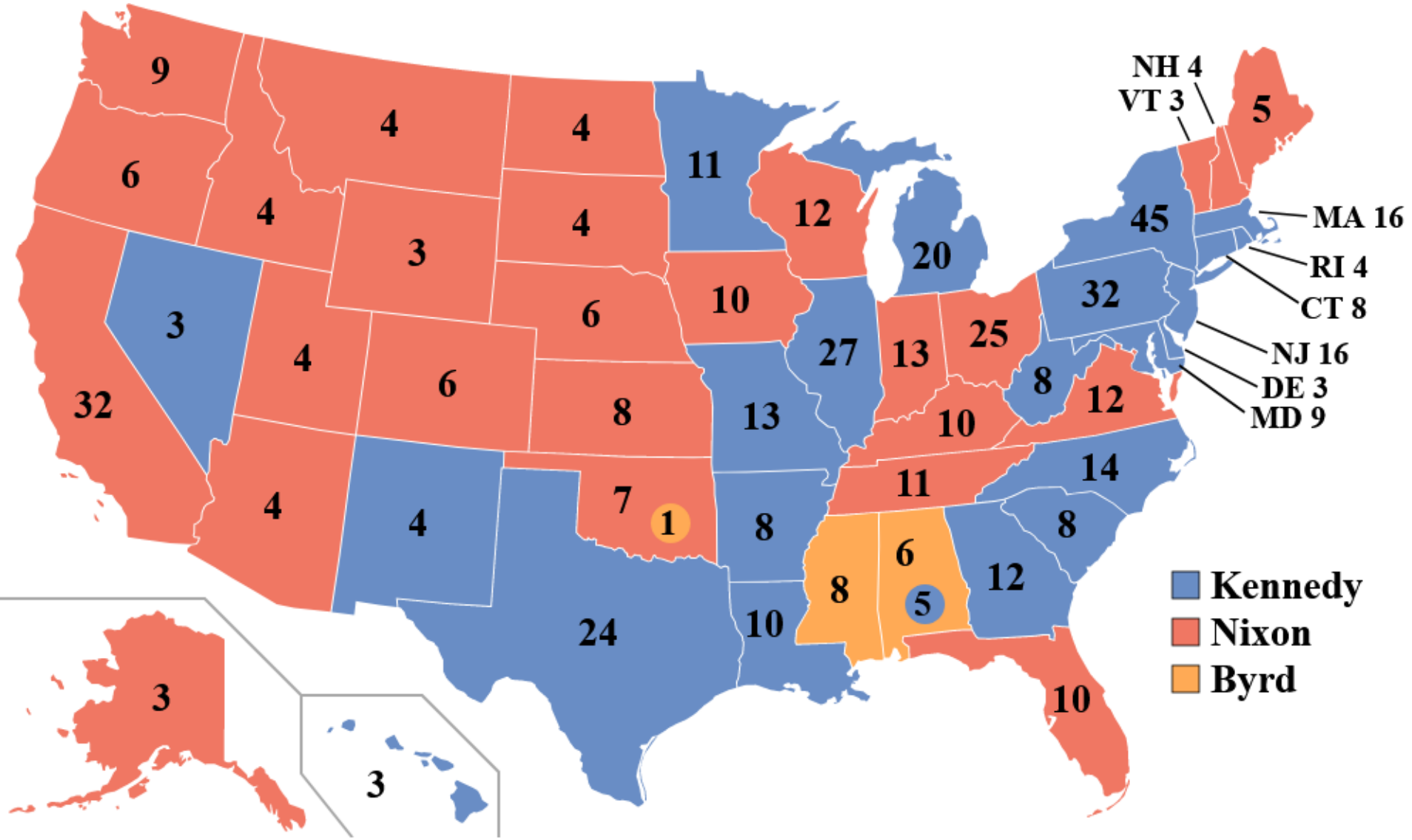
Source: Wikipedia

1960 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Richard Nixon	Republican	49.6	219
John F. Kennedy	Democratic	**49.7**	**303**

- This race was incredibly close in the popular vote… but not in the electoral college!

EV needed to win: 269



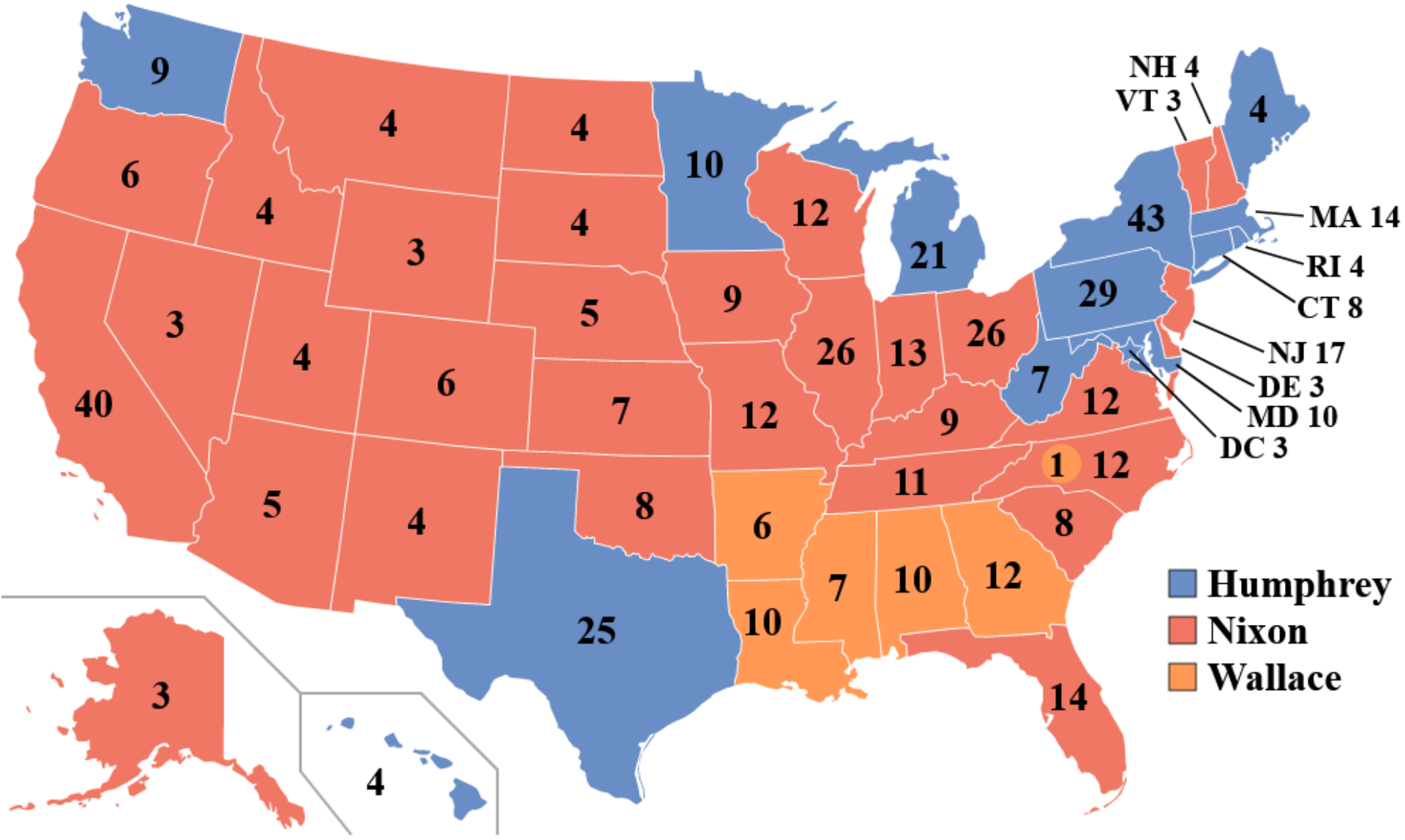
Source: Wikipedia

1968 Presidential Election (Nixon's Revenge)

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Richard Nixon	Republican	**43.4**	**301**
Hubert Humphrey	Democratic	42.7	191

- This race was also close in the popular vote… but not in the electoral college!

EV needed to win: 270



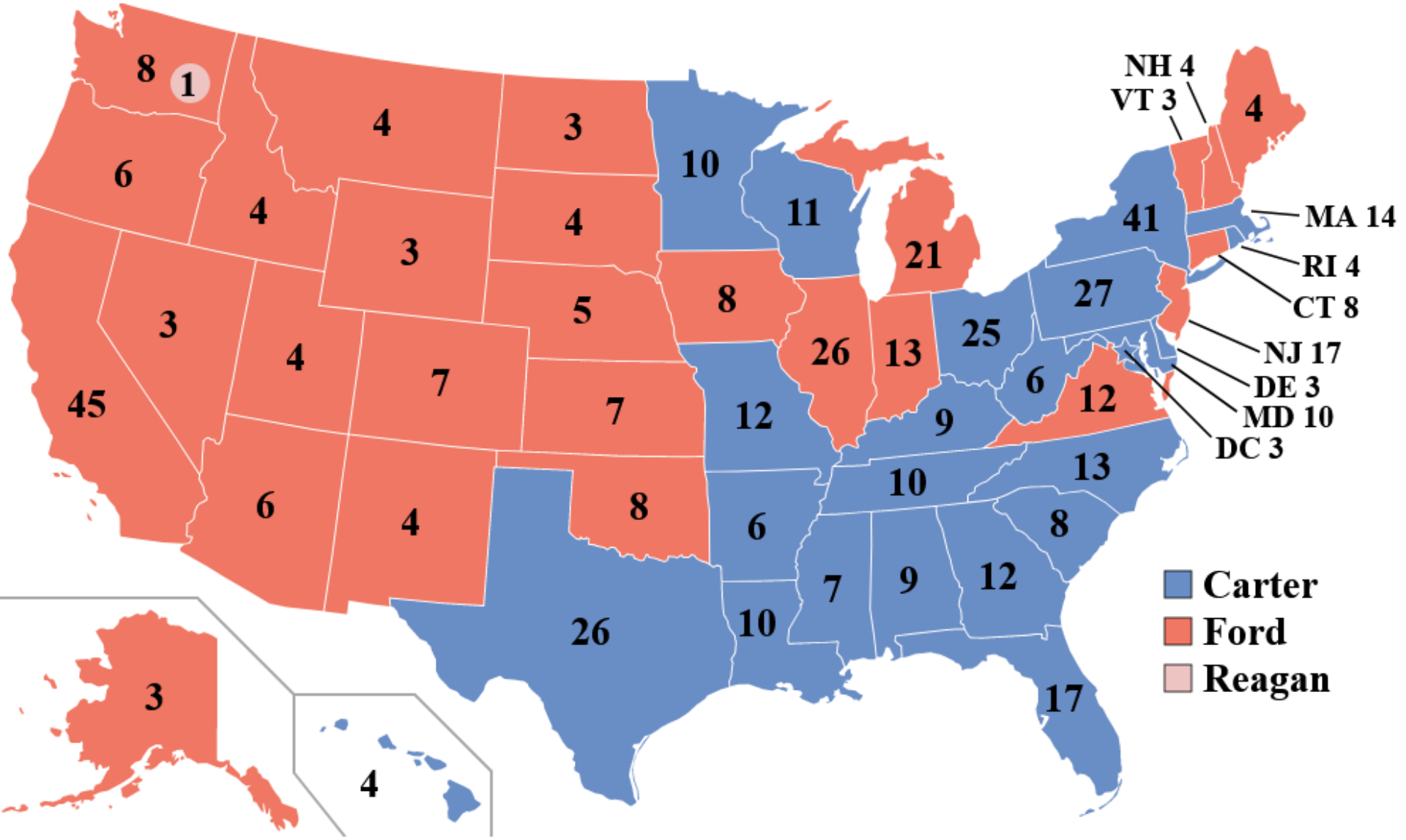
Source: Wikipedia

1976 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Gerald Ford	Republican	48	240
Jimmy Carter	Democratic	**50.1**	**297**

- This race was also close in the popular vote… but not in the electoral college!
- Let's admire how alien the electoral map is!

EV needed to win: 270



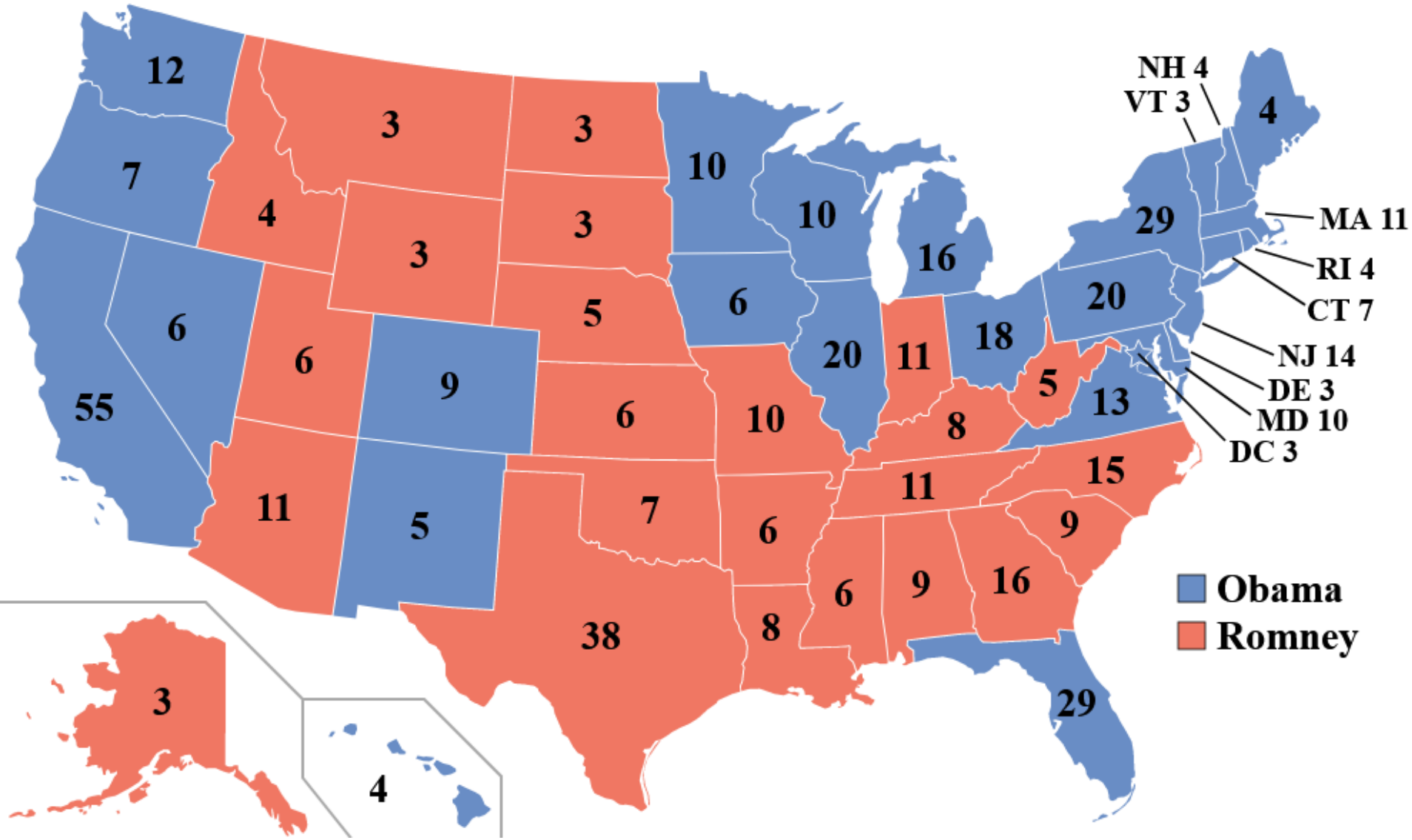
Source: Wikipedia

2012 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Mitt Romney	Republican	47.2	206
Barack Obama	Democratic	**51.1**	**332**

- This race was pretty close in the popular vote… but not in the electoral college!

EV needed to win: 270



Source: Wikipedia

Electoral College Inversions

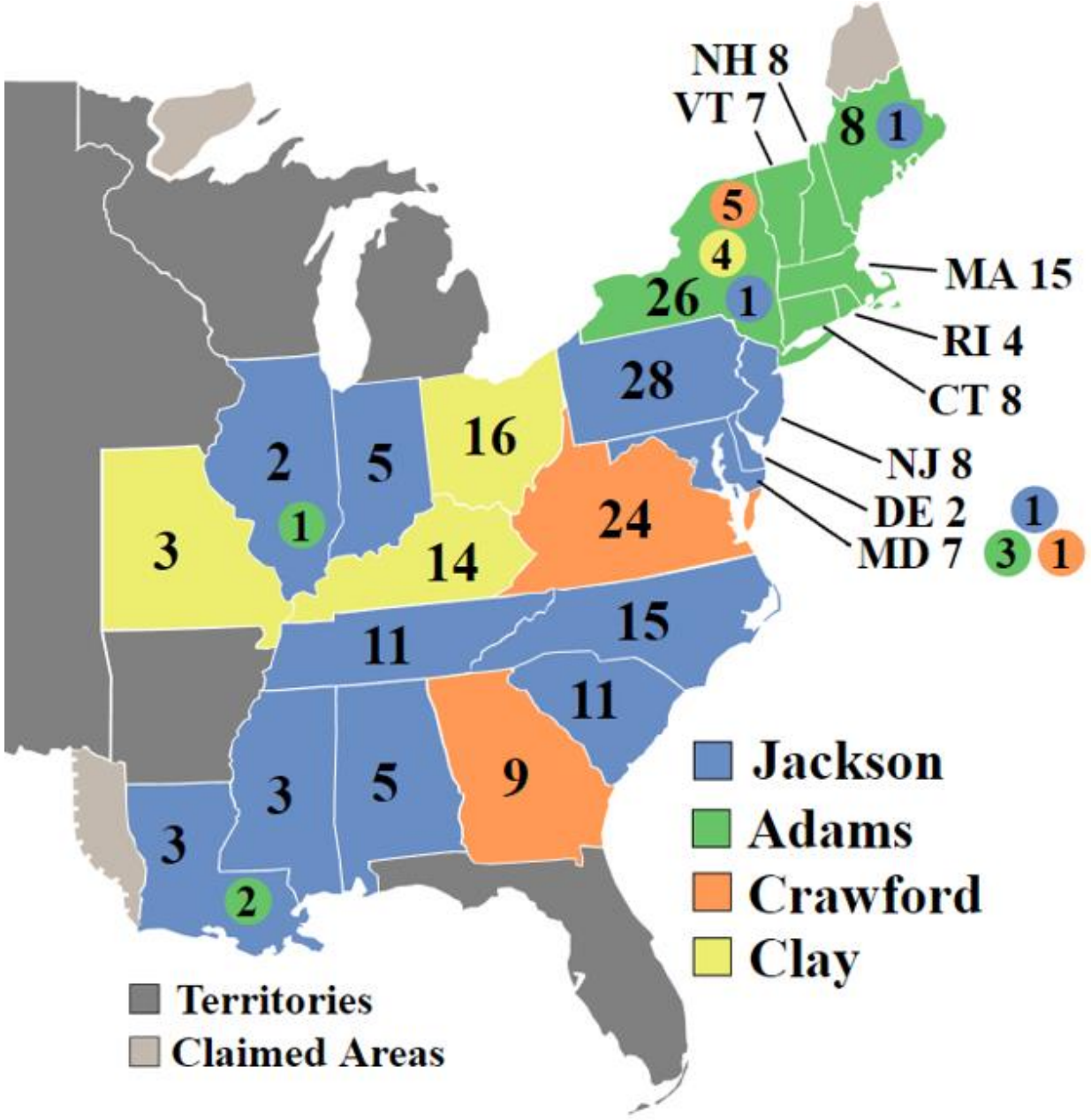
Inversions

- The electoral college *usually* selects the popular vote winner – but not always!
- The share of the electoral votes the winning presidential candidate receives is almost always greater than the share of the popular vote received
- Can we say that Clinton (2016) and Gore (2000) would have won without the electoral college? Probably, but *not* certainly!
- Let's look at the 5 **inversions** cased by the electoral college

1824 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
John Q. Adams (winner)	Democratic -Republican	30.9	84
Andrew Jackson	Democratic -Republican	**41.4**	**99**
William H. Crawford	Democratic -Republican	11.2	41
Henry Clay	Democratic -Republican	13.0	37

EV needed to win: 131



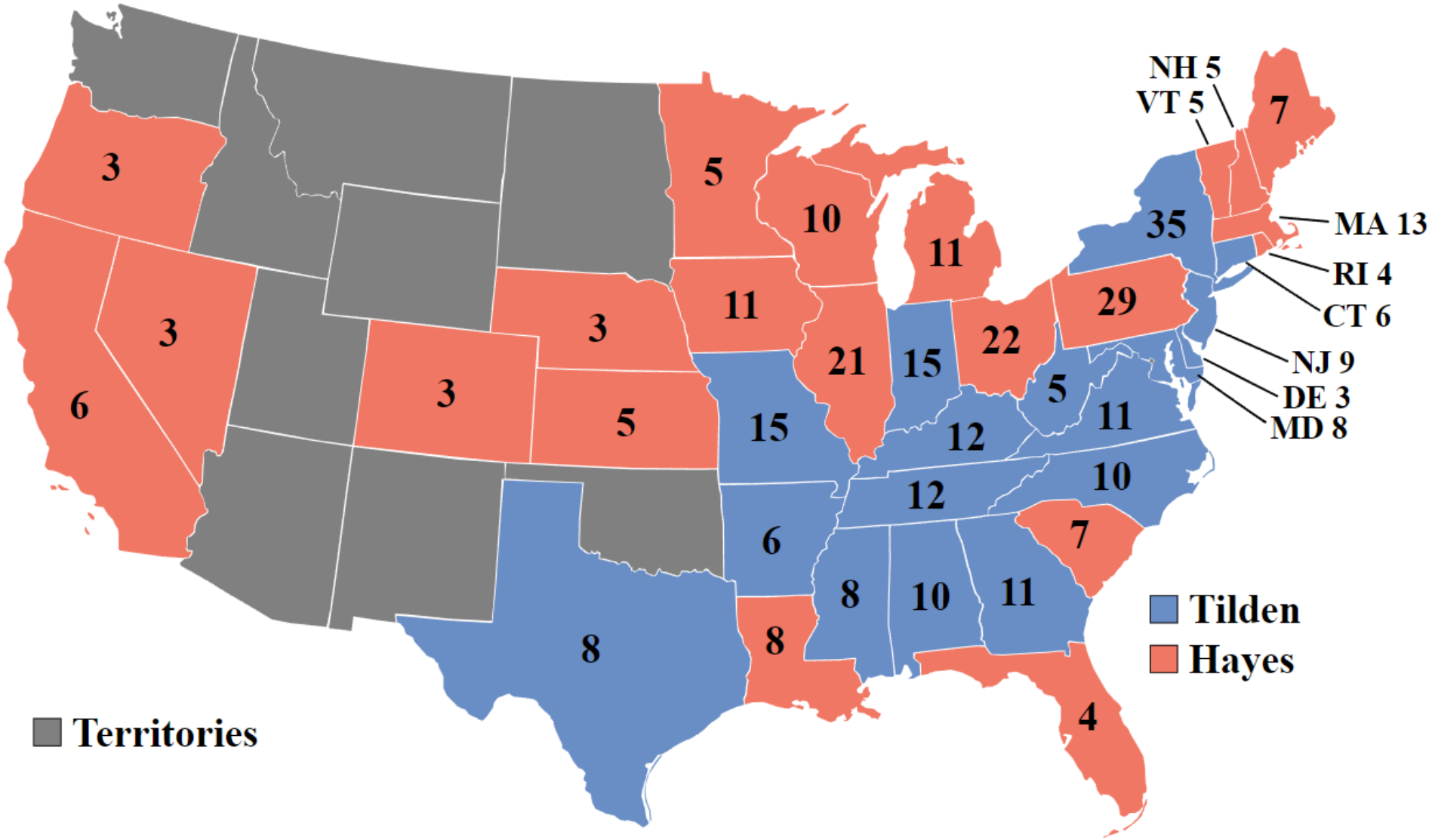
Source: Wikipedia

1876 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Rutherford B. Hayes (winner)	Republican	47.9	**185**
Samuel J. Tilden	Democratic	**50.9**	184

- Sorry 2000 and 2016! This is probably the shadiest presidential election in US history

EV needed to win: 185



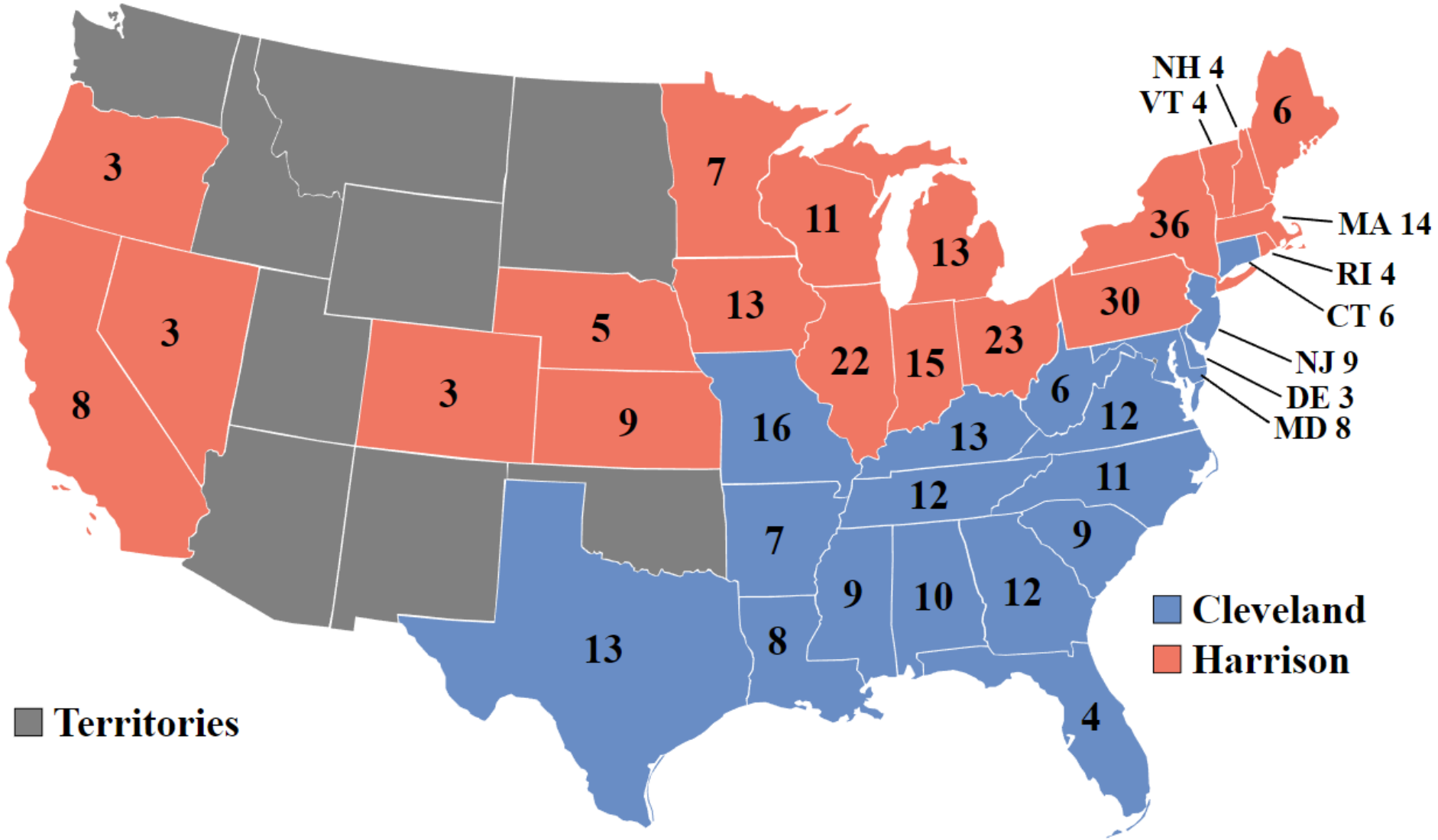
Source: Wikipedia

1888 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Benjamin Harrison	Republican	47.8	**233**
Grover Cleveland	Democratic	**48.6**	168

- #ClevelandWasRobbed

EV needed to win: 201



Source: Wikipedia

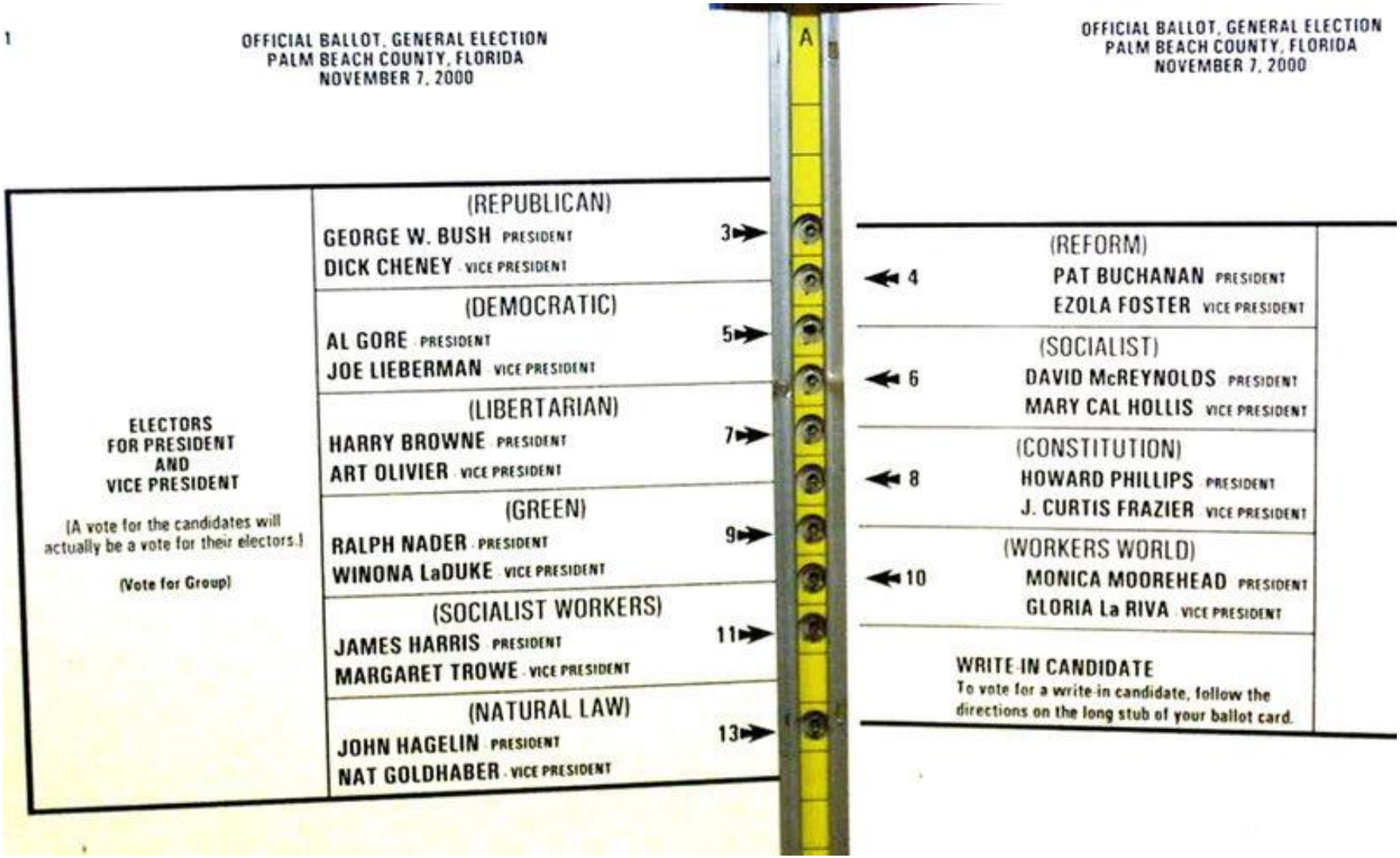
2000 Presidential Election

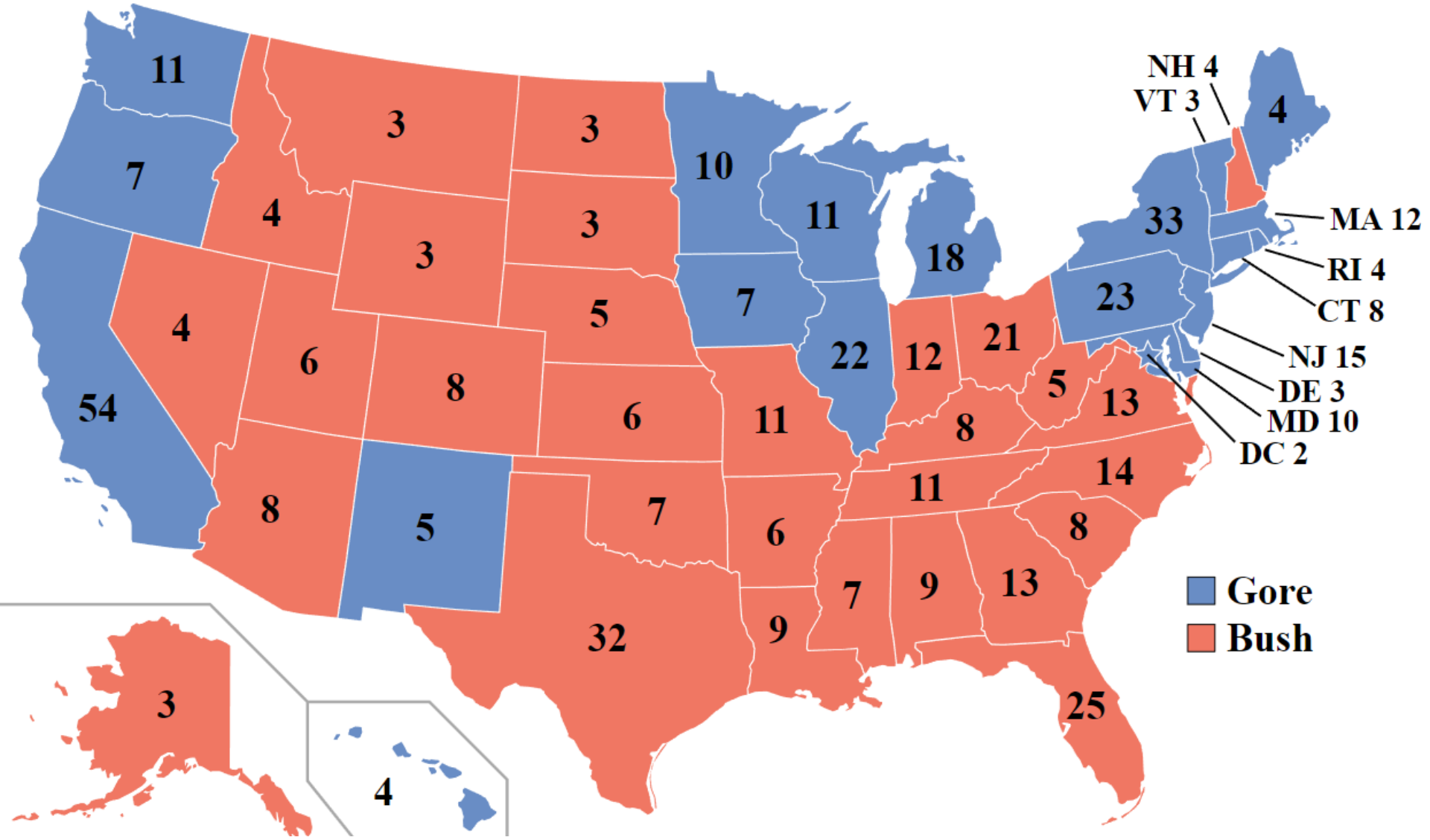
Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
George W. Bush	Republican	47.9	**271**
Al Gore	Democratic	**48.4**	266

- Was it 271-266? Or 5-4?

EV needed to win: 270

Florida's Infamous "Butterfly Ballot"





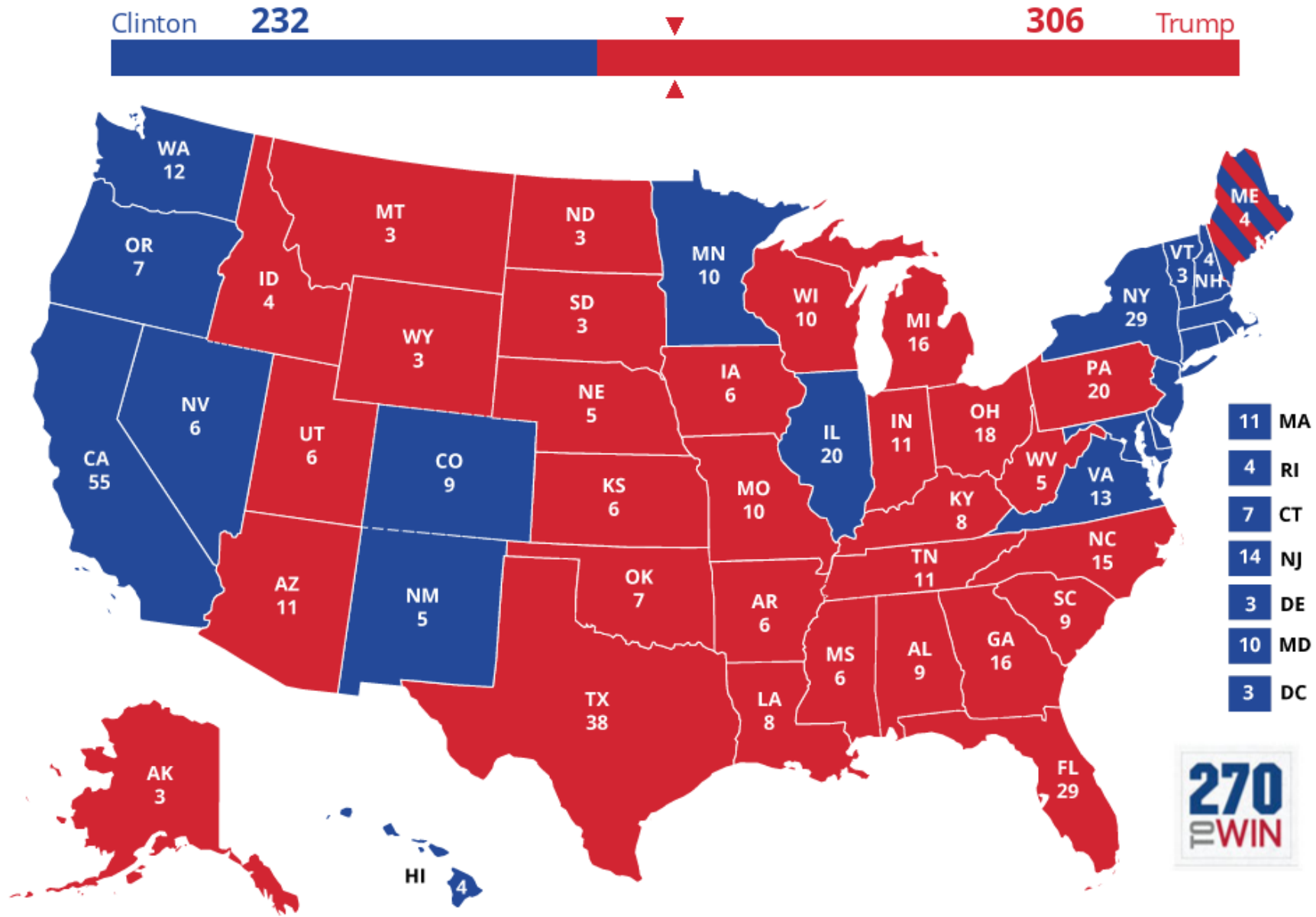
Source: Wikipedia

2016 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Donald Trump	Republican	46.1	**304**
Hillary Clinton	Democratic	**48.2**	227

- Not going to joke about this one

EV needed to win: 270



Source: 270towin.com

Big Picture

- If the electoral college produces normatively bad results, why do we still use it?
- If the senate is so malapportioned, why don't we reapportion or abolish it?
- Electoral systems are hard to change for a reason!
  - And it doesn't hurt that the electoral college and Senate are specified in the constitution

Who Benefits?

The Winners Under the Electoral College

- The swing states
- Small states
- White voters
- Republicans
  - This could change in the future!
- The two-party system

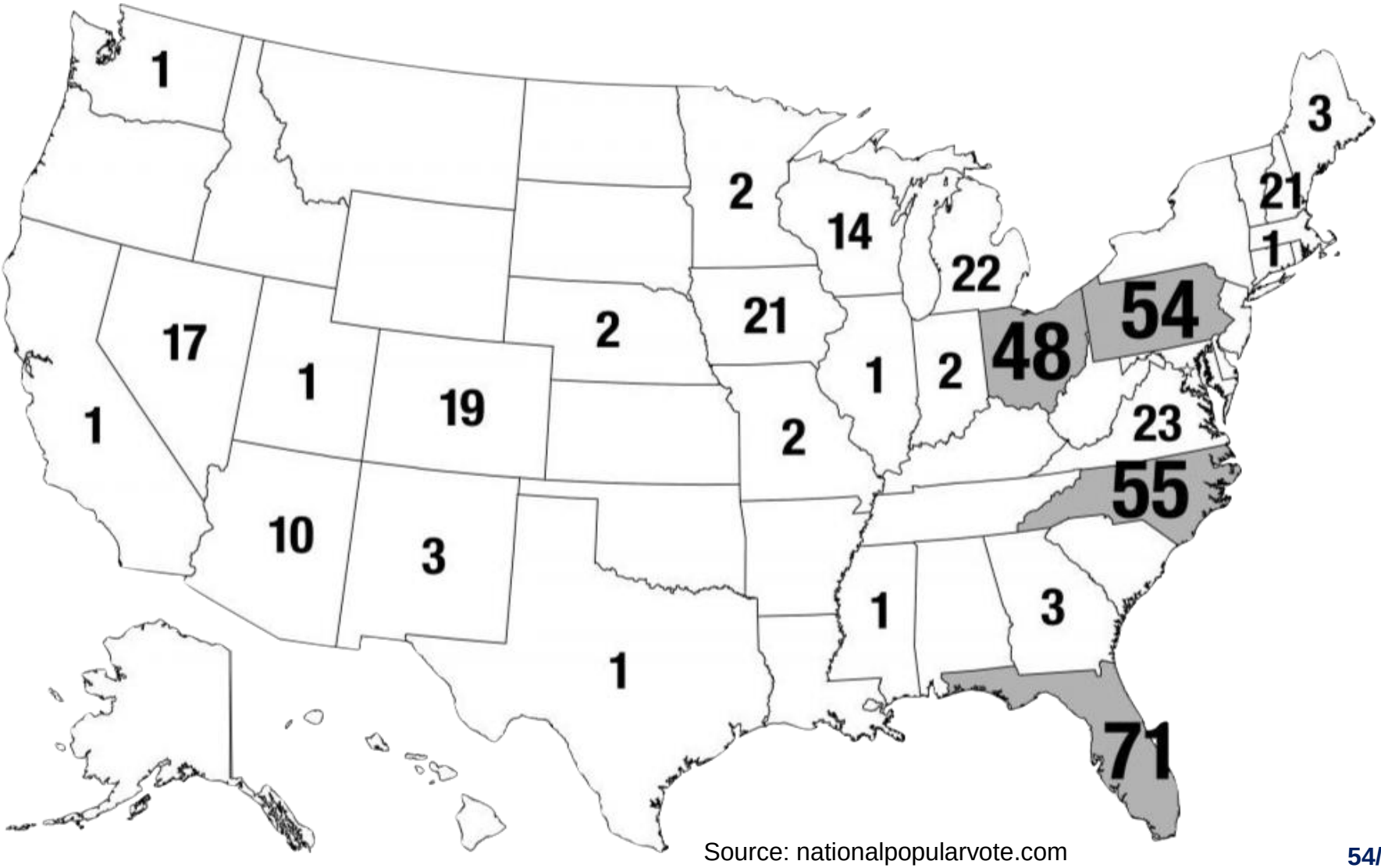
The Losers Under the Electoral College

- Safe states
- Big states
- Racial minorities
- Democrats
  - This could change!
- Third party & independent candidates

Why Swing States?

- In a presidential race, candidates have limited time and resources
- If a state is guaranteed to go to your opponent, money & time are wasted on that state
- If you are sure to win a state, money & time are wasted on that state
- Thus, only *swing states* that could go to either party get time and attention from the candidates
  - Voters in safe states are largely ignored

Campaign Visits in 2016

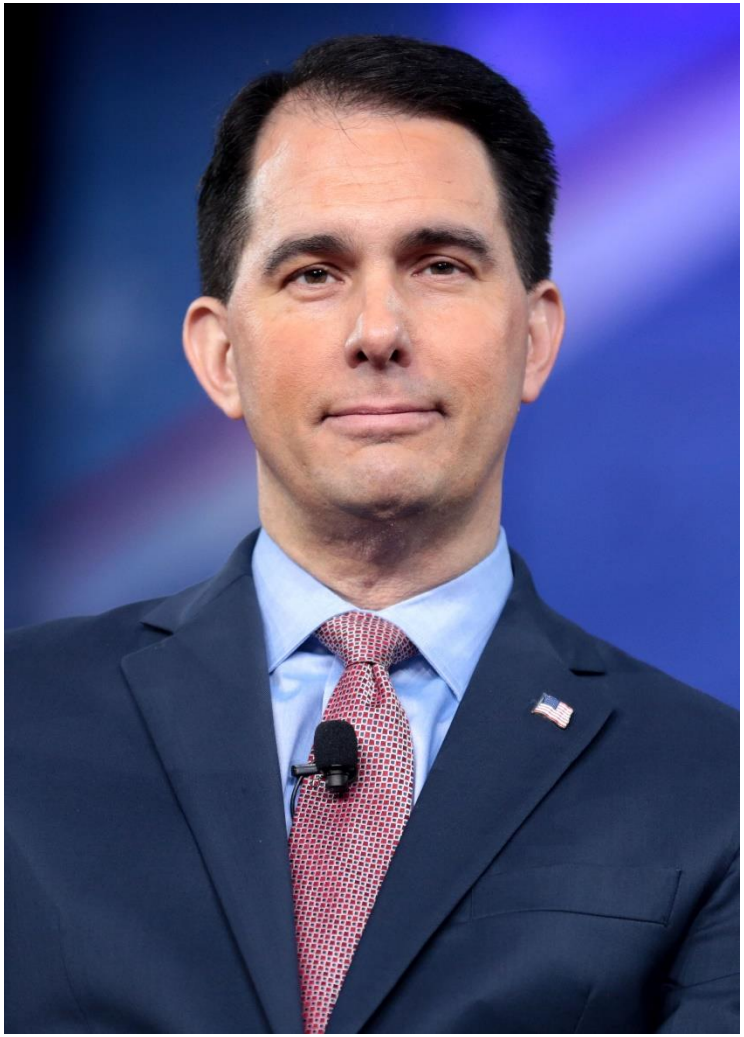


Source: nationalpopularvote.com

The Candidates Know It

"The nation as a whole is not going to elect the next president. Twelve states are."

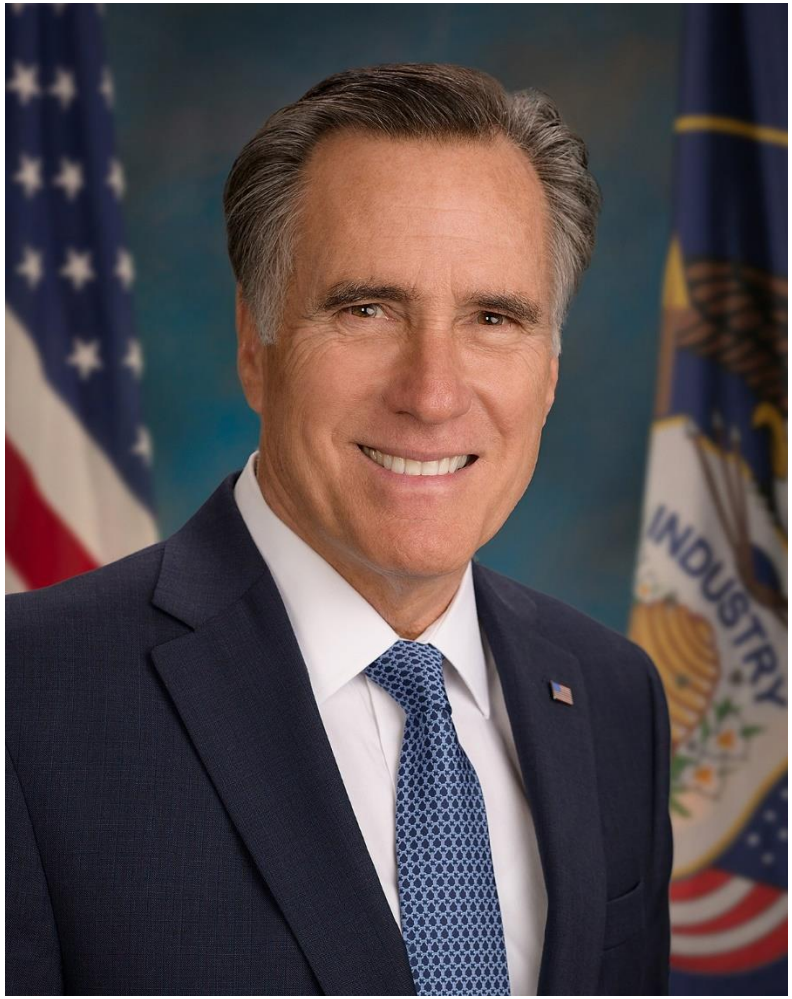
- 2016 Republican presidential candidate Scott Walker



The Candidates Know It

"All the money will get spent in 10 states"

- 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney

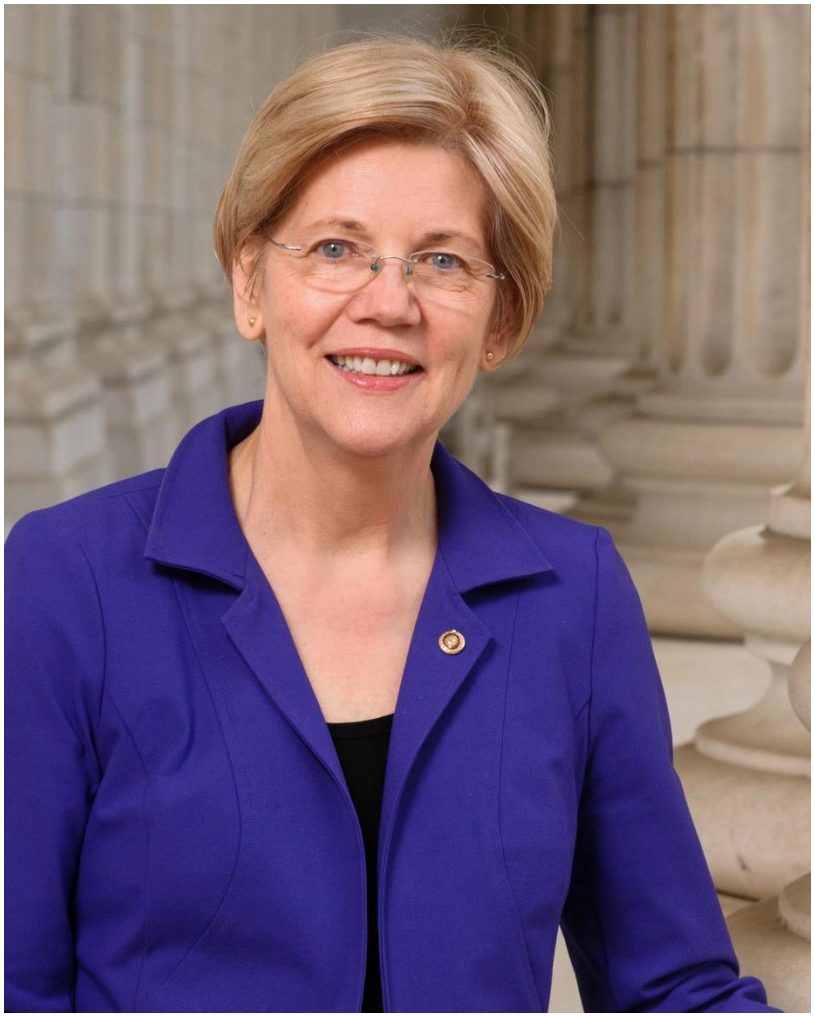


The Candidates Know It

"But the way it works right now, come general election time, presidential candidates don't travel to every state.

They zero in on just a few battleground states, and they don't get to hear about the issues that are on the top of people's minds everywhere else in the country."

- 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren



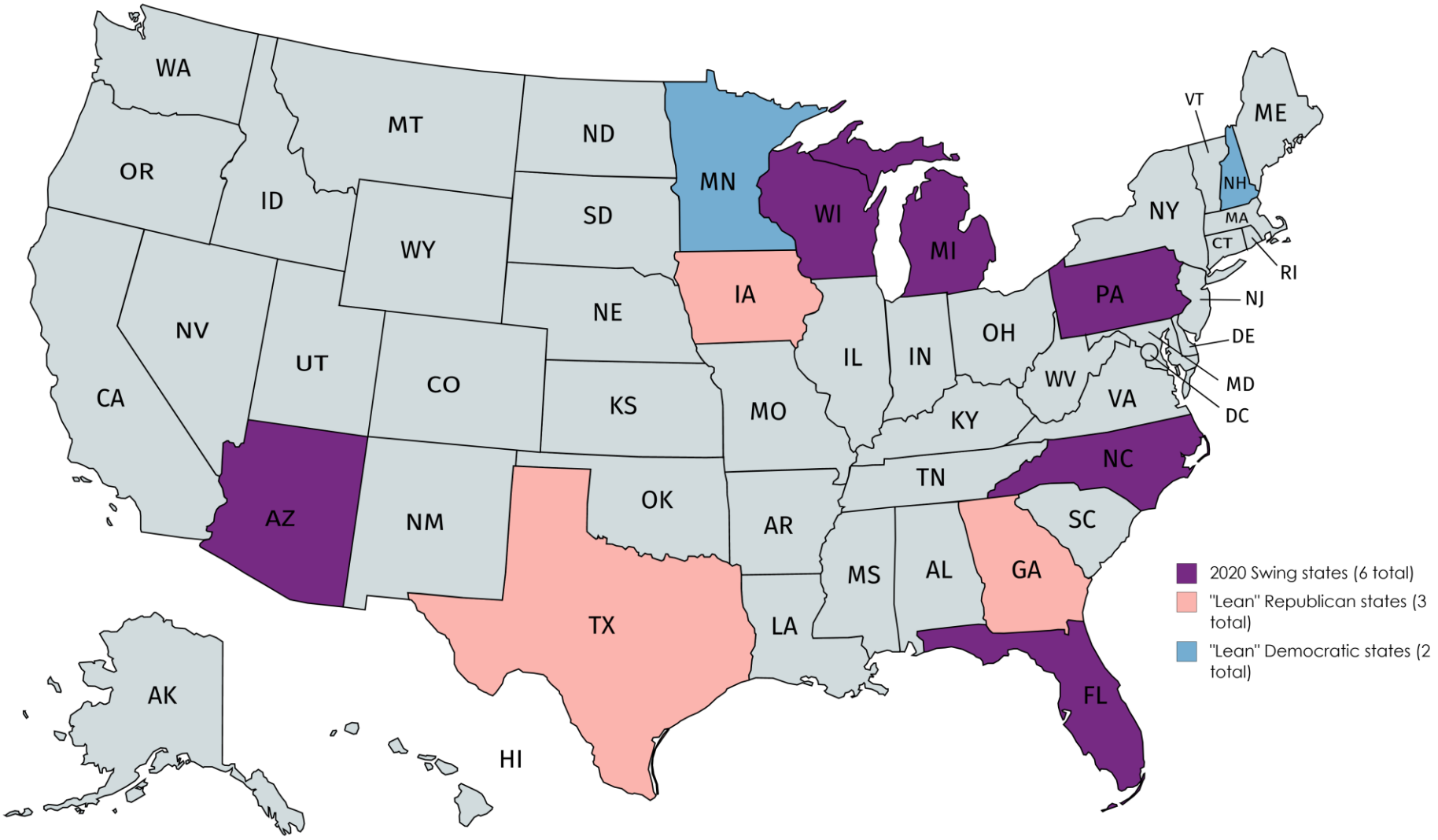
The Candidates Know It

"When we pick the president of the United States, we're picking somebody for all of us.

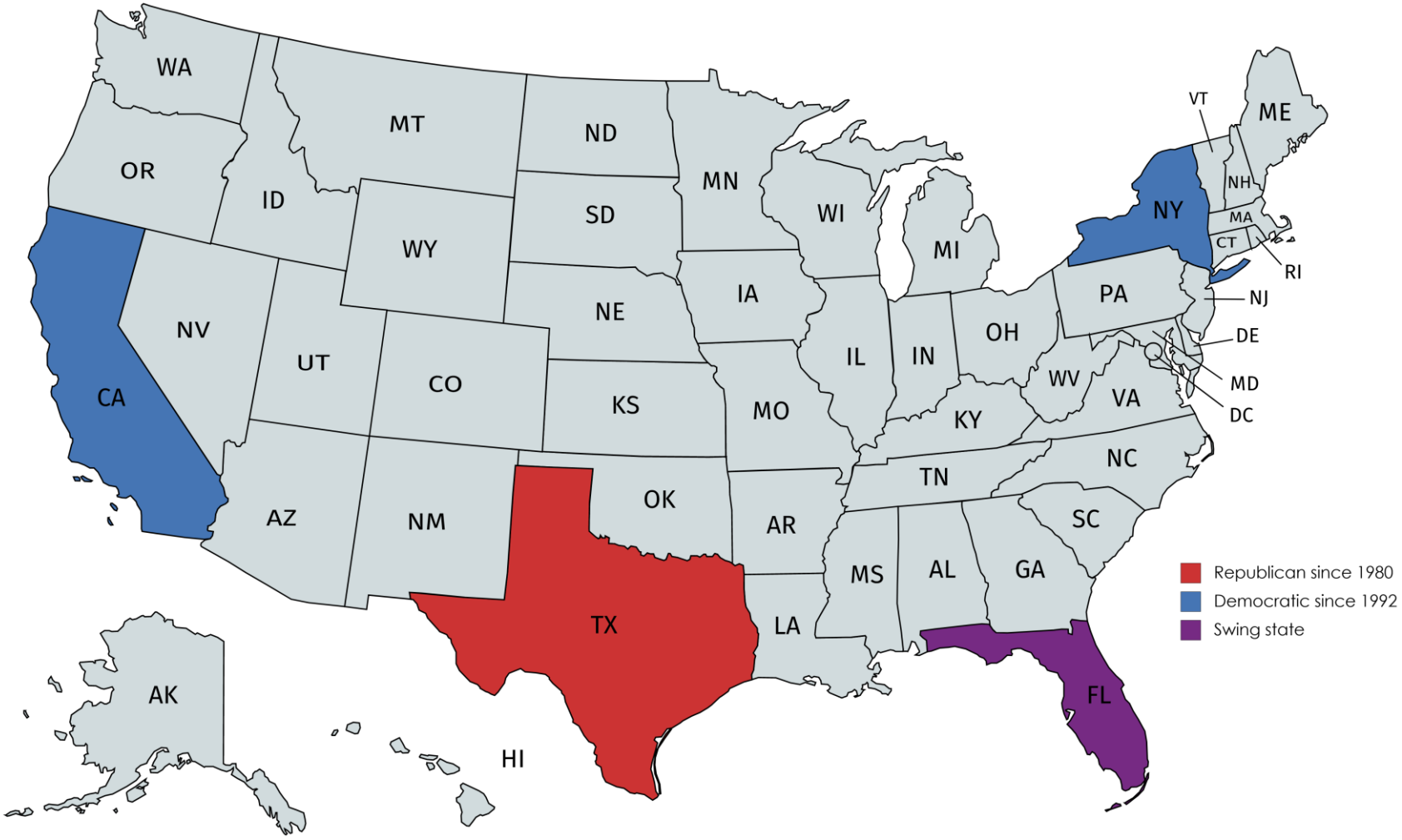
And yet if you live in a very red state like mine or a very blue state, most years it's like your vote doesn't count at all when it comes to the presidency."

- 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg

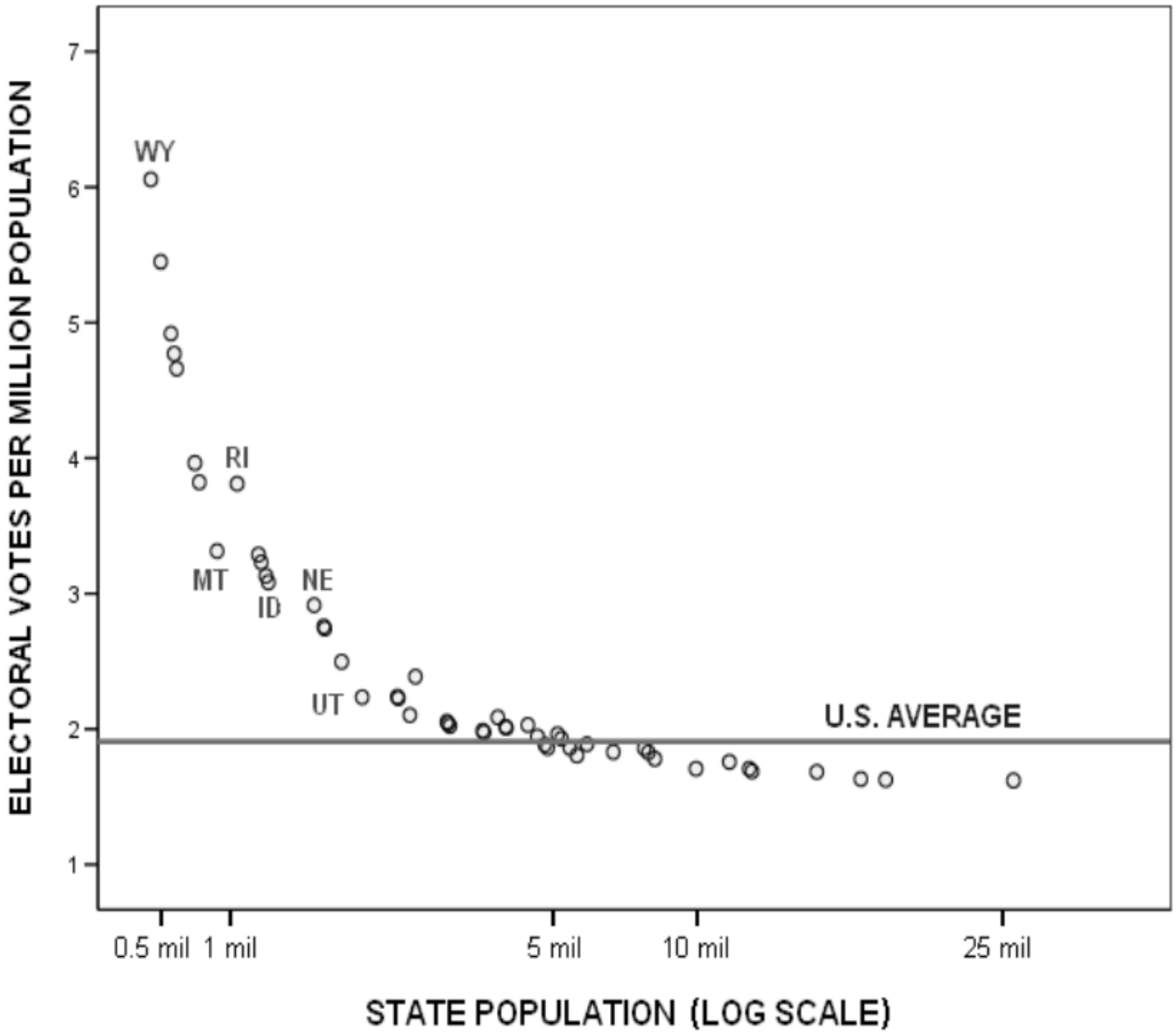
2020 Will Come Down to Just a Handful of States



Only One of the Four Biggest States Has Been Contested in Recent Presidential Races

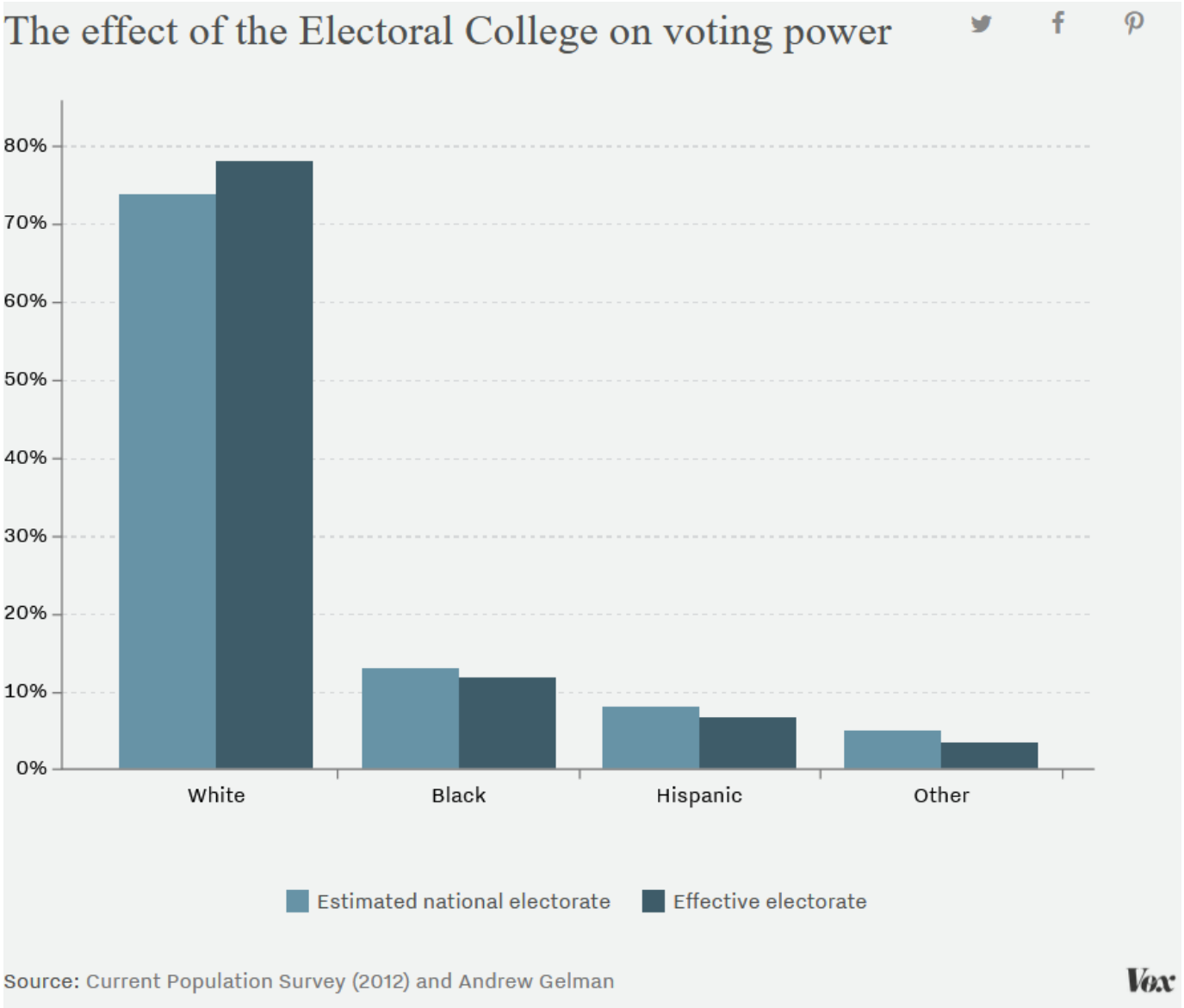


Small State Voters are Overrepresented



Source: Miller (2009)

The Swing States are Whiter Than the Electorate

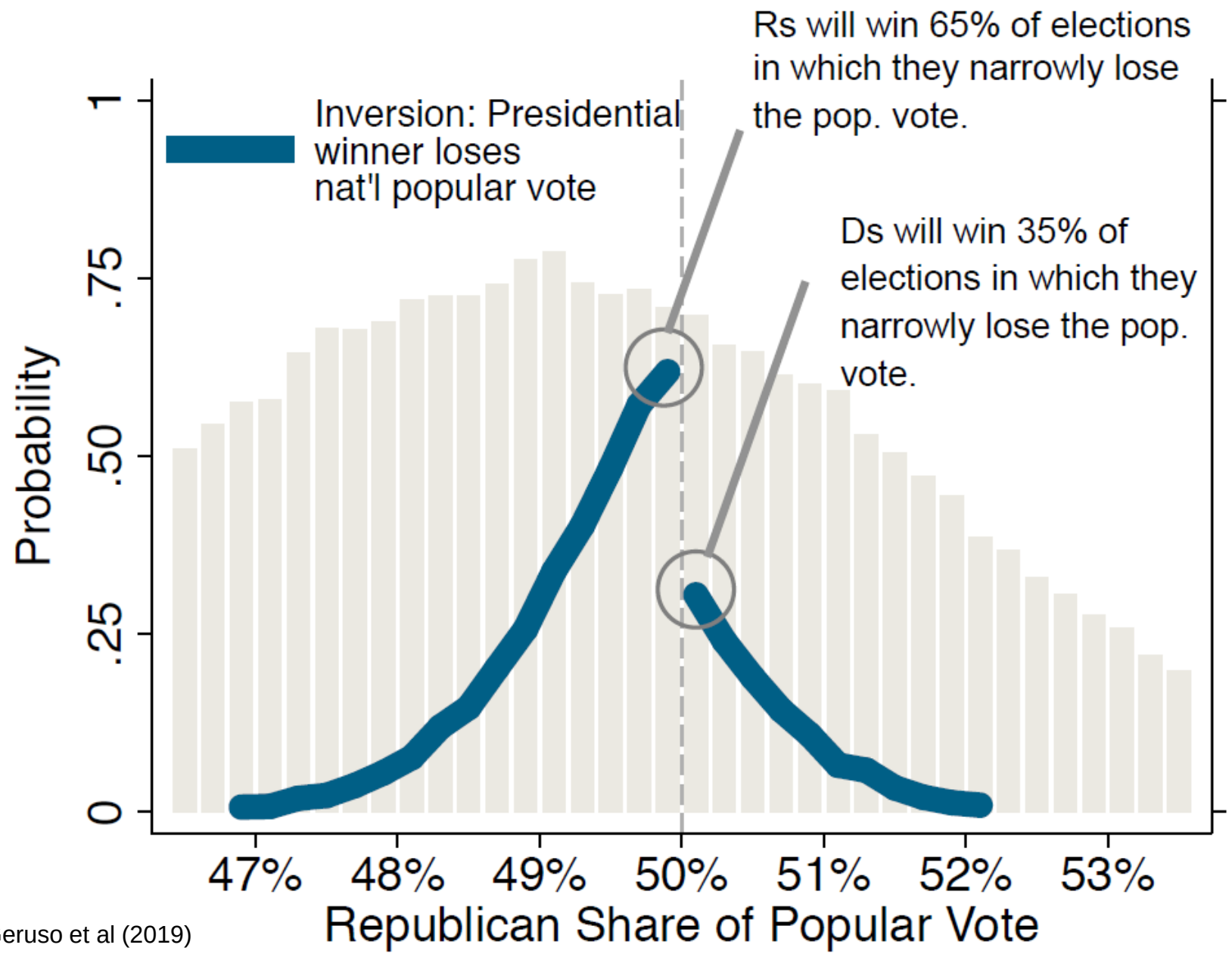


Why Does It Help the GOP?

- Right now, the electoral college helps the Republican Party and hurts the Democrats

- This is *not* always true in American politics – sometimes the electoral college has been a structural advantage for Democrats

- Right now however, Democratic votes are overconcentrated in blue states, whereas Republican voters are more spread out
  - The pivotal swing states are more Republican than the country as a whole
  - The Democrat winning a lot of votes in CA doesn't help them become president!

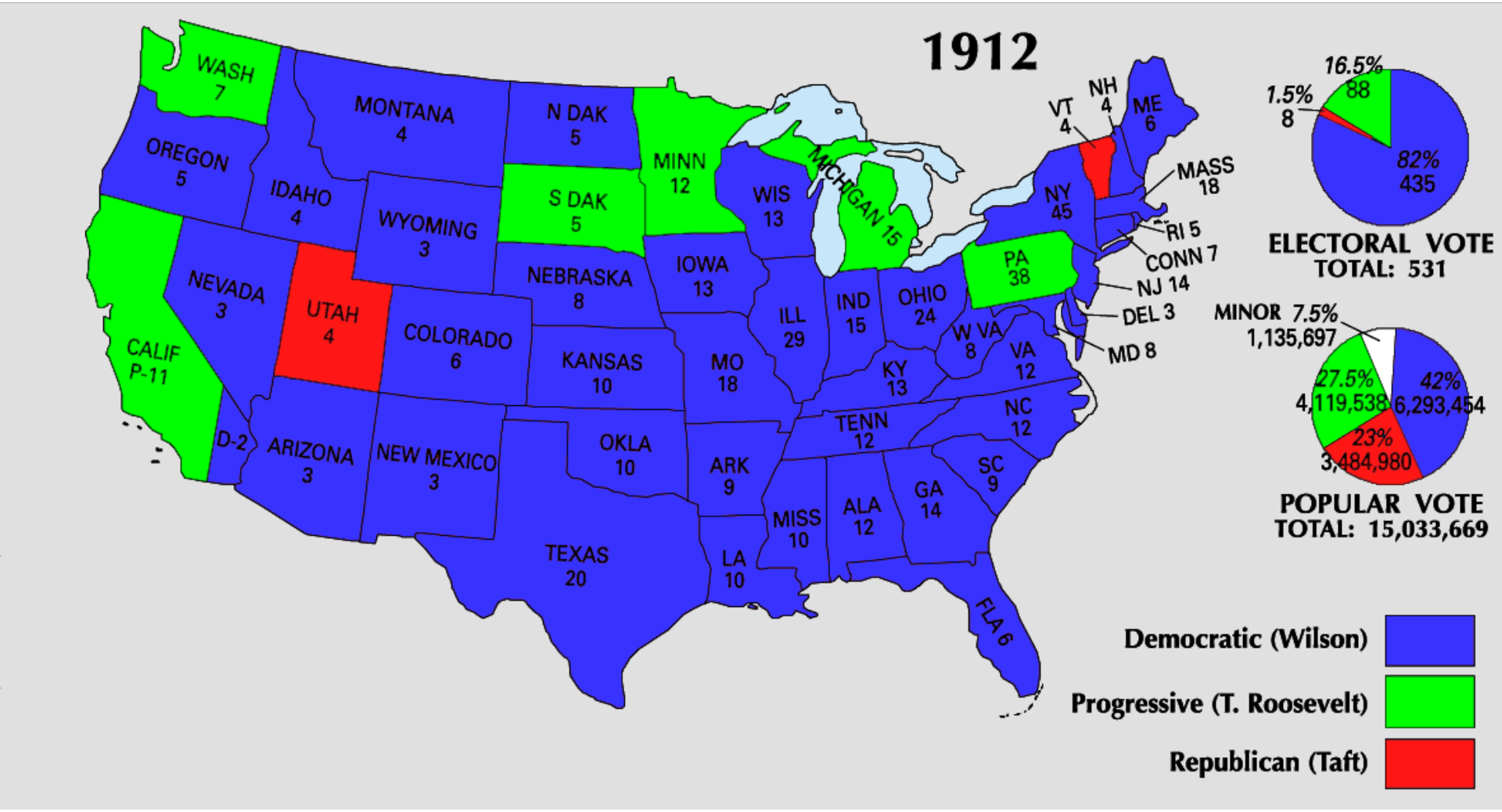


Source: Geruso et al (2019)

Why Does It Hurt Third Party Candidates?

- Remember, this is a plurality winner-take-all electoral system at the state level
- What does a candidate get if they come in 2nd in a state?
  - Nothing!
- Getting a lot of the popular vote doesn't necessarily translate into Electoral Votes
- Let's compare…

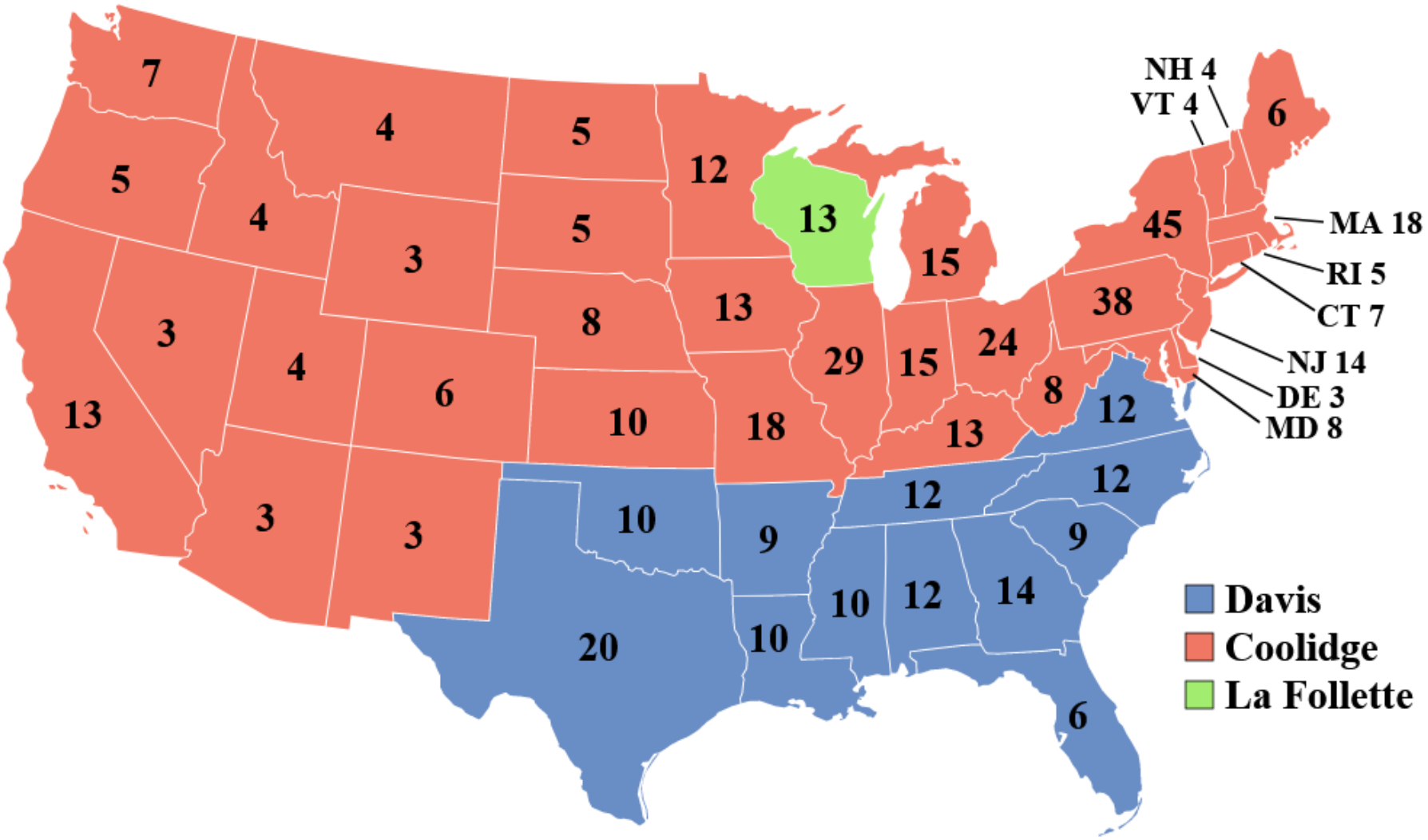
Roosevelt and Taft Split Republican Voters



1924 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Calvin Coolidge	Republican	**54**	**382**
John Davis	Democratic	28.8	136
Robert La Follette	Progressive	16.6%	13

EV needed to win: 266

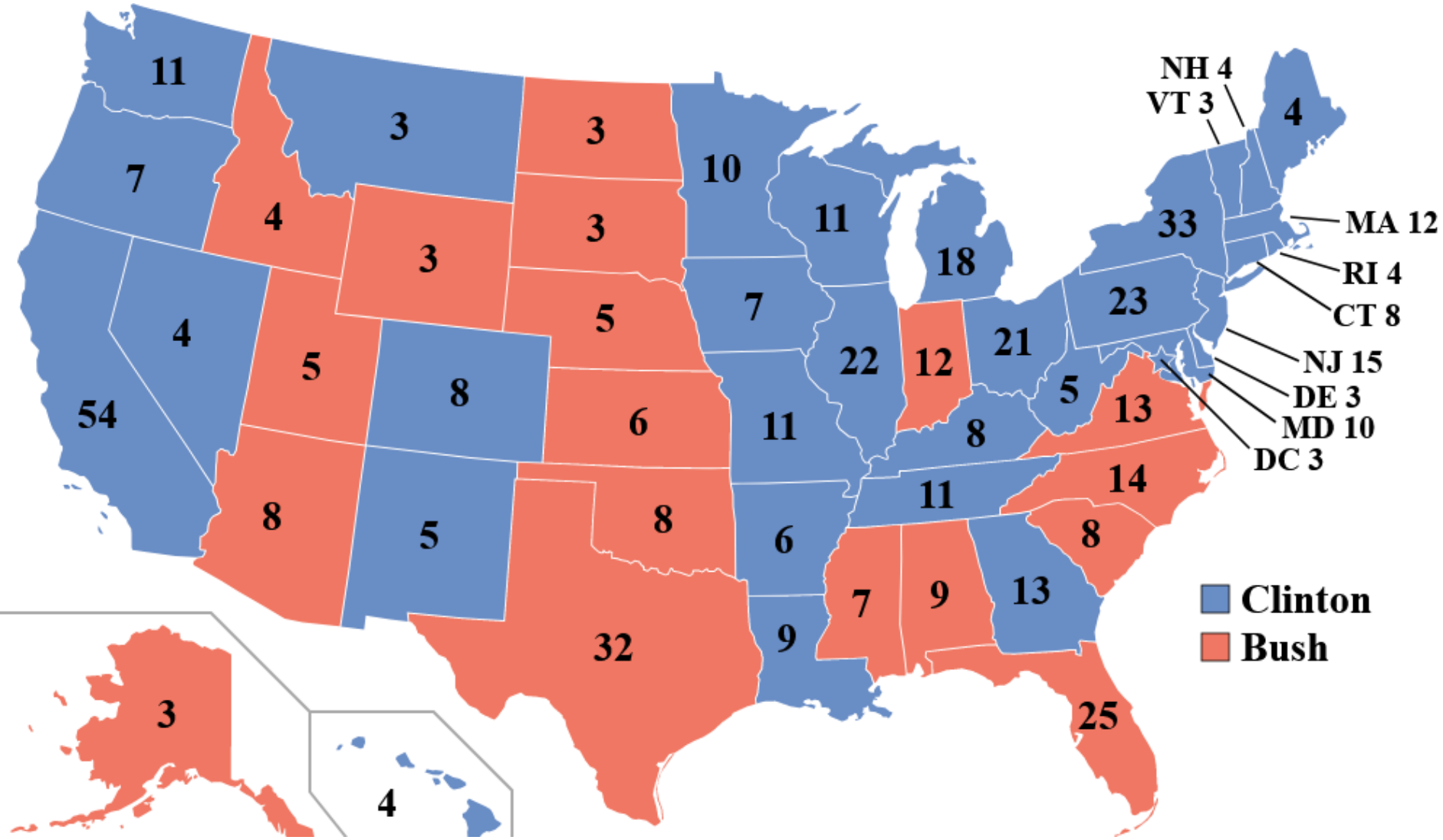


Source: Wikipedia

1992 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
George H.W. Bush	Republican	37.4	168
Bill Clinton	Democratic	**43.0**	**370**
Ross Perot	Independent	18.9%	0

EV needed to win: 270



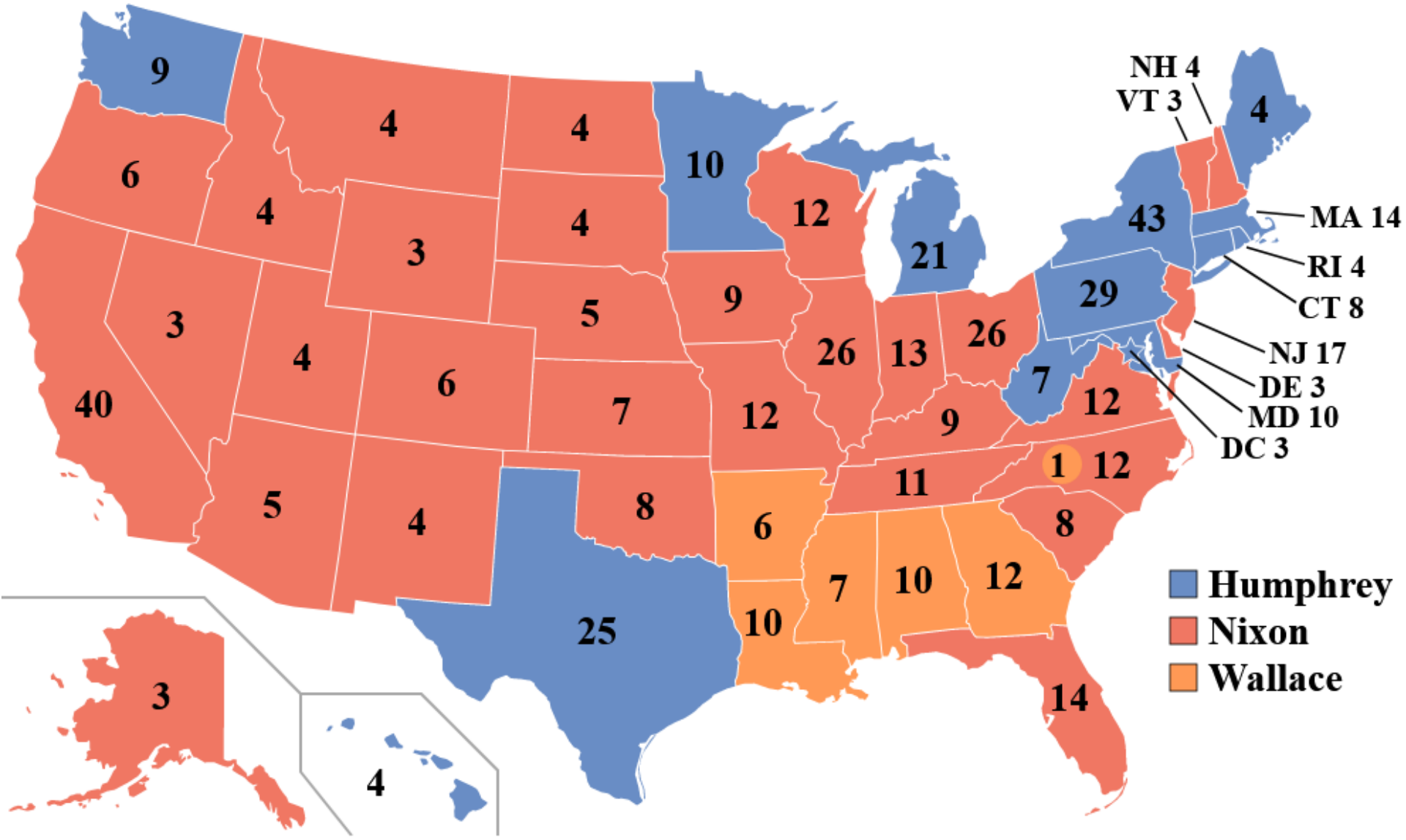
Source: Wikipedia

1968 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	% votes	EV
Richard Nixon	Republican	**43.4**	**301**
Hubert Humphrey	Democratic	42.7	191
George Wallace	American Independent	13.5%	46

- Wallace got a much smaller percent of the popular vote than Taft, Perot, and even La Follette… but a lot more electoral votes! Why?

EV needed to win: 270



Source: Wikipedia

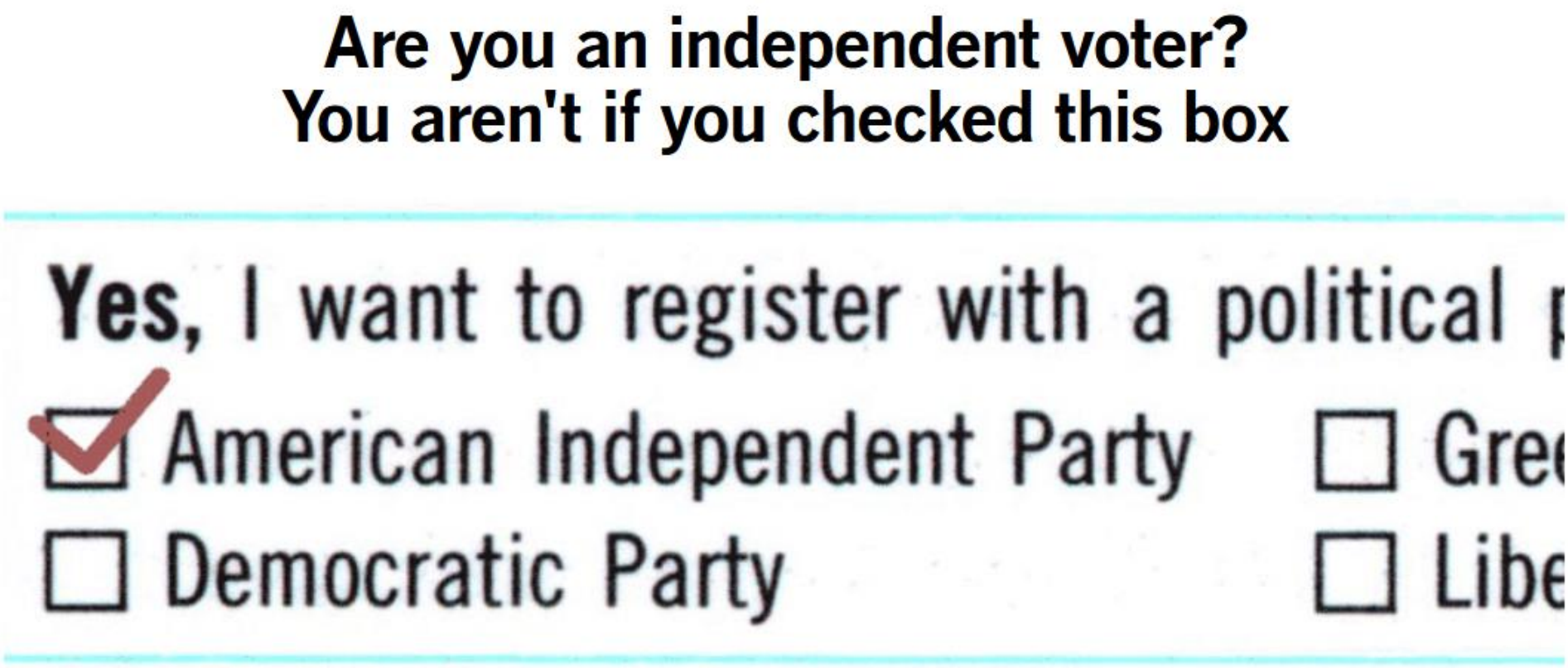
Why Does It Hurt Third Party Candidates?

- To get electoral votes, candidates need to come in first in many states
  - This is simply too big a lift for third party candidates without major party infrastructure behind them

- Since there is no prize for second (or third) place, the electoral college **strongly** incentivizes parties to be as broad as possible
  - By being as big a tent as possible, a party maximizes its number of voters and increases the odds of its candidate coming in first in more states in presidential elections

- This is a major cause of the two-party system in the US

PSA: The American Independent Party Still Exists!



- This is from a *Los Angeles Times* story investigating the AIP

Founded By This Guy

It is hereby Certified No. 1056

Is a paid member for 1969

GEORGE WALLACE

AMERICAN INDEPENDENT PARTY

and as a member is endeavoring to exert his strength and influence in his city, county, state and nation to the end that there may be established and maintained freedom in America.

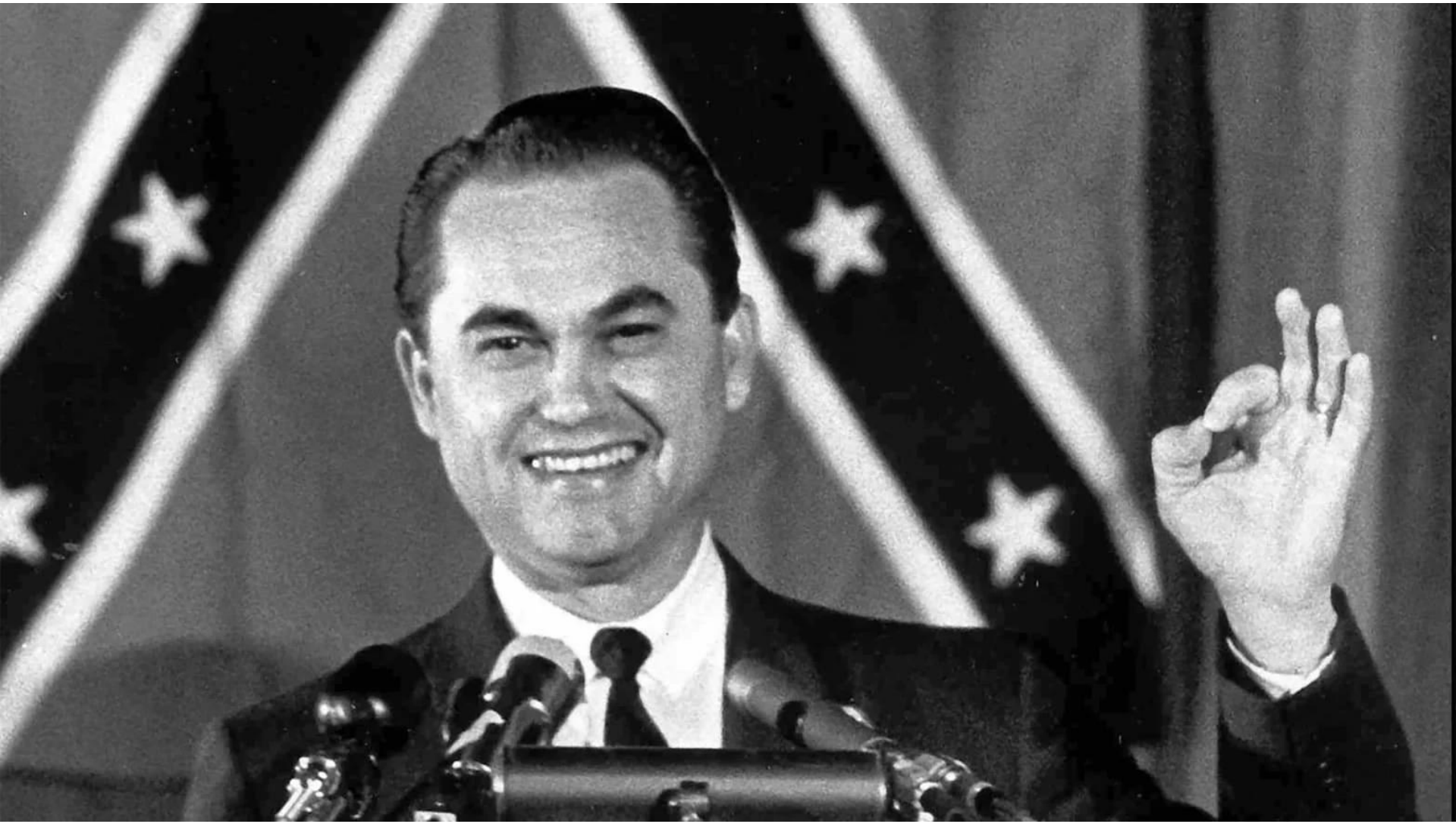
STAND UP FOR AMERICA

Louis Molnar
Chairman

Yearly
$3.00

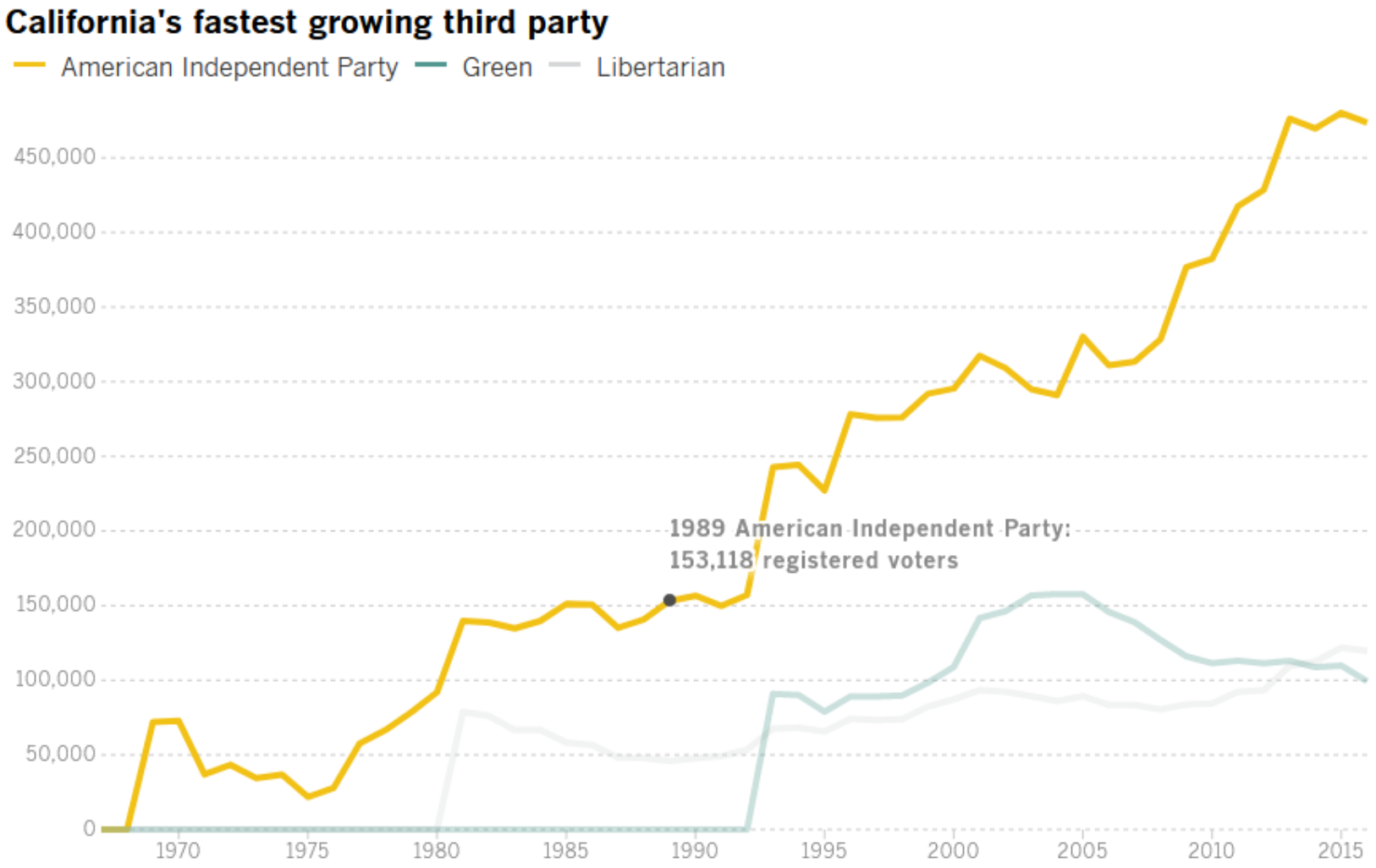
Joseph Payton
Treasurer

Yeah, THIS Guy



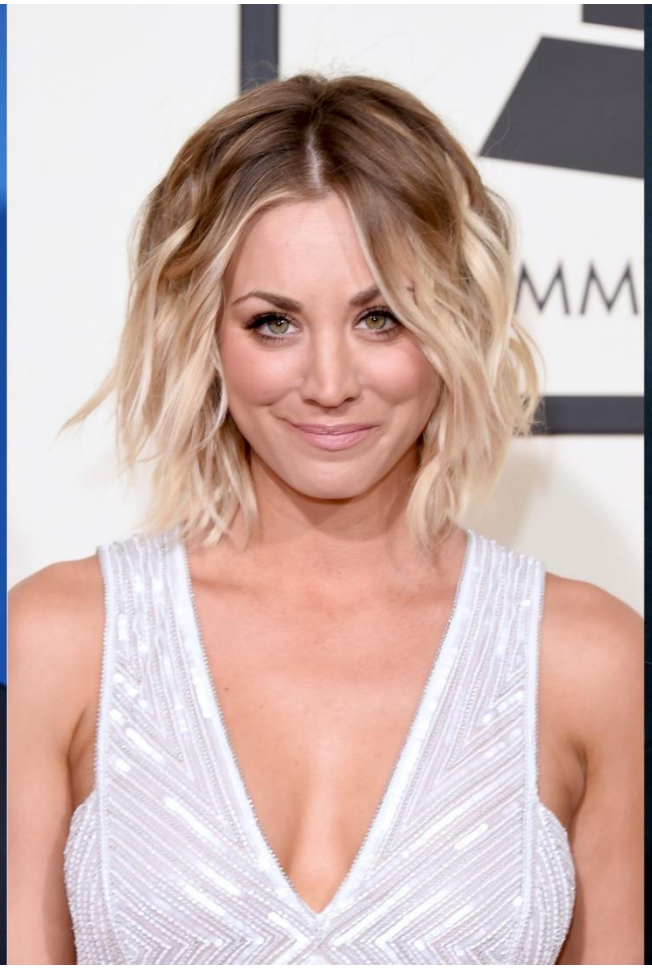
THIS Guy

It Confuses a Lot of People!



Some of Whom You May Recognize

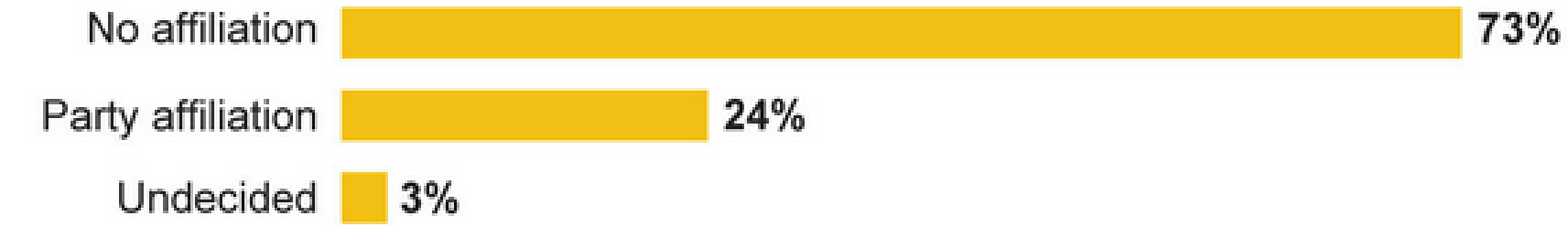
Some of Whom You May Recognize



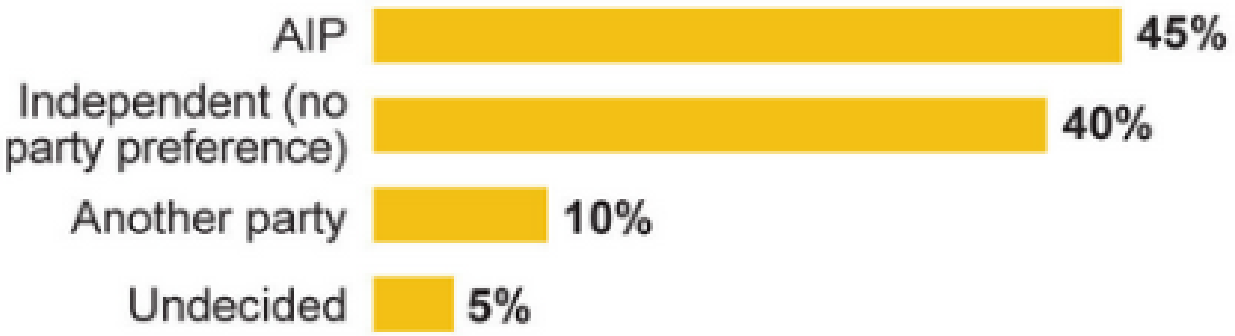
Oops

Times poll finds 3 in 4 didn't know

How AIP members identify themselves



AIP members' preferred registration after hearing party platform



What's the Alternative?

DOES IT SPARK JOY?
THE U.S. ELECTORAL COLLEGE
©Tommy Siegel

Why Is it Hard to Get Rid Of?

- While Marie Kondo makes it look easy, the electoral college is actually hard to get rid of

- The electoral college is in the Constitution, and amending the Constitution is hard
  - 2/3 support of Congress or of state legislatures

- Those who benefit from the current system are unlikely to support getting rid of it:
  - Swing states
  - Red states

What Are the Alternatives?

1. Abolish the presidency
   - Good luck with that
   - There are lots of parliamentary democracies though!

2. National popular vote
   - E.g. Honduras, Kenya, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan

3. Two-round system
   - This is the most popular method
   - E.g. France, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, Iran, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uruguay

National Popular Vote Interstate Compact

- One reform approach is getting a lot of attention
- The NPVIC is a legislative agreement among the states that *only* becomes law if states totaling 270+ electoral votes sign on
- If that happens, those states agree to give all their electoral college votes to the national popular vote winner
- This is a clever way of circumventing the electoral college
  - Nothing in the Constitution restricts how states allocate their electoral votes

A Debate on the NPVIC

What Happens If The NPVIC Succeeds?

- **Increased** attention on dense urban areas currently ignored
  - E.g. Los Angeles, Houston, NYC, Seattle, San Diego, etc.
- Swing states would get a lot **less** attention than they do now
- Some argue rural voters would get less attention – but not much evidence of this in other countries!
  - In fact, rural voters in safe states currently get ignored
- The difference would be presidential candidates would have to compete *everywhere* – not just in swing states
  - Elections could get even more expensive

Q&A