# research note

# Why Non-Competitive States are So Important for Understanding the Outcomes of Competitive Elections: The Electoral College 1868-2016\*

# Why Noncompetitive States are So Important for Understanding the Outcomes of Competitive Elections: The Electoral College 1868-2016

# ABSTRACT

*Brams and Kilgour (2017) begin their recent essay on the Electoral College by pointing out the obvious, but nonetheless regularly neglected, fact that states that are non-competitive may have a decisive impact on Electoral College (EC) outcomes and shape the electoral strategies of the candidates in the competitive states, especially if there is asymmetry in the partisan balance in the non-competitive states. Their contribution is to offer combinatorics insights into the implications of such asymmetries in the form of three new indicators: Winningness, Vulnerability, and Fragility. They then explore the magnitude and effects of these three measures for the presidential elections of 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. A main contribution of this note is to extend their analyses of these measures to an additional 34 elections: every election in the modern two-party post-Civil War era from 1868 through 2016. Inspired by their work, we also offer a new and simpler metric for partisan asymmetries in noncompetitive states and show how it can predict the expected closeness of EC outcomes as well or better than the more complex combinatorics measures.*

**Keywords: Electoral College; Non-Competitive States; Voting Power; Presidential Elections**

The Electoral College (EC) is often criticized because the logic of campaigning under the EC’s weighted voting rule makes each party’s presidential campaign focus exclusively on *battleground states*, i.e., states characterized as competitive. Such states can, over the course of a campaign, “swing” toward one candidate or the other. Often such states are taken -- wrongly as we shall see -- to be the ones that are solely determinative of the presidential winner. Even fewer states, the largest of the battleground states in terms of EC votes, are often seen as especially critical, while a large majority of states have seemingly no power to determine the president, since, for all practical purposes, the outcomes in those states cannot be changed by the presidential campaign. It is also well known that it is the potentially pivotal states that get all the attention from the candidates and the media.

The view that the states which are non-competitive are therefore made irrelevant has been challenged by Brams and Kilgour (2017).[[1]](#footnote-1) These authors point out that each candidate’s electoral votes can be thought of as coming from two sources: non-competitive states—with outcomes effectively decided before the election—and the competitive states that support him or her on election day. Thus, the readily foreseeable outcomes in non-competitive states can create a “loading of the dice” in an election, by requiring the candidate with fewer expected easy victories to do remarkably well in the more competitive states in order to win.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, at the extreme, we can imagine the outcomes in states essentially safe for one party might involve enough votes so as to render outcomes in the more competitive states the ones that are irrelevant. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Brams and Kilgour specify an indicator, *Winningness*, of the extent to which the virtually certain outcomes in non-competitive states structure the expected outcome of the overall election in a two-candidate contest. If we, for simplicity, posit that each of the battleground states is equally likely to go for either candidate, and there is *m* such states, then *Winningness* is the proportion of the 2*m* combinations of zeroes and ones in which the candidate who is ahead in the non-competitive states is the winner (adding the seats won in competitive states found in that particular combination to the already “known” votes in the non-competitive states). Note that the greater the advantage a given candidate has in the non-competitive states, the greater will be the expected proportion of the 2*m* outcomes in which that candidate is the winner of an Electoral College majority, since the candidate ahead in seats won in non-competitive states will need fewer seats won from the competitive seats to amass a winning majority than will the other candidate. In 2012, with *m=*8 competitive states, Brams and Kilgour point out (p. 101) that 207 (80.9%) of the 256 splits would result in a win for Obama, whereas only 49 (19.1%) would result in a win for Romney, giving Obama 4.22 times more ways of winning than Romney.”

Brams and Kilgour (2017: 101-2) offer two other closely linked indicators that can be used to measure the extent to which outcomes are predictable: *Vulnerability* and *Fragility*. *Vulnerability* is defined as “the proportion of the coalitions in competitive states in which a single competitive state, by switching to the other candidate, either can cause a change in the winner or create a tie …;” while “*Fragility* is measured by the expected number of competitive states in a winning coalition that can disrupt victory in this way.”

Brams and Kilgour, using a definition of *non-competitive state* as one where the winner’s vote share is expected to be above 53%, calculate *Winningness*, *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility* for four recent elections: 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. In the next section, we extend their analysis to include all 38 presidential elections in the modern two-party era, from 1868-2016. We look at the correlations of their measures over the entire time period and we consider how well each (and all three together) allow us to predict EC winners and EC seat shares in these 38 elections, and we discuss the question of how well an *ex post* measure of non-competitive states relates to expectations about non-competitiveness *ex ante*. In the online Appendix, we consider how analyses would change if we changed the definition of non-competitive state.While the analyses in the Appendix show that our choice of range to define a competitive state can matter a great deal, to maximize our compatibility with Brams and Kilgour (2017), and because we think this definition is a plausible one in the context of predicting EC outcomes (see discussion below), we will use the Brams and Kilgour (2017) plus or minus three percentage point definition of competitive state throughout the essay.

In the subsequent section, we offer a simple alternative measure based on the Brams and Kilgour intuition about the importance of the imbalance in partisan breakdown of EC seat shares in the non-competitive states. We show that this measureis even more highly predictive of the final EC outcomes and EC seat percentages than any single one of the measures proposed by Brams and Kilgour.

***Winningness*, *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility: 1868-2016***

For the Electoral College for the entire modern two-party era, 1868-2016, we provide in the online appendix in Table A1 *ex post* values for the Democratic and Republican EC seat shares in the noncompetitive states in the first two columns, and we show the final EC seat tallies for both parties, both as numbers and as a percentage. In addition, we provide a column that has the *difference* between the Democratic and Republican EC seats in the noncompetitive states, and a further column that shows that difference normalized by total EC seats.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Table A2,we provide the values of *Winningness*, *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility* that extend those provided by B-K to the entire modern political era.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**<< Figure 1 about here>>**

We see from the first plot in Figure 1 that in most years, *Winningness* is such that the outcome is expected to be determined solely by what happens in the non-competitive states, i.e., a *Winningness* values of zero or one. In the four elections analyzed in Brams and Kilgour (2017), only one, 2008, fell into this category. Had Brams and Kilgour extended their data back somewhat further in time to 1980, however, they would have found that in that election and in each of the four following elections, one of the two candidates had locked up enough votes in non-competitive states to win the election.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Table A3 looks at the correlations among the *Winningness*, *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility* variables, and EC seat share. For *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility* we must report results separately for the Republicans and the Democrats. The *Winningness* value for the Democratic candidate is simply the negative of the *Winningnes*s value for the Republican candidate. *Winningness* is defined for all elections, so that we can run its correlation with the EC outcome for the entire data set. But the other pairwise Pearson correlations reported in Table A3 are only for values of *Vulnerability* and *Fragility* that are defined and not zero, i.e., for the elections whose outcomes can be effected by what happens in the competitive states (17 of 38 elections). Table A3b provides correlations for all elections where non-competitive states did not decide the election and at least one competitive state could have changed the outcome.

We see from Table A3a that, as commonsense would predict, when *Winningness* is high, *Vulnerablity* and *Fragility* are both low. The absolute value of the correlations among this set of variables is very high. For example, the correlation between Democratic *Vulnerability* and Democratic *Fragility* is r=0.89**,** whilethe correlation between Republican *Vulnerability* and Republican *Fragility* is r=0.71**.**

While the various measures proposed by Brams and Kilgour (2017) are of theoretical interest, in and of themselves, we are most interested in how these measures allow us to address the bias imposed on likely Electoral College outcomes of having a substantial proportion of seat outcomes already known in advance in a fashion that favors one political party. Brams and Kilgour note (2017: 111) that the sign on the *Winningness* advantage correctly predicts the winners in all four of the presidential contests they study. When we replicate that analysis for all 38 elections, we find that this holds for all but two elections: 1880 and 1960. This is a very good predictive performance by the *Winningnes*s variable. Even if we consider just the 17 elections where the winner was determined by the competitive states, this is a success rate of 88%.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A more difficult test for the predictive usefulness of *Winningness* and the other two variables is to ask how well they, singly or collectively*,* predict final EC seat share outcomes. These three variables are, in fact, highly correlated with EC outcomes, with the correlation for *Winningness* at r=0.90. The correlation between EC outcomes and Republican *Fragility* is -0.76, while it is -0.67 with Democratic *Fragility*. The correlation between EC outcomes andRepublican *Vulnerability* is -0.66, while it is -0.81 with Democratic *Vulnerability*.

The high proportion of cases for which *Winningness* is either 0 or 1 affects its power to predict final seat shares.When we restrict *Winningness* to values between 0 and 1 (i.e., the values for which *Vulnerability* is defined), its correlation with EC outcomes declines to 0.73. In such cases, *Vulnerability* is the most highly correlated single variable with the EC outcome for the Democratic candidates, but *Fragility* is the most highly correlated for the Republican candidates.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Accuracy of ex post classification of states as non-competitive**

B-K first justify the use of the *ex-post* criterion by which they classify competitive and non-competitive states by pointing out that ±3% corresponds with the usual pre-election poll margin of error.[[9]](#footnote-9) Second, they point out that, empirically, there is a very good fit between *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluations of competitive states.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, in 2012, B-K note that 99.6% of advertising money was spent in the ten states identified as battlegrounds by FairVote.org. Of those ten states, eight are included in the *post hoc* set of competitive states, while the other two were the next closest states in terms of margin of victory.

We provide confirmation of the congruence between final results and expectations of competitiveness for two additional recent elections, those in 2004 and in 2016.[[11]](#footnote-11) However,we would not, in general, expect the campaign spending or campaign appearances to be only in competitive states, since candidates also spend some money and make some appearances for reasons not directly related to boosting their own campaign chances, e.g., to help down-ticket candidates or to build for the future. [[12]](#footnote-12)

In the 2016 election, the campaigns and campaign related PACs spent 82% of advertising money in the states retrospectively classified as competitive.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, the only competitive state not targeted by either campaign was Minnesota, a state that holds the longest win streak for Democratic candidates. Similarly, if we look at candidate rallies or events where the presidential or vice-presidential candidate was present in 2016, the major party candidates held 79% of all events in the 13 states which post-hoc we are labeling competitive. In 2012, 87% of campaign events were held in the set 8 states viewed post-hoc as competitive.[[14]](#footnote-14) A similar pattern occurs in 2004, when 85% of campaign events were held in the 12 competitive states (Shaw 2006)**.**

**Using of Partisan Imbalance in Non-Competitive States to Predict EC Outcomes**

We, like Brams and Kilgour (2017), believe that outcomes in non-competitive states are critical in understanding final Electoral College winners. In this section, we capitalize on that insight by offering a simple measure that we show jointly performs as well or better as the Brams-Kilgour variables in predicting final EC outcomes.

To present our measure, some notation is useful. We may again partition the states into the set of competitive states, Cj,and the set of non-competitive states, NCi, where *i* indicates the election year. The EC seats in a competitive state are labeled as s(Cj) and the EC seats in a non-competitive state are labeled as s(NCj). We have s(EC) = s(Cj) + s(NCj). The noncompetitive states won by Democrats we label NCD, and the non-competitive states won by Democrats we label NCR. The seats in the non-competitive states won by the Democrats are thus labeled s(NCD) and the seats in the non-competitive states won by Republicans are thus labeled s(NCR).

We will be interested, on the one hand, on the partisan balance of seats in the non-competitive states and, on the other hand, on the share of the states that fall into the non-competitive category. We define our variable of interest as the difference between the two-candidate’s non-competitive electoral totals, divided by the total number of EC seats

***Non-Competitive Advantage* = [s(NCD) - s(NCR)]/s(EC)**

This measure is standardized, thus allowing us to compare its effects across elections. When one party has a big advantage in non-competitive electoral votes, they will be more likely to win the election. Bram's and Kilgour reflect this intuition by examining coalitions among competitive states, and determining outcomes under the explicit assumptions that the competitive state outcomes occur independently of one another and with an equal probability of victory for the two parties in each. [[15]](#footnote-15) We do not require either of these strong assumptions. But exactly the same intuition drives our model as that in the work of Brams and Kilgour, namely that the candidate that has a bigger advantage in electors from the non-competitive states will have more options in terms of possible wins in competitive states leading to Electoral College victory.

We first test the predictive usefulness of our *Non-Competitive Advantage* variable by looking to see how often the party with the advantage in the non-competitive states wins the EC vote. As does the *Winningness* measure, in all four of the elections from 2000 through 2012, *Non-Competitive Advantage* correctly predicts the presidential outcome. Indeed, we find that in all but 2 of the 38 elections (1880 and 1960) the party with a *Non-Competitive Advantage* goes on to win the election, with errors including the same two that *Winningness* fails to predict. In the two elections that fail under this classification, the partisan gap in non-competitive seats is very low, and thus the election is hard to predict.

Next, we regress Republican EC seat share on the *Non-Competitive Advantage* variable*.* Here we find (see Table A4) a very strong and significant relationship between the two measures, and the simple regression between them yields an adjusted R2 of 0.96. We can compare this regression with one that models the same dependent variable with *Winningness* as the predictive variable. As noted earlier, the adjusted R2 of the *Winningness* model is 0.81, which is considerably lower than that for *Non-Competitive Advantage* at 0.96. Whilethe very simple *Non-Competitive Advantage* variable does better in predicting final seat shares than any (or all) of the three variables from Brams-Kilgour (2017), *Winningness* and *Non-Competitive Advantage* do equally was well at predicting the directionality of EC outcomes.

# **Discussion**

Brams and Kilgour (2017) begin by suggesting that the set-up power of non-competitive states dictate the terms under which a presidential election is contested. We agree. While competitive states receive the bulk of campaign activities like television and radio advertising, campaign field offices, and visits from the candidates and their surrogates, the media “horse-race” coverage about ‘swing states’ and ‘battleground states’ takes attention away from the extent to which safe seats matter for election outcomes. Partisan balance in non-competitive states matters since the candidate who enjoys a *Non-Competitive Advantage* has many additional pathways to the presidency, and thus one candidate can begin the presidential contest severely handicapped.

We have extended B-K’s analyses of *Winningness*, *Vulnerability* and *Fragility* beyond the four recent elections they analyze, to include not just 2016, but all elections between 1868 and 2016. Thus, we have added 34 elections to the analyses. We also added a new and simpler variable based on the logic of the B-K argument, namely, *Non-Competitive Advantage,* defined as the difference in safe EC seats between the parties, normalized by total EC seats. We find that the candidate that holds the edge in *Winningness* and *Non-Competitive Advantage* have gone on to win in all but 2 of the 38 elections since 1868. In the mispredicted elections, the partisan advantage in non-competitive seats was very slim.

When we move from attempting to predict a dichotomous outcome variable to seeking to predict final EC vote shares, we found that both *Winningness* and our new *Non-Competitive Advantage* variable are both highly predictive of EC seat shares, but now the predictive edge is with the simpler variable, since it is a continuous variable rather than a dichotomy **(**R2 of 0.96 vs. one of 0.81).[[16]](#footnote-16)We take these results to be highly supportive of the basic B-K intuition:the candidate that has more potential paths to victory is far more likely to win the election. Campaigns have clear incentives to concentrate resources in the most competitive states, butnon-competitive states play a foundational role in setting up the contest and, as we have shown, the candidate who has the edge in the Non-Competitive EC seats is almost always elected President.

**Figure 1: Comparing Winningness, Vulnerability, and Fragility to EC Outcomes**

**/Users/jcervas/Dropbox/Non Competitive Electors/scatterBrams.pdf**

*Note: Candidate’s Share of EC is from the Republican perspective in plot one. The absolute value of the EC Share is taken in the second and third plot.*

# **References**

Bartels, Larry M. 1985. “Resource Allocation In a Presidential Campaign.” *The Journal of Politics.* Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 928-936.

Bartels, Larry M. 1988. “Electoral Continuity and Change, 1868-1996.” *Electoral Studies.* Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 301-326.

Banzhaf, John F., III. 1968. “One Man, 3.312 Votes: A Mathematical Analysis of the Electoral College,” *Villanova Law Review* 13, no. 2: 304-332.

Brams, Steven J. and D. Marc Kilgour. 2017. “Paths to victory in presidential elections: the setup power of noncompetitive states”. *Public Choice* 170:99–113,

Election 1984. 1984. *Editorial research reports 1984* Vol. II. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre1984091400

Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King. 1993. “Why are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls so Variable When Votes are so Predictable?” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 409-451.

Pattie, Charles, and Ron Johnson. 2014. “The Electors Shall Meet in their respective states’: Bias and the US Presidential Electoral College, 1960-2012.” *Political Geography,* Vol. 40, pp 35-45.

Shaw, Daron R. 2006. *The Race to 270.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shirani-Mehr, Houshmand, David Rothschild, Sharad Goel, and Andrew Gelman. “Disentangling Bias and Variance in Election Polls.” (forthcoming).

Retrieved from http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/research/unpublished/pollposition\_v2.pdf

1. We will refer to Brams and Kilgour’s *Electoral Studies* paper by their names and with the B-K acronym interchangeably throughout this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, in 2012, Brams and Kilgour point out (p. 101): “Because Barack Obama had a 233–191 electoral vote lead over Mitt Romney in the 42 noncompetitive states and the District of Columbia, he needed only 37 of the 114 electoral votes in the competitive states to win with a majority of 270 electoral votes, whereas Romney needed 79.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 1984, Ronald Reagan won 49 out of 51 states (including Washington D.C.) Norman Ornstein, writing before the election, said “Incumbent presidents don’t often lose, particularly presidents presiding over 6% real growth and low or non-existent inflation” (quoted in *CQ Press*, http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1984091400). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Minor party candidacies likely to be a problem for our analyses in situations where they receive Electoral College votes. This has not been the case in recent elections, as no minor party candidate has won a state since George Wallace in 1968. In their assessment of minor party impact, Pattie and Johnson (2014) do not find substantial effects and they also note that such effects have often been split in their partisan impact. To provide a consistent coding across all elections in our data set we ignore minor party votes and treat contests as between the two major party candidates in terms of two party vote share. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the process of replicating the Brams and Kilgour (2017) analyses, we found a few minor errors that we corrected; those corrections explain the differences in the numbers reported in Table A1 for the elections of 2000 and 2004**,** and those reported in Brams and Kilgour Table 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In 1992, Bill Clinton was just 7 shy of having enough seats in non-competitive states, and could have lost the election in only 5 of the over 130,000 different combinations of electoral outcomes among the competitive states, i.e., Winningness > 0.99. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While these two elections were very close in two-party vote margin, and thus might be regarded as hard to predict, they were less so electorally. In 1960, John F. Kennedy won the EC vote by 9.1% and in 1880, James Garfield won by 7.5%. In neither election were third party candidacies consequential in affecting relative two party shares. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We have done regression analyses with all three Brams-Kilgour measures as independent variables and EC Democratic share as the dependent variable, but we do not report results for these models since, as expected, the very high correlations among the three variables meant that adding *Vulnerability* and/or *Fragility* to *Winningness* did not increase the adjusted R2, and only one of the three variables was statistically significant in any of the models. When we include *Vulnerability*, and *Fragility,* we require separate equations for each party, and we lose cases. We find that the best fitting model in terms of adjusted R2 is the one where we simply use *Winningness* to predict the EC outcome, with an adjusted R2 value of 0.81. If we restrict the model to *Winningness* scores greater than zero and less than one, the adjusted R2 drops to 0.50 (see Table 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. When a state polls outside this three percentage point margin, it is generally seen as not winnable by the trailing candidate, although more errors in prediction do occur than would be suggested by the 95% confidence limits **(**Gelman and King 1993; Shirani-Mehr et al., forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A third reason for choosing the ±3% value is a pragmatic one that we found only after we had done robustness checks; over both recent elections and the longer historical data ±3% value t has (marginally) greater predictive power than the often used ±5% definition of competitive state (see Appendix). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Older elections also largely conform to these expectations. Detailed campaign activities for the 1976 election are available because they were submitted into evidence for the hearingbefore the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary (S.J. Res. 28,1979) on a bill that would abolish the ElectoralCollege and establish a direct popular vote. The data were first used by Bartels (1985). That election shows a similar pattern of campaign activities focused on the competitive states, though there were many more (25) competitive states in 1976 than in the two most recent elections of 2012 and 2016. In 1976, 78% of all campaign events were held in the 25 battleground states, and 78% of all campaign television and radio ads were held there. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bartels (1985) has pointed out that campaigns have what he calls both “instrumental” and “ornamental” reasons for staging campaign events. Attending an event in a swing state, where a candidate’s presence could increase turnout is instrumental, while visiting a state to satisfy state parties might be ornamental.Clinton spent over $600,000 in Arizona, perhaps trying to influence lower ticket races by increasing mobilization efforts. Ultimately, Arizona, a state that has had a strong Republican tradition, became competitive in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Data compiled from AdAge.com, based on state specific ad buys between October 21, 2016 and election day. http://adage.com/article/campaign-trail/states-where-trump-clinton-spending-most-on-advertising/306377/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Data aggregated from FairVote.org, with original data from CNN: http://www.fairvote.org/presidential\_tracker\_2012#2012\_campaign\_events [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We regard both of these assumptions as quite reasonable ones to make for purposes of model tractability, but we might expect that they would be falsified if there are electoral tides that sweep in a particular direction and thus create interdependencies in vote outcomes in the competitive states. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Even when we do not include years when the election victories were so large that competitive states were irrelevant to the outcome, we still find a substantial correlation between the *Winningness* and *Non-Competitive Advantage* variables and the actual EC outcomes (an R2 of 0.50 vs. one of 0.60). Of course, as we know from polling, all predictions have a margin of error, and the fact that we might give high odds that a given candidate will win does not mean that her election is a certainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)