

Election Primer: Race for the White House

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As you know by now, we are deep in the heart of election season. Many of you have likely been inundated with ads, flyers, e-mails and phone calls from eager campaign staff looking for your vote (and a contribution too, if you don't mind!). But through the haze of ads and news coverage of poll results, it's not always clear just what exactly is at stake. So over the coming days, we'll be providing brief primers on what to look for this November and how you can track the action through Election Day.

Today we take a look at the race for the White House.

How a President Gets Elected

President Barack Obama and his opponent, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, are in a tight race nationally for control of the White House. [Recent polls](#) have shown the candidates tied among likely voters nationally, particularly after Governor Romney's strong showing in the first presidential debate.

But while the national "horse race" numbers are what are most commonly tracked in media coverage, the ultimate vote for president falls to the Electoral College. The College is comprised of the 538 electors, representing the 435 members of the House of Representatives, 100 Senators, and three representatives of the District of Columbia. In order to win the presidency, a candidate must receive a majority of 270 electoral votes.

Most states utilize a "winner take all" method for casting electoral votes, meaning that the candidate with the most votes in the state receives all of its electoral votes. So, for example, the candidate who wins the popular vote in California will receive 55 electoral votes: one for each of the state's 53 House districts and two Senators.

Two states, Nebraska and Maine, award their electoral votes proportionally. In those states, the candidate with the most votes in each Congressional district wins that district's electoral vote, and the two Senate votes are awarded to the candidate with the most votes statewide.

So while the head-to-head national poll numbers that roll in just about daily can be very interesting, the race for president is really 50 separate state races. You need only look back to the controversial election of 2000 — when then-Vice President Al Gore won the popular vote by more than 500,000 only

to come up short in the Electoral College – to recognize which numbers really count.

States That Matter in 2012

By and large, most states are not competitive in presidential voting. Most are safely “red” (Republican) or “blue” (Democrat). In these states, the campaigns are effectively over before they start.

What that means is that a select few “swing states” end up determining the occupant of the White House. These are the states that can vary from red to blue depending on the election, and they’re the states where the campaigns most heavily invest their time and resources. For 2012, these states include:

- Ohio
- Virginia
- Florida
- Wisconsin
- Colorado
- Nevada
- Iowa
- New Hampshire

If you really want to know who the next president will be, you’ll need to keep an eye toward how the candidates fare in these key battleground states.

How to Keep Track

Here are two great sites to check if you want to be in-the-know on the race for the White House:

[FiveThirtyEight](#)

FiveThirtyEight is a polling aggregation blog run by statistician Nate Silver. Silver weights and adjusts polling averages, then incorporates a “linear regression analysis” to incorporate other factors such as incumbency, funding, and state partisan voting records to develop a forecasting model to predict winners in each state. Forecasts are updated daily with the latest polling information. In 2008, Silver accurately predicted the winner in 49 of the 50 states.

Before taking on politics, Silver was a popular baseball writer, and he developed the “PECOTA” system for forecasting the future performance of baseball players.

[InTrade](#)

InTrade is a trading exchange website that works like a futures market for political outcomes. Trade values are established based on market demand, so percentages represent the assessment of traders on the probabilities of the race. This is a great tool for measuring the conventional wisdom of where the race stands on any given day.

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