**Electoral College Strategies of American Presidential Campaigns**

**from 1952 to 2012**

Daron R. Shaw

University of Texas at Austin

Scott Althaus

University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign

**Abstract**

There is widespread agreement that the Electoral College shapes the nature of presidential campaigns in the U.S., but relatively little empirical research explores what Electoral College strategies are like, how they have changed over time, or how they affect the allocation of candidate resources. Drawing on archival and news media data from presidential campaigns between 1952 and 2012, we re-construct how the major party presidential candidates classified states for campaign purposes and how they allocated candidate visits and campaign advertising across states. We find that campaigns have consistently developed detailed Electoral College strategies throughout this time period and have allocated resources in rough accordance with these plans. Furthermore, some common conceptions about presidential campaign strategies are challenged: competitiveness is only imperfectly correlated with battleground status; populous states are no longer more likely to be targeted; and the number of battleground states has changed only marginally over time.

WORD COUNT: 10,297

KEYWORDS: campaigns, elections, strategy.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors thank the Cline Center for Democracy at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for long-term financial and computational support of this project. We also thank the many gracious staff members who assisted our archival research efforts at the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Goldwater, Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Reagan libraries, the Mudd Library at Princeton University, the Hoover Library at Stanford University, the NARA Archive I site in Washington DC, and the NARA Archive II site in College Park, MD. Our project benefitted from the expert advice of many people involved in presidential campaigns over more than six decades, including Mary Lukens, Bill Wilson, Gerald Rafshoon, Ted Sorenson, Bill Murphy, and Fred Steeper. We are also grateful for research assistance from Dave Paul, Jake Jensen, Phil Habel, Sarah Castle, Ulric Shannon, Matt Harrington, Emily Renwick, Paul Richardson, Amanda Carne, Paul Testa, Lauren Ratliff, Jeremy Teigen, and especially Jason Rittenberg, who accompanied Scott Althaus on numerous trips to archive locations around the country.

**Introduction**

There are few certainties in politics, but it is a safe bet that the next presidential election will generate dozens of news stories about the candidates’ strategies for capturing 270 electoral votes and winning the White House. The “sun rising in the East” quality of this prediction rests on our understanding of both the U.S. news media and presidential election rules; pundits and practitioners always focus on the horserace when discussing American elections (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar, 1992; Patterson, 1993) and the presidential horserace is defined by the need to win enough states to guarantee a majority of electors. In particular, journalists and the expert consultants they rely on will speculate about which states are particularly critical to the candidates. Coverage will concentrate on the races in those states, even to the exclusion of what happens in other, non-battleground states. This much we know.

We know less about how the campaigns come to prioritize some states over others, or how these priorities affect their outreach to voters. We also know little about how Electoral College strategies have changed over time. This doesn’t prevent speculation about what campaigns are thinking and how their allocation of campaign resources reflects strategy. A few have even suggested some trends in strategic thinking over time. Still, we have scant empirical evidence on—and almost no analyses of—Electoral College strategies beyond single year case studies and campaign narratives.

This gap stems from a lack of data rather than limited interest. Concerns about the quality of political representation and accountability have long been at the heart of democratic theory (Manin 1997; Mansbridge 2003; Rehfeld 2006; Urbinati and Warren 2008; Rehfeld 2009; Mansbridge 2011), and these concerns have dogged few institutions of contemporary democracy as much as the Electoral College (e.g., Edwards, 2004; Grofman and Feld, 2005; for a recent review, see Miller 2011). Institutional design is a critical factor determining the type and quality of representation (Stimson, MacKuen et al. 1995; Hansen 1998; Przeworski, Stokes et al. 1999; Disch 2012), and presidential systems have particular strengths and weaknesses for enabling citizens to hold their governments accountable for what they have done, or failed to do (e.g., Samuels and Shugart 2003; Samuels 2004; Hupe and Edwards 2012). But among contemporary democracies with presidential systems, the United States is unique in electing its presidents not by direct popular vote, but by indirect voting through the Electoral College system with its 51 separate statewide elections.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite the continued importance of this anachronistic institution, little is known for certain about how the quality of American democracy is affected by the strategic incentives it imposes on presidential candidates.

The import of this lacuna is underscored by the small set of agreed-upon facts regarding presidential campaign strategies. Political scientists strongly suspect that presidential campaigns have increasingly concentrated their activities in a handful of competitive, “battleground” states (see, for example, Shaw, 1999 and 2006; Wright, 2009; Abramowitz, 2011; although see Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw, 2002). If this is correct, then several negative consequences for democratic responsiveness are likely to follow. First, the disproportionate attention paid by campaigners to battleground states determines how important any particular person’s vote might be for a given presidential election (e.g., Gelman, Silver, and Edlin, 2012). As a consequence, voters in battleground states may wield more political power than voters in “safe” states. Second, such disproportionate attention will also tilt the opportunity costs for citizen engagement in politics by creating more information-rich and politically stimulating environments favoring those citizens living in battleground states (e.g., Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowotz, 2007). As a consequence, those in battleground states will have an easier time connecting their interests with their votes than those living in less-competitive states. Third, candidates competing in these battleground states are likely to make policy commitments designed to specifically benefit the subsets of voters living in these states. Because the issue positions and personal appeals offered to voters during the campaign become the loadstars by which candidates navigate when elected (e.g., Sulkin 2005, 2011), campaign commitments must be acted upon. Fourth, once in office, strategic presidents intending to seek re-election will represent the anticipated preferences of battleground constituencies as a way to guard against future electoral reprisal (as suggested by the logic of “anticipatory representation,” Mansbridge 2003). Consistent with this possibility, we know that the travel schedules of incumbent presidents appear to favor larger and more electorally competitive states that may be strategically important in the Electoral College (e.g., Doherty 2007; Charnock, McCann et al. 2009). The strategic logic imposed by the Electoral College also incentivizes presidents to undersupply public goods that can’t be narrowly targeted to electorally important states (e.g., Lizzeri and Persico 2001). In short, the needs of the campaign also matter for governing.

The prospect for uneven democracy is thus very real, if in fact the competitive map of U.S. presidential elections is shrinking. But the ability of political scientists to assess whether these suspected problems actually manifest has been limited by the near-total absence of data on the Electoral College strategies pursued by presidential election campaigns, and by the paucity of data on whether the campaign resources deployed by presidential aspirants are allocated in line with those strategies. Our study aims to fill both of these gaps by shedding new light on how presidential campaigns have approached the fundamental task of winning 270 electoral votes.

Is it really the case that there are fewer battleground states in recent presidential elections and that campaigns lavish resources on voters in these states to the exclusion of other voters? To answer these questions, we reconstruct and analyze the electoral strategies of the sixteen major-party presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2012. The result is a comprehensive and unique historical data set that suggests (1) every modern presidential election has focused on a subset of battleground states, (2) only a handful of states have been consistently viewed as battlegrounds, (3) electoral competitiveness is imperfectly correlated with battleground status, (4) population size is no longer a powerful predictor of battleground status, and (5) the number of battleground states has been relatively stable over time. We also offer unprecedented data on presidential and vice-presidential candidate appearances from 1952 through 2012 and television advertising data from 1988 through 2012 to test how campaign resource allocations reflect Electoral College strategies. We demonstrate that although earlier presidential campaigns were extremely sophisticated, more recent campaigns increasingly target resources to the battleground states. These analyses present some direct challenges to the received wisdom on presidential campaign behavior, while also confirming some suspected patterns and trends.

**The Strategic Impact of the Electoral College**

Although we do not know much about the Electoral College strategies of campaigns, we have a rich set of expectations based on well-known theoretical perspectives and previous research. Most of these expectations follow from the core assumption that presidential candidates are rational actors seeking to win an election (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962). This assumption may seem trivial to scholars of American politics, but in other countries election campaigns are often about advancing policies or winning enough votes to influence a governing coalition rather than seeking outright victory (Duverger, 1954; Kirchheimer, 1966). In the U.S., however, the name of the game is winning and this focus shapes our expectations about strategy.

In addition to candidate rationality, we also assume that the campaign itself is defined by the institutional arrangements of the presidential election. Specifically, a campaign needs to win a plurality of the vote in enough states to obtain 270 electoral votes. This strategic task is conditioned by the fact that campaigns have limited resources with which to persuade voters to support their candidates. Campaign finance laws, which define how contributions can be accepted and spent on communication, play a part in limiting resources.[[2]](#footnote-2) So do the physical limitations of a candidate’s in-person campaigning, as travel is draining and expensive. The result is that candidates make choices about where and when to deploy their most precious resources: money for persuasive communication and personal appearances to rally supporters and drive local news media coverage.

So how does a strategic campaign allocate limited resources across the states given its goal of winning 270 electoral votes? A strategic campaign would almost certainly not allocate its resources evenly. Some states are worth more electoral votes than others, and spending the same amount of time in Wyoming and Florida would appear to be a poor decision. All things being equal, a better strategy would be to allocate resources proportionally, spending more money and time in more populous states because winning these states will yield more electoral votes (Brams and Davis, 1974: 121-124; Colantoni, Levesque, and Ordeshook, 1975).

But there are compelling reasons not to expect a strictly proportional allocation. For example, more populous states might be even more precious than their size alone would suggest, as these states could be relatively more difficult to replace in a candidate’s prospective winning coalition and therefore warrant more attention than smaller targets. This possibility has caused some scholars to speculate that a strategic campaign will allocate resources in proportion to a state’s electoral votes raised to the 3/2’s power (Brams and Davis, 1974).

However, neither the proportionality nor the 3/2’s expectations take into account that television advertising in the most populous states is extraordinarily expensive, which could induce campaigns to focus resources on smaller, more cost-effective targets. Moreover, neither expectation takes into account what the competition is doing. Should a campaign spend proportionally or based on the 3/2’s rule when the other side is concentrating its resources in some other (more strategic?) way. Or should it adjust its strategies based on the resource allocations of its opponents? Similarly, it makes little strategic sense for campaigns to expend any resources in states where their chances are either very good or very bad. [[3]](#footnote-3) Instead, campaigns have incentives to concentrate their efforts in states where the outcome is most uncertain, as the result might be tipped in a favorable direction with a robust campaign.

A different theoretical approach to resource allocation presumes that campaigns target states according to their place in a hypothetical winning coalition. In other words, campaigns rank-order states according to their predicted two-party vote and then focus resources on the so-called “pivotal” states, where victory is most uncertain but where winning would be most critical to amassing a 270-electoral vote majority (Mann and Shapley, 1960; Longley and Dana, 1984 and 1992; Smith and Squire, 1986; Wright, 2009). Journalistic narratives of presidential campaigns often identify and comment on the one state that will decide the election, such as Ohio in 2004, Florida in 2000, or Michigan in 1960.[[4]](#footnote-4) More formal research along these lines assumes each possible coalition is a particular random ordering of states, leading scholars to argue that a state’s power in the Electoral College is the proportion of all possible coalitions in which the state is pivotal (Mann and Shapley, 1960). This work suggests a slight bias in favor of larger states (Longley, 1975; Longley and Dana, 1984 and 1992; Longley and Pierce, 1999; Smith and Squire, 1986). However, more recent studies of pivotal states amend the dubious assumption that all coalitions are equally likely to form. Instead coalitions are assumed to form “in the order of their popular vote shares for the winning candidate, where states with the largest within-state vote shares for the winner commit first” (Wright, 2009: 25). This research contends that 1) smaller states may be pivotal and 2) competitive states are not necessarily pivotal.

Our goal here is to integrate these theoretical perspectives and use them to guide a more detailed, empirical analysis of what presidential campaigns actually do. So what do we know about how presidential campaigns behave? The most relevant finding from recent research is that contemporary campaigns use information from surveys, past elections, and data from current voter files to estimate their position in each state and to develop a rank-order of states (see Shaw, 2006). This squares nicely with the theoretical work on pivotal states. In light of this, we strongly suspect that candidates will expend the lion’s share of their resources in states that are most likely to be decisive in the Electoral College.[[5]](#footnote-5)

An illustration of how estimates of the vote and the Electoral College come together is offered in the following example. Consider this hypothetical rank-ordering of states for a Republican candidate:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rank** | **State** | **Current Vote Standing** | **EVs** | **Cumula-tive**  **EVs** |  | **Rank** | **State** | **Current Vote Standing** | **EVs** | **Cumula-tive**  **EVs** |
| 1 | UT | +48 | 6 | 6 |  | 16 | MT | +13 | 3 | 123 |
| 2 | WY | +41 | 3 | 9 |  | 17 | MS | +12 | 6 | 129 |
| 3 | OK | +34 | 7 | 16 |  | 18 | SC | +11 | 9 | 138 |
| 4 | ID | +32 | 4 | 20 |  | 19 | AZ | +10 | 11 | 149 |
| 5 | ND | +30 | 3 | 23 |  | 20 | MO | +10 | 10 | 159 |
| 6 | WV | +26 | 5 | 28 |  | 21 | IN | +10 | 11 | 170 |
| 7 | AR | +24 | 6 | 34 |  | 22 | GA | +8 | 16 | 186 |
| 8 | KY | +23 | 8 | 42 |  | **23** | **NC** | **+3** | **15** | **201** |
| 9 | AL | +23 | 9 | 51 |  | **24** | **FL** | **0** | **29** | **230** |
| 10 | KS | +22 | 6 | 57 |  | **25** | **VA** | **-2** | **13** | **243** |
| 11 | TN | +20 | 11 | 68 |  | **26** | **OH** | **-2** | **18** | **261** |
| 12 | TX | +18 | 38 | 106 |  | **27** | **CO** | **-4** | **9** | **270** |
| 13 | SD | +18 | 3 | 109 |  | 28 | IA | -6 | 6 | 276 |
| 14 | LA | +17 | 8 | 117 |  | 29 | NV | -7 | 6 | 282 |
| 15 | AK | +14 | 3 | 120 |  | 30 | WI | -8 | 10 | 292 |

These estimates lead us to expect that the Republican candidate will spend most of his time and money in states such as North Carolina, Florida, Virginia, Ohio, and Colorado. Although the most viable path to a 270-electoral vote victory consists of carrying these states, they are also the weakest/riskiest states in the minimum winning coalition. Furthermore, note that although the hypothetical rank-order shows a tight race in the states that are likely to provide the GOP candidate’s 270th vote, this may not always be the case. However, even if the candidate is a decided underdog in those states, they remain the most essential to victory and will probably get the most attention (Wright, 2009; but see Johnson, 2005; Patterson, 2002).

We are also convinced that presidential campaigns prize strategic flexibility. Campaigns understand that a) electoral politics are dynamic, which means ranking differences are often tiny and subject to change, and b) the information used to develop rankings is imperfect. This creates uncertainty. Contrary to the research on pivotal elements to democratic coalitions, we expect that a campaign facing the posited hypothetical rank-order would also spend resources in states such as Iowa, Nevada, and Wisconsin; these states could provide alternative paths to a majority if something goes wrong with the minimum winning coalition. Furthermore, a campaign would be sorely tempted to spend at least some time in states like Georgia, which look safe but may not be completely locked up.

As mentioned earlier, a significant factor that could induce a campaign to deviate from this ranking is whether the cost—in terms or time or money—makes another state a more efficient option. Consider a different election in which Alaska might be a target based purely on win-probability logic, but is not targeted because it is expensive and time-consuming for a candidate to travel there. Instead, a state that is a slightly less likely to be decisive might be targeted if the costs associated with locking it up are lower. Similarly, New Jersey might be a target based purely on win-probability logic, but the expense of airing television advertisements in its two media markets—Philadelphia and New York City—might make another state a more cost-effective target.

It is important to again note how our understanding leads us to question some of the received wisdom with respect to presidential campaigning. For starters, we are confident that candidates do not spend time and money proportionally (or according to the 3/2s rule) across the states; nor is there likely to be proportional campaigning even after a small number of states have been “zeroed out.” Rather, campaigns seem to establish “cut-points,” identifying “battleground” states and spending resources there, but withholding resources in states designated as “safe” or “base” (Shaw, 1999). As suggested earlier, where these cut-points are in the rank-order of states presumably depends on the estimated vote, uncertainty about the vote, and the overall competitiveness of the race. Within the states designated as “battlegrounds”, we suspect that campaign resources are allocated neither proportionally nor equally. Rather, we posit that campaigns develop and adhere to strategic allocation criteria within their battleground states (Shaw, 2006). Consistent with our hypothetical rank-ordering example, we are confident that campaigns do this by prioritizing states that are most critical to achieving a minimal winning coalition.

This understanding of Electoral College strategy leads us to several important and specific research expectations. First, we expect every presidential campaign to have an Electoral College strategy that distinguishes between and amongst states based on importance to a winning coalition. This represents an obvious test of our assumption that campaigns are rational and seek to win a 270-vote majority in the Electoral College.

Second, we expect that competitive states are more likely to be targeted. In recent elections, for instance, Utah and Massachusetts were neglected, while Florida and Ohio were courted. This is another obvious expectation, and one that underpins many recent analyses. It is also related to the argument—made by Abramowitz (2011) and others—that because the number of competitive states has decreased since the 1990s, the number of battleground states in U.S. presidential elections is shrinking. But we are skeptical about this; as explained above, competitiveness should only be imperfectly correlated with battleground status because winning 270 electoral votes sometimes requires a campaign to target states that are not all that close. George McGovern in 1972 and Robert Dole in 1996 attempted to identify paths to 270; they necessarily contested states where they were down by double-digit margins. There may be fewer battleground states in recent elections, but strategic imperatives dictate there will always be some, irrespective of objective measures of competitiveness.

Our third research expectation is counter-intuitive: larger states are not advantaged when campaigns develop Electoral College strategies. This is because smaller states provide more flexibility for developing pathways to a 270-vote majority, advertising costs are relatively lower in the smaller states (for example, the cost of a 1,000 point TV buy in Iowa is lower than in Florida, even controlling for population differentials), and smaller states get proportionally more Electoral Votes than larger states.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our fourth expectation is that electoral strategies and targeting should become better and more precise over time due to superior data. In the absence of polls and high quality voter list data, which were often missing in the 1950s, states might have been designated as battlegrounds simply because campaigns did not know how they might vote. In such cases, it was probably better to be safe than sorry. Better information, though, means greater certainty about which states are most pivotal. Consequently, we expect the number of battleground states to decrease slightly over time not because fewer states are competitive (see discussion above), but because campaigns today are more likely to have relevant data from remote, under-polled states such as Alaska, Hawaii, or North Dakota.

Our fifth and final research expectation is that campaign resources will be disproportionately, but not exclusively, concentrated in battleground states. Put another way, campaigns not only develop strategies but mostly adhere to them in reality. Some resources will be allocated in the base states because presidential campaigns do have goals beyond winning the presidency. Presidential campaigns try to help their party win seats in the U.S. House and Senate, to favorably influence local elections, to highlight certain policy fights, and to advance the prospects of the party more generally (Kessell, 1968; Bartels, 1984). It is also the case that the explosion of money in the post-*Citizen’s United* world and the attendant saturation of battleground markets with TV ads has allowed campaigns to spend some resources in safer states. Still, overall we expect resource allocations will be concentrated in the battleground states.

Although our primary contribution to understanding presidential campaigns is empirical, by bringing to light previously hidden strategies and testing how well they predict presidential campaign activity, our theoretical perspective also challenges previous research in subtle but important ways. In our view, political actors are office-seeking and strategic, but they prefer multiple paths to victory due to uncertainty. As a result, their strategies are flexible. The costs of campaigning further influence (and complicate) the calculation of where to allocate resources. Finally, political attitudes and behavior change even as institutions remain the same. Campaigns have to adjust to a dynamic political environment despite the fact that rules of the game, as embodied by the Electoral College, have remained nearly constant since the 1950s.

**Data and Design**

Studies of presidential election campaigns have been limited by a lack of information on campaign strategy. Even though they play out in plain sight, these strategies are closely guarded secrets. Moreover, those involved in presidential campaigns do not create systematic archives of their thoughts and decisions. Political science research has also been limited by a single-election focus. Our studies of presidential voting sometimes—though not as often as one might assume—focus on over-time data, but our analyses of campaigns rarely attempt such a multi-election scope. In this project, we offer an unprecedented look into presidential campaigns by locating and using original and secondary sources to re-construct and analyze Electoral College strategies from all 16 elections of the television era, from 1952-2012.

This goal required us to visit the presidential libraries of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush to view campaign documents pertaining to the candidates’ Electoral College strategies. We also visited the libraries (or viewed the official papers) of defeated presidential candidates Adlai Stevenson, Barry Goldwater, Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, and Robert Dole, as well as two special collections (The Robert Teeter Papers and the Hoover Institution Library) that offered relevant information from the Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan, and G.H.W. Bush campaigns.

Beyond the libraries and collections, we relied on post-election presentations and conferences, and journalistic and insider narratives for information on strategy. In particular, the election de-briefing conferences sponsored by the Annenberg Institute (held at the University of Pennsylvania after every election from 2000-2012) and the Campaign Decision Makers’ Conferences (held at Harvard University after every election from 1972-2012) often offered detailed information on presidential electoral strategies. Beyond these, narrative accounts of the presidential campaign from journalists such as Jack Germond and Jules Witcover and the *Newsweek* teams were often instructive, as were insider accounts from people such as Gary Hart (McGovern), Martin Schram (Carter), and Stephen Shadegg (Goldwater).

Based on these, we develop summary measures of Electoral College strategies, which we present for each major party candidate for every presidential election from 1952-2012 (see Appendix 1). As is evident from these tables, there was considerable variability in the nomenclature from election to election, but the basic approach was fairly consistent. Campaigns sorted states into Democratic states, Republican states, and battleground states. Most campaigns went further, distinguishing between higher and lower priority battleground states or between states that were safely for one side or the other and those that only leaned toward one side. For analytical purposes, we have coded the classification of states for each campaign into a five-category variable: Republican Base (+2), Republican Lean (+1), Battleground (0), Democratic Lean (-1), and Democratic Base (-2).[[7]](#footnote-7) This allows us to analyze aggregate tendencies (such as whether the number of battleground states has changed over time), as well as an individual state’s tendencies (the mean rating on the -2 to +2 scale and the standard deviation of this rating).

Of course, assessing Electoral College strategies requires matching plans to actions. For this project, we focus on how closely candidate appearances and television advertising have hewed to the campaigns’ strategies over time. A small set of studies have analyzed this relationship for one or two or three elections (e.g., Shaw, 1999 and 2006), but no one has attempted a true over-time study. Thus, in the course of documenting Electoral College strategies based on the papers found at these various locations, we also sought information on candidate appearances and television advertising.

For in-person campaign appearances by presidential and vice-presidential candidates, we confined ourselves to the traditional September 1 to Election Day general election campaign time-frame.[[8]](#footnote-8) Campaign documentation was the preferred source of candidate schedules, although we used the daily calendar of the White House (for incumbents seeking re-election) and the digital newspaper archives of *The New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* (which consistently and comprehensively track the campaign appearances of presidential candidates in their daily coverage) to fill in gaps in the calendar and to cross-check our data.[[9]](#footnote-9) The results of this endeavor are presented in Appendices 2 and 3. We should also note that what we are estimating here are public appearances, as opposed to “days” in a state. For example, a candidate could give speeches in Gainesville, Orlando, and Miami, Florida on a single day, and would tally three appearances in our data set. The rationale is that these appearances are primarily targeted at local media outlets; anything that can drive newspaper coverage in a particular market should be counted as a discrete event. Our criteria necessarily exclude private meetings; fundraisers, unless they are public events, are not counted.

Statewide estimates of television advertising by the campaigns and parties are slightly more difficult to come by. However, we have comprehensive data from 1988-2012, sometimes coming from the records of one or more of the campaigns themselves (1988-2004) and sometimes coming from Campaign Media Analysis Group (2000-2012). The raw data are often, though not always, in the form of advertising expenditures at the media market level. We aggregate these to the state level, and then (to enhance comparability) transform them into 2016 dollars.[[10]](#footnote-10) These data complement those for candidate appearances; candidate schedules allow us to analyze how Electoral College strategies affect the allocation of labor, while television advertising allows us to analyze how they affect capital.

**Results**

*Do All Presidential Campaigns Identify Battleground States?*

In his 1960 nomination speech, Richard Nixon famously pledged to visit all fifty states during his campaign (White, 1961). Contrary to some claims, the promise was actually an important part of his speech:

“I’ve been asked by my friends in the press, where are you going to concentrate? What states are you going to visit? And this is my answer: In this campaign we are going to take no states for granted and we aren’t going to concede any states to the opposition…I pledge to you that I, personally, will carry this campaign into every one of the fifty states between now and November 8th.”

Thus, on the last weekend of the campaign Nixon trudged to Alaska to fulfill his pledge. He carried Alaska by less than two percentage points, so the trip might have helped win him the state and its 3 electoral votes. But Nixon lost close contests in Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Texas. All might have gone for him had he mobilized supporters with a last-minute appearance.

Was Nixon’s mistake a singular blunder? To what extent have past presidential campaigns clearly distinguished and prioritized between and amongst states? Internal memos, as well as insider and journalistic accounts, conclusively demonstrate that Electoral College strategies are a common feature of television-era presidential election campaigns. Every single campaign had one. Furthermore, as one can see by examining the particulars in Appendix 1, these strategies have *always* been multi-faceted and sophisticated. Indeed, one cannot help but be struck by the intelligence and professionalism of past campaigns. For example, consider the Eisenhower campaign in 1952, which targeted 49 counties in 12 states—Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and California—where a combined shift of 844,320 votes from 1948 totals would net the candidate 249 electoral votes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Or the Johnson campaign in 1964, which identified 12 battleground states for saturated television advertising.[[12]](#footnote-12) Or the Carter campaign in 1976, which occasionally relied on Hamilton Jordan’s mathematical formula for allocating candidate appearances based on Electoral College priorities.[[13]](#footnote-13) In short, even a cursory review of the campaign records confirms our first research expectation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Within the battleground states, many campaigns further distinguished between their targets, often based on a simple larger (more populous) versus smaller (less populous) dichotomy. Both of the Eisenhower and Stevenson campaigns did this. In 1960, Nixon and Kennedy designated states as “Priorities 1-4,” with Priority 1 states being the “biggest” targets and Priority 4 states being the “smallest” targets. In 1972, Nixon explicitly designated “large/key,” “medium/key,” and “small/key” states.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, in 2000 the Gore campaign distinguished between “highest” and “next highest” priorities within its battleground states, with Florida, Pennsylvania, and Illinois scoring a “highest” ranking and Delaware and New Hampshire scoring a “next highest” ranking.[[16]](#footnote-16)

But size appears to lessen as a factor over time. Consider, for example, the 1992 G.H.W. Bush campaign, which classified states as “Level 1C” (competitive), “Level 1NC” (need and competitive), and “Level 2” (a mix of traditionally Republican states that need attention); this system appears to be superimposed on the ranking of states, almost like a reality check on what they had expected. It is not especially sensitive to size, as Pennsylvania and Ohio sit alongside South Dakota and Maine as Level 1C targets.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, no campaign acknowledged state size as part of their Electoral College strategies in 2004, 2008, or 2012.

Other factors, including uncertainty and overall competitiveness, influenced strategic distinctions. For example, the 2012 Obama campaign assumed uncertainty and consequently valued flexibility, creating clusters of states within its battleground category that provided different pathways to 270 electoral votes.[[18]](#footnote-18) Losing campaigns, however, often do not have the luxury of flexibility. Dukakis’s 1988 campaign identified a set of battleground states, but also developed a worst-case scenario “18 state strategy,” which identified a minimum winning coalition if they were not able to make head-way in the broader set of battleground states by early October.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Regional factors were also sometimes acknowledged in these strategic distinctions. In 1960, 1968, 1972, and 1976, the campaigns created distinct categories for southern states. In 1960, Kennedy and Nixon classified Alabama and Mississippi as “Dixiecrat” states, likely to award their electors to an “internal” Democratic candidate. In 1968, Humphrey and Nixon identified several southern states as “likely Wallace,” which further complicated their strategic planning in an already tight race.[[20]](#footnote-20) Nixon’s 1972 campaign created a sub-species of battleground states, called “southern opportunity” states.[[21]](#footnote-21) Carter’s 1976 effort classified all southern states as part of his Democratic base, but further distinguished among those he was “likely to carry,” those that would be “contested,” and “important border South” states. Ford, meanwhile, classified eight states (Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia) as “peripheral south” battlegrounds.

In short, all presidential campaigns developed plans to win a sufficient number of states to amass 270 electoral votes. State population, planning flexibility, overall competitiveness, and regional factors all appear to have had at least some influence on these plans. It is less clear whether there are trends in the nature of these plans, or whether these plans necessarily dominate how campaigns allocate resources.

*Are Certain States Always Battlegrounds?*

How have campaigns viewed different states across different election cycles? Figures 1and 2 present maps of the states shaded by their average strategic ratings—on a -2 to +2 scale, with 0 representing battleground rating—from 1952 to 2012. The map of Republican ratings (Figure 1) shows clusters of states with average ratings near zero (battleground status) in the Pacific, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Southern, and New England regions. The map of Democratic ratings (Figure 2) offers a similar view, although only Oregon rates as a battleground state from the Pacific coast.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

But the average rating can be misleading. States with an average strategic rating close to zero and high variance are not comparable to those with the same average rating and low variance. Put plainly, the latter have been rated as battlegrounds in most elections, while the former have been rated as both base Republican and base Democratic states over our 60-year time frame. The relatively high variance states (standard deviations of 1.5 or greater) with average scores around zero are marked with stars on the maps. Unsurprisingly, these include many Southern states, which moved from base Democratic in the 1950s to base Republican by the 2000s, and a few New England states, which moved from base Republican in the 1950s to base Democratic in the 2000s. Less expected perhaps is that Oregon and New Mexico fall into this range, at least according to Republican strategies.

So do certain states get targeted in every election? No, but several states come very close. Figure 3 shows that Ohio was rated a battleground state by 15 of 16 Republican campaigns and 14 of 16 Democratic campaigns; Michigan was rated a battleground by 13 Republican campaigns and 11 Democratic campaigns; Wisconsin was rated a battleground by 13 Republican and 12 Democratic campaigns; and Pennsylvania was rated a battleground by 12 Republican and Democratic campaigns. Other states achieving battleground status at least half the time for one or more of the campaigns include California, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Washington.

[Figure 3 about here]

*How Much Does Competitiveness Drive Which States Are Battlegrounds?*

Our second research expectation is that more competitive states are more likely to be classified as battlegrounds, but that this relationship will be weaker than is often supposed. Figure 4 graphs the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party presidential vote for all states designated as battlegrounds in a given election. A simple visual inspection of the data shows that sometimes the vote in the battleground states is very close (e.g., 1960, 1976, 1988, 2000, and 2004) and sometimes it is not (e.g., 1964, 1972, 1984, 1992, and 2008). In other words, if the election is a blowout, then the vote in the battleground states is not especially competitive.[[22]](#footnote-22)

[Figure 4 about here]

The regression models (see Table 1) offer a slightly different take on this topic. We use competitiveness of the previous election, along with electoral votes and dummy variables for the states, to predict how a state is classified by the Republican campaigns (the results are virtually the same if we use the Democrats’ classifications; see supplemental appendix). Overall, competitiveness is a statistically significant predictor of battleground status, but the substantive size of the effect is hardly overwhelming. A ten-point increase in the competitiveness of the election—for instance, if a 20-point Democratic margin were reduced to 10-points—increases a state’s rating on the 0-2 battleground scale by 0.37 points (where 0=base state, 1=lean state, 2=battleground state). This effect is somewhat curvilinear and is slightly greater as one moves towards a 50-50 distribution of the vote, but never pushes above 0.50 points per 10-point increase. If one isolates the estimated influence of competitiveness by decade, it bumps around a bit—reaching high points in the 1950s and again in the 2000s—but always remains in roughly the same neighborhood. In sum, competitive states are likely to be battleground states, but the overall relationship between competition and strategic targeting is somewhat modest because campaigns often hone in on less competitive states when their overall position is weak.

[Table 1 about here]

*Are Larger States More Likely to be Battlegrounds?*

Aside from competitiveness, there is also the possibility—raised by scholars and pundits—that more populous states are more likely to have been classified as battlegrounds. Figure 5 examines the percentage of large states, defined as having 15 or more electoral votes, that were rated as battlegrounds for each decade between 1952 and 2012 (elections are consolidated into decades to increase the number of observations and limit the impact of outliers). The pattern is clear and surprising. Larger, more populous states were indeed more likely to have been classified as battlegrounds during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Approximately 80 percent of large states were battlegrounds over this time frame. But in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, the percent of large states rated as battlegrounds decreased dramatically, falling to an average of 33 percent.

[Figure 5 abut here]

The models in Table 1 reinforce this story-line. The coefficients associated with electoral votes are marginally significant overall, but the decade-by-decade comparisons clearly demonstrate that the influence of size on battleground status drops to near-zero from the 1990s onward. This suggests that more populous and heterogeneous states are no longer necessarily more likely to be keystones for both campaigns’ winning coalitions.

*Are There Fewer Battleground States in Recent Elections?*

If the large states are less likely to be battlegrounds in recent elections, does this mean that more smaller states are in play? Or is it the case that the number of battleground states is decreasing over time? Figure 6 shows that the number of battlegrounds was quite high in the 1952 and 1956 contests, averaging 21.0 states. From 1960 on, however, the average varies between 12 and 15 states with no real trend. A slightly more rigorous analysis can be done, with a least squares estimator being used to measure the effect of more recent elections on the number of battleground states; this produces an estimated coefficient that is statistically insignificant and substantively close to zero.

[Figure 6 about here]

The reduction of battleground states after the 1950s is consistent with our expectation that increased information would produce greater precision and fewer targeted states. But why does the number of battleground states not decline further after 1960? Part of the explanation might be that more insightful polling and voter file information reveal ways in which difficult states can be won (e.g., Geer 1996). Another part of the explanation might be that campaigns need to replace large and newly uncompetitive states, such as New York and Texas, with many more small and competitive ones, such as New Hampshire and Nevada. And, as discussed earlier, the number of battleground states could be driven by that the structural reality of the Electoral College plus the inherent uncertainty of electoral politics; there will always be at least a half dozen or so battleground states because every campaign has to identify and defend a coalition of at least 270 electoral votes, but no one is completely confident about either their support or the rank-ordering of states.

*How Closely Do Presidential Campaigns Follow Their Electoral College Strategies?*

Presidential campaigns are clearly guided by their Electoral College strategies, although at least some resources are dedicated to the base and (especially) the lean states. From Table 2, we see that Republican presidential candidates were 7.8 times more likely to appear in a battleground state than a base Republican state, and 1.8 times more likely to appear in a battleground state than a lean Republican state. For GOP vice-presidential candidates, the numbers are 5.3 times more likely and 1.3 times more likely, respectively. The television advertising numbers are similarly lop-sided, with an average of close to $6.8 million being spent by Republicans in battleground states compared to around $1.6 million in lean Republican and around $220,000 in base Republican states. To control for the increase in television ad spending in recent years, we calculate the percent of TV ad dollars spent in the different strategic categories: from 1988 through 2012, 64% of TV ad dollars were lavished on battleground states. Beyond the battleground category of states, Republican candidates have (curiously) averaged more appearances in the Democratic states. This anomaly is also apparent for television advertising; on average, GOP campaigns spent slightly more in the lean Democratic than in the lean Republican states.

[Table 2 about here]

As for the Democrats, the concentration of resources in the battlegrounds states was just as severe. Democratic presidential candidates were 3.9 times more likely to appear in a battleground state than in a base Democratic state, and 2.8 times more likely to appear in a battleground state than in a lean Democratic state. For their vice-presidential candidates, the numbers are 2.0 times more likely and 3.0 times more likely, respectively. The Democrats’ 1988-2012 television advertising numbers look like the mirror-image of the Republicans’—over $6.7 million in battleground states versus $1.4 million on the lean Democratic states and just under $300,000 in the base Democratic states. As a percentage of all TV ad expenditures, Democratic candidates also concentrated just under 70 percent of all TV ad spending in battleground states. Unlike the Republicans, however, the Democrats are far more likely to expend resources in their states than in the opposition’s.

Given changes in the electorate as well as improvements in technology and the proliferation of information regarding voters’ preferences, it is legitimate to ask if resource allocations are *increasingly* in accord with Electoral College strategies. The bottom-half of Table 2 presents the allocation of resources by strategic categories in the four most recent presidential elections, 2000-2012. It seems that the raw amount of campaign resources expended in the battleground states has increased; candidate appearances for both parties’ candidates and television advertising for the Democrats are significantly up over the 1952-2012 averages. Also, the percentage of TV ad expenditures was slightly more concentrated in battleground states—up roughly 10 percentage points, from about 67% to about 77%. In addition, for both sides we see the virtual abandonment of campaigning in lean Republican states and an up-tick in campaigning in lean Democratic states. This may reflect the movement of high profile targets such as Illinois and New Jersey and (especially) Pennsylvania and Michigan to lean Democratic status, along with the inability of campaigns to resist expending some effort in those states despite their apparent movement to the left. These slight shifts suggest that the campaigns of today are not demonstrably more disciplined than campaigns of the past; they continue to emphasize creating or maintaining pathways to 270 electoral votes.

**Conclusion**

We know that institutions shape the behavior of strategic actors, but in the realm of politics we know little about how the complex nexus of rules and incentives affect actions and outcomes. This study demonstrates how the Electoral College affects the planning and attendant behavior of presidential campaigns and how these influences have changed over time. Examining an array of original strategic documents and insider accounts spanning 60 years and 16 elections, we confirm the suspicion deduced from both theory and a handful of previous empirical studies that presidential campaign plans are driven by the need to win a plurality of votes in enough states to guarantee 270 electoral votes.

But theory and intuition also produce some expectations that do not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Larger states are no more likely to be categorized as battlegrounds or receive a disproportionate amount of resources from the campaigns. Competitive states are more likely to be classified as battlegrounds, but campaigns often have to target less competitive states when the outcome of the race is somewhat unfavorable. Finally, there is only a very weak trend towards fewer battleground states over time.

There are two main reasons for these counter-intuitive findings. The first is that we have under-estimated the strategic sophistication of the earlier presidential campaigns. The Obama and G. W. Bush campaigns were smart and savvy, but so were the Eisenhower and Kennedy campaigns. Indeed, reviewing the sophisticated spot buys of the Eisenhower and Stevenson campaigns or reading strategic memos from Bill Moyers on Lyndon Johnson’s television advertising campaign is a revelation. We may think complex and multi-dimensional planning is a by-product of cable television advertising and the Internet, but it was alive and well in the middle of the last century.

The second reason is that presidential campaigns recognize uncertainty, and value strategic flexibility, in a way political scientists have previously underestimated. Put another way, presidential campaigns prefer keeping options on the table rather than whole-heartedly pursuing the one pathway with the highest chance for success. This rule is not absolute, and obviously depends on the relative likelihood of different strategic pathways. But candidates seem to embrace the advice so many parents pass onto their children: always have a back-up plan.

Those who are skeptical about apocalyptic views of trends in presidential campaigns may find this analysis re-assuring. We agree with this interpretation of our data. We do not find much evidence for consistent (or increasing) biases. We also do not see the playing field as shrinking. It is true that California, New York, and Texas are no longer battleground states—but it is also true that Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Colorado and several other states have replaced these behemoths. Moreover, the rules of the game virtually guarantee that a small clutch of battleground states will exist in every election.

For all of its faults, the Electoral College does not consistently privilege a small number of the same states year after year in the strategic thinking of presidential candidates. Likewise, the nationwide electoral sanction that presidential incumbents must face after a term in office does not appear to endue battlefield states with an arbitrary veto power. In the strategic logic imposed on presidential aspirants by the Electoral College, democratic representation may be better for some states than for others, but the quality of that representation does not consistently privilege the same pivotal few decade after decade.

**Figure 1**

**Average Ratings by Republican Campaigns, 1952-2012**



Notes: Classifications based on average rating of states by the Republican campaigns in each of 16 presidential elections from 1952-2012 on the following scale: -2=base Democratic, -1=lean Democratic, 0=battleground, 1=lean Republican, 2=base Republican. Average ratings, listed below state abbreviations, are sorted as follows: -2 to -1.5=base Democratic, -1.5 to -0.5=lean Democratic, -0.5 to 0.5=battleground, 0.5 to 1.5=lean Republican, 1.5 to 2.0=base Republican. States with standard deviations over 1.5 are designated “high variance.”

**Figure 2**

**Average Ratings by Democratic Campaigns, 1952-2012**



Notes: Classifications and variance designations are the same as Figure 1, only for Democratic strategies.

**Figure 3**

**Frequency of Battleground Status, 1952-2012**

**Table 1**

**Explaining Electoral College Strategies, 1952-2012**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010s | Overall |
| Intercept | 1.114\*\*\* | 0.250 | 0.879\*\*\* | 0.353\* | 0.732\*\*\* | 1.203\*\*\* | 0.777\*\*\* | 0.729 |
|  | (0.168) | (0.139) | (0.169) | (0.143) | (0.152) | (0.123) | (0.215) | (0.061) |
| Electoral  Votes | 0.031\*\*\* | 0.056\*\*\* | 0.035\*\*\* | 0.036\*\*\* | 0.009 | -0.003 | 0.004 | 0.026\*\*\* |
|  | (0.009) | (0.007) | (0.008) | (0.008) | (0.008) | (0.007) | (0.011) | (0.003) |
| Competitive-ness | -0.064\*\*\* | -0.014 | -0.041\*\*\* | -0.021\* | -0.035\*\* | -0.060\*\*\* | -0.044\*\* | -0.037\*\*\* |
|  | (0.011) | (0.010) | (0.010) | (0.009) | (0.013) | (0.009) | (0.015) | (0.004) |
| N | 94 | 142 | 101 | 152 | 101 | 152 | 50 | 798 |
| Adj. R2 | 0.351 | 0.302 | 0.303 | 0.182 | 0.069 | 0.215 | 0.127 | 0.179 |
| F-Stat Sign. | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.011 | 0.000 | 0.015 | 0.000 |

Notes: The results are from a regression model of the Republican candidates’ Electoral College ratings of each state for each election over the defined time series (0=base state, 1=lean state, 2=battleground state) using a least squares estimator. Competitiveness is measured by taking the absolute value of the Republican share of the two-party vote percentage from the previous election and subtracting 50 percent. The subsequent variable ranges from 0 (most competitive) to 50 (least competitive).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010s | Overall |
| Threshold  (Base state) | -0.881 | 1.767\*\*\* | -0.194 | 1.328\*\* | -0.385 | -1.681\*\*\* | -1.033 | 0.136 |
|  | (0.555) | (0.455) | (0.496) | (0.437) | (0.462) | (0.412) | (0.856) | (0.163) |
| Threshold  (Lean state) | -0.413 | 1.985\*\*\* | 1.063\* | -- | 0.843 | -0.902\* | -0.395 | 0.676\*\*\* |
|  | (0.548) | (0.463) | (0.511) | -- | (0.475) | (0.392) | (0.845) | (0.166) |
| Electoral Votes | 0.085\* | 0.153\*\*\* | 0.113\*\*\* | 0.090\*\*\* | 0.025 | -0.004 | 0.028 | 0.064\*\*\* |
|  | (0.037) | (0.032) | (0.032) | (0.025) | (0.021) | (0.019) | (0.039) | (0.009) |
| Competitive-ness | -0.244\*\*\* | -0.046 | -0.116\*\*\* | -0.098\* | -0.178\*\* | -0.314\*\*\* | -0.365\*\* | -0.133\*\*\* |
|  | (0.059) | (0.034) | (0.034) | (0.040) | (0.061) | (0.053) | (0.116) | (0.016) |
| N | 102 | 153 | 102 | 153 | 102 | 153 | 51 | 816 |
| Nagelkerke | 0.451 | 0.354 | 0.363 | 0.267 | 0.153 | 0.383 | 0.374 | 0.238 |
| Chi-Square Sign. | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.001 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 |

Notes: The results are from a model of the Republican candidates’ Electoral College ratings of each state for each election over the defined time series (0=base state, 1=lean state, 2=battleground state) using an ordered logit estimator.

**Figure 4**

**Presidential Vote in Battleground States, 1952-2012**

Notes: Data points represent the average Republican share of the two-party presidential vote by the strategic categories of each party.

**Figure 5**

**Percent of Large States Classified as Battlegrounds, 1952-2012**

Notes: Data points represent the percentage of large states considered battleground by the respective campaigns. “Large” is defined as 15 or more electoral votes.

**Figure 6**

**The Number of Battleground States, 1952-2012**

**Table 2**

**Allocation of Campaign Resources by Electoral College Strategy, 1952-2012**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Base Dem.** | **Lean Dem.** | **Battle-ground** | **Lean Rep.** | **Base Rep.** |
| **Republican Campaigns** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presidential Candidate Appearances  (Avg. in these states) | 1.48 | 4.11 | 5.68 | 3.21 | 0.73 |
| VP Candidate Appearances  (Avg. in these states) | 1.40 | 3.79 | 4.44 | 3.29 | 0.84 |
| Television Advertising  (Avg. $ in these states) | $371,264 | $1,692,813 | $6,824,903 | $1,620,301 | $219,939 |
| % of Television Advertising  (% of total $ spent in these states) | 3.5% | 14.0% | 63.6% | 15.1% | 2.0% |
| **Democratic Campaigns** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presidential Candidate Appearances | 2.00 | 2.85 | 6.51 | 1.69 | 0.53 |
| VP Candidate Appearances | 1.70 | 2.51 | 5.02 | 1.71 | 0.68 |
| Television Advertising | $292,220 | $1,353,818 | $6,708,146 | $1,178,839 | $110,355 |
| % of Television Advertising | 3.0% | 14.0% | 69.6% | 12.2% | 1.1% |

**Allocation of Campaign Resources by Electoral College Strategy, 2000-2012**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Base Dem.** | **Lean Dem.** | **Battle-ground** | **Lean Rep.** | **Base Rep.** |
| **Republican Campaigns** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presidential Candidate Appearances | 2.14 | 3.50 | 8.85 | 1.00 | 0.88 |
| VP Candidate Appearances | 0.86 | 3.00 | 6.45 | 1.38 | 0.27 |
| Television Advertising | 299,228 | $1,757,604 | $9,218,267 | $966,336 | $125,110 |
| % of Television Advertising | 2.4% | 14.2% | 74.5% | 7.8% | 1.0% |
| **Democratic Campaigns** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presidential Candidate Appearances | 2.27 | 3.25 | 8.95 | 1.50 | 0.24 |
| VP Candidate Appearances | 1.50 | 3.42 | 6.65 | 1.11 | 0.36 |
| Television Advertising | $123,378 | $1,213,369 | $9,315,991 | $681,386 | $91,669 |
| % of Television Advertising | 1.1% | 10.6% | 81.5% | 6.0% | 0.8% |

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1. While 49 of the 51 units use a plurality vote to allocate their electors, Nebraska and Maine use congressional district results to determine those electors and a statewide vote to determine their two at-large electors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Legal limits on fundraising and the expenditure of resources have obviously changed due to congressional legislation (most notably, the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act) and legal decisions (most notably, *McConnell v. FEC* and *Citizen’s United v. FEC*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Colantoni, Levesque, and Ordeshook (1975) refer to the expectation that campaigns will react to one another as “sequential planning” and the expectation for zero campaigning in base states as “corner solutions.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For 2004, see Thomas, et al. (2005); for 2000, see Milbank (2001); for 1960, see White (1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We use the terms “swing,” “battleground,” “pivotal” interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Electoral College slightly over-rewards smaller states by basing electoral votes on representation in the House (which is proportional to population) and representation in the Senate (which is not). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Following Shaw (1999, 2006), two different coders classified the states using the five-category scale described above. The resultant inter-coder reliability score, measured by Cohen’s kappa coefficient, is 0.87. Differences in coding were then discussed and resolved by consensus. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although modern presidential campaigns begin earlier than Labor Day, our focus is on the relative dispensation of resources in battleground states across the years and this is best done by examining fall campaigning. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We confirmed all appearances in news coverage whenever possible. When information derived from intended candidate schedules conflicts with news reports about where candidates actually went, we privilege the confirmed appearances derived from news accounts since campaign schedules often change unexpectedly at the last minute as new opportunities and challenges develop. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Many recent analyses rely on TV ad airings as the unit of analysis. As far as we can tell, this is mostly because CMAG offers the data in this format. Other analyses use gross rating points, which estimate the number of times an ad is viewed (on average) across a media market. We prefer expenditures because (a) it is easily aggregated from the market- to the state-level, and (b) dollars spent is arguably the best measure of how much a campaign values a particular state, which is our primary focus. We did re-analyze the data using estimated statewide gross rating points instead of dollars spent, and our results were virtually identical to those offered here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Eisenhower's strategy is delineated in the report "Campaign Plan," from Robert Humphreys, 8/31/52, Robert Humphreys Papers, Box 10; Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library. Additional details are found in the memo "Campaign Analysis," from Ken Hechler, 8/8/56, Adlai E. Stevenson Papers, Box 280; Princeton University Mudd Manuscript Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Johnson's strategy is delineated in "Media Recommendation for Democratic National Committee, 1964 Election," from Doyle, Dane, Bernbach, Inc., 7/24/64, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers-Democratic National Committee, Box 225; Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Carter's strategy is delineated in a 6/76 memo from Hamilton Jordan, as cited in Martin Schram, "Running for President 1976: The Carter Campaign," Stein and Day: NY: 239-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Interestingly, the common assumption that spot buys were rare until the 1980s (Diamond and Bates, 1992) appears incorrect. FCC records show that Eisenhower and Stevenson aired hundreds of spot buys in specific media markets in 1952 and 1956. Similarly, DDB advertising records demonstrate that Kennedy and Johnson targeted different media markets within their battleground states with varying amounts of advertising during the 1960 and 1964 campaigns, respectively. From the beginning, presidential campaigns understood the potential of television to target specific audiences with persuasive messaging. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Nixon's strategy is delineated in "Tentative Priority List of States for Campaign," 8/1/60, Robert Haldeman Papers (White House Special Files), Box 45: Richard M. Nixon Presidential Birthplace and Library. Kennedy's strategy is delineated in "Media Buying Report," from Guild, Bascom, and Bonfigli, Inc., 8/28/60, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Box 38: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gore's strategy is delineated in comments by Tad Devine (chief strategist), and Bill Knapp (media advisor) at the "Annenberg Conference on the Presidential Campaign of 2000," held February 10, 2001, at the University of Pennsylvania. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bush's strategy is delineated in media buy plan documents from the November Company and strategic memos from Bush's pollster, Fred Steeper (available upon request from the authors). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Obama's strategy is delineated in comments by Jim Messina (strategist) in YouTube.com presentations on 12/13/11 and again on 4/25/12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dukakis's strategy is delineated in "Media Buy Reports" from Yellin Communications, obtained by the authors from Ruth Rowley, personal assistant to Governor Michael Dukakis. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Humphrey's strategy is delineated in a memo from Bill Connell to Joe Napolitan, 9/9/68, Hubert H. Humphrey Papers, Box 23 (C88F): Minnesota Historical Society Library. Nixon's strategy is delineated in the memo "Battleground States" from Kevin Phillips, 10/68, Len Garment Papers, Box 85; Richard M. Nixon Presidential Birthplace and Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nixon's strategy is delineated in a memo from Arthur Finkelstein to Jeb Magruder. 2/4/72. Files of Jeb Magruder, Box 19: Hoover Institution Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Figure 4 also shows the Democrats have done better in the battleground states than they have nationally since 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)