

Solid, Leaning and Toss Up States

September 5											
Obama States						McCain States					
14 Solid: 183 EVs						18 Solid: 142 EVs					
5 Leaning: 55 EVs			4 Toss Up: 35 EVs			4 Leaning: 32 EVs			6 Toss Up: 91 EVs		
State	EVs	Lead	State	EVs	Lead	State	EVs	Lead	State	EVs	Lead
PA	21	5.0	MI	17	4.3	GA	15	6.3	FL	27	3.1
MN	10	7.0	CO	9	0.4	MO	11	7.0	OH	20	0.6
WI	10	7.2	NM	5	4.3	MT	3	5.3	NC	15	4.2
IA	7	9.0	NH	4	0.3	ND	3	0.6	VA	13	0.0
OR	7	7.0							IN	11	4.7
									NV	5	1.0
Av. Lead: 7.04			Av. Lead: 2.33			Av. Lead: 4.80			Av. Lead: 2.27		
Wt Av. Lead: 6.53			Wt Av. Lead: 2.84			Wt Av. Lead: 5.91			Wt Av. Lead: 2.37		
≤6.0: 21 EVs			≤1.0: 13 EVs			≤6.0: 6 EVs			≤1.0: 38 EVs		
≥9.0: 7 EVs			≥4.0: 22 EVs			≥9.0: 0 EVs			≥4.0: 26 EVs		

Source: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/maps/obama_vs_mccain/?map=10

RealClearPolitics' No Toss Up States map shows a very, very close outcome in the Electoral College: 273 EVs for Obama to 265 for McCain. This is a difference of less than 1.5% of the aggregate number of EVs at stake, which is third in narrowness only to the results in Hayes-Tilden in 1876 (in effect, a tie) and Bush-Gore in 2000 (4 EVs, not quite 3/4 of 1%). But it would of course be decisive. If on November 4th the actual voters award them the EVs that the map does today, Obama-Biden will be in, McCain-Palin will be out.

Almost a quarter of the EVs (23.4%) come from Toss Up states, though, which of course means that a 273-265 outcome is far from assured. Obama's and McCain's EV totals are both unstable, as we've seen just this week (when MN upgraded from Toss Up to Leaning for Obama, and FL downgraded from Leaning for McCain to Toss Up). This might seem like bad news for both of them (worse for McCain, of course, because even a narrow EV win is better than a loss), but the pattern of instability is such that it may

actually be good news for Obama. It gives him opportunities to increase his EV margin, and therefore his mandate.

This will be clear from looking closely at the Toss Up states (and, less closely, at the Leaning states). Before we do, though, let's focus on the fact that Obama's Solid states give him a base of 183 EVs to McCain's 142. The 41-EV difference is a respectable and healthy margin, amounting to more than 7.6% of all EVs and over 12.6% of Solid EVs. The latter margin, if it could be made to carry through to all states, would have Obama winning the electoral count 303-235.

On top of those 183 Solid EVs, the map shows Obama with 55 Leaning EVs, to McCain's 32. The 23-EV gap in this category is also appreciable: almost 4.3% of all EVs and more than a quarter – 26.4% – of the Leaning EVs. Together, the Solid and Leaning states are Obama's by a margin of 64 EVs. That's just under 12% of all EVs and 15.5% of Solid and Leaning EV's combined – enhancements of Obama's margins in Solid EVs alone. If on election day he could outperform McCain nationwide by this 15.5% margin, Obama would win the presidency 311-227. (See below for how, precisely, that might actually happen.)

When you look at the Toss Up EVs that the map shows for each candidate, though, their positions are flipped: McCain gets 91 and Obama 35. McCain's Toss Up EV's are more than a sixth (16.9%) of all EVs, and almost three-quarters (72.2%) of Toss Up EVs. McCain wins the Toss Up states by a landslide. That's why, when all states are taken into account – Solid, Leaning and Toss Up – Obama's margin shrinks pitifully to the less than 1.5% of total EVs that I noted at the outset.

This is too bad, of course. Still, it's certainly better to lead in Solid and Leaning EVs than in those of Toss Up states. On election day, the first two categories are much more likely to stay in place than the third. And the good news for Obama is that Solid states provide a substantially higher share of his EVs (more than 67%) than McCain's (53.6%). The same is true of their Leaning states (20.1% vs. 12.1%). Conversely, McCain's 265-

EV No Toss Up States map total is disproportionately made up of Toss Up EVs: more than 34%, to Obama's 12.8%.

The last two rows in the table focus on how close a Leaning or Toss Up state is to changing categories, in either direction. McCain has 38 EVs in Toss Up states where his lead is equal to or less than 1%; Obama has only 13. So McCain has almost three times as many Toss Up EVs as Obama that are in imminent danger of sliding over to his rival's column.

In Leaning states the comparable yardstick (a lead equal to or less than 6%) gives McCain an advantage of 21 EVs to 6, but it's a less indicative measure than the 1% Toss Up state floor because the 6% Leaning state floor lies on the border between winning a state narrowly and winning it convincingly, not on the border between winning and losing it altogether.

At the other end of the scale, McCain has a slight edge over Obama in the number of Toss Up EVs (26-22) that are within a percentage point of being upgraded to Leaning for him and thus relatively safe. In the Leaning state of IA, Obama has 7 EVs that are one point away from Solid for him, McCain none.

More enlightening than these overall calculations, though, are the polls in the individual Toss Up states. They give us state-by-state reason to hope that more of McCain's Toss Up EVs will end up in Obama's column than will Obama's in McCain's.

Most notably and tantalizingly, although the No Toss Up States map awards VA's 13 EVs to McCain, it in fact describes the candidates' positions in the polls as "Tied". It's a very real possibility that VA's voters will break that tie in Obama's favor on election day. If they do, and if there are no other changes in the map, Obama will win 286 EVs to 252.

There's an almost equal possibility of his also picking off OH's 20 EVs and NV's 5, in each of which McCain's polling lead is 1% or less. If Obama can add these 25 EVs to

VA's 13, and everything else in the map stays the way it is today, he will end up with 311 EVs and McCain with 227 – a 15.6% margin in EVs. (This is exactly, but coincidentally, the margin you get if you apply Obama's Solid and Leaning combined margin nationwide.)

Just winning the three dead-heat states of VA, OH and NV, then, and holding the rest of the states where he currently is leading in the polls, would give Obama, by today's standards of our deeply and evenly divided politics, quite a convincing and substantial EV margin.

In comparison, McCain's potential pickings among Obama's Toss Up States are slim. Obama has only four Toss Up States for McCain to go after, and in two of them (MI and NM, with 22 EVs between them) Obama's current lead is more than 4%. Even if McCain were to win Obama's other two Toss Up States (CO and NH, with 13 EVs), to win the election he would also have to defend successfully all but one (NV, the smallest) of his states – Solid, Leaning and Toss Up.

That defensive need brings up a point that's often mentioned in the press: the fact that Obama's superior resources permit him to mount attacks on McCain even in states that McCain will probably win in the end. Obama can lose such a state – NC, for example – and still benefit overall by starving McCain's defense of resources in another state, such as VA or OH. Chess, anyone?

Well, up to this point I've focused almost entirely on Toss Up states, so now, finally, let's look a little more closely at Leaning states. There Obama is strongest in IA, with a 9% lead; McCain's lead in his strongest Leaning state, MO, is 7%. Obama's next-best Leaning state is WI, with a 7.2% lead; McCain's is GA, with 6.3%. Then comes MN for Obama (7.0% lead) compared with MT for McCain (5.3%), and OR (also 7.0%) compared with ND (0.6%)¹. State for state, then, McCain clearly has higher hurdles to

¹ It seems to me that ND actually should be a Toss Up state rather than Leaning for McCain. I am giving him a .6% margin in that state even though RCP doesn't show an

clear in winning Leaning states than does Obama. The resulting advantage to Obama is only marginally mitigated by the fact that he has more EVs from Leaning states at risk than does McCain – the four I’ve mentioned plus PA, where he leads by 5% in the polls.

All this may seem like hair-splitting. And it is, because, yes, in many of the Toss Up States and even some of the Leaning States, the candidates’ poll leads are within or close to the margin of error. And because, yes, the differences between the candidates’ average and weighted average leads look tiny. That doesn’t mean, though, that any of the differences discussed here are negligible: with 10 Toss Up States in play, margins (of error and otherwise) could have a way of cancelling each other out. And if the received wisdom is right that this election will be quite like the last two, it’ll be all about small differences making all the difference. Hair-splitting, when elections are won or lost by a hair or less (cf. 537 votes in FL in 2000), is the name of the game.

Also, poll distortions may lie in the land-line/cell-phone mix, as well as in the Bradley effect (although these, too, could pull in opposite directions). Nader and Barr could be factors. And of course there may be some turn in the campaign that swamps the current polls and melts down the prospects of one side or the other. Conceivably, McCain’s choice of Palin could turn out to be such a development; it’s too early to know, or even to make a useful guess. But there are plenty of other potential game-changers: a debate gaffe or swoon (or Gore-like sigh), an October surprise, a terrorist attack, belated disenchantment on the part of the media with one candidate or the other, a stunning revelation.

Obama is the candidate whose prospects would be most affected by an October surprise, since the Republicans control the White House and are certainly not above pressing (or indeed violating) ethical and/or legal limits in using that control to their advantage.

RCP average for it. Can’t explain why. My .6% margin was built out of all the polls RCP shows for ND (there are five of them), which date back to February. That early poll gave Obama a lead of 4%. The three polls giving McCain a lead (average 3.33%) date from (1) late March and early April, (2) early July and (3) late July. The latest poll, dating from late August, gives Obama a lead of 3%.

Otherwise, though, McCain's campaign seems to me to be more vulnerable to a reversal of fortune than Obama's, especially given that the Clintons' efforts to defeat the latter would almost certainly have unearthed anything that might be a stunning revelation.

So let's think aloud about McCain and Palin: What do we really know about her (troopergate, people over whose dead bodies she's climbed to get to the highest point in Alaska, etc.)? What exactly did McCain know about her in extending his invitation to join the ticket, and when did he know it? Will the MSM ever take away the pass they've been giving him? Will we ever stop hearing him called a maverick? Will we be prompted by our Hockey Momania to look at how much closer Michelle Obama is to what we all admire in American womanhood than is McCain's plutocrat, overage-mall-rat wife? Will the MSM ever bring home to the Family Values Crowd that the McCains were having an affair while he was still married to his first wife, who had waited faithfully for him – and had a disfiguring car accident – during his Vietnam years? And will it ever find a way (or the will, I should say, because where there's a will there is said to be a way) to report on good ol' John's hurling at dear Cindy, in front of reporters and members of his staff, an epithet that starts with C and rhymes with “punt”?

But I digress, and begin to rant.

Some of the questions I've just raised – and there are others – are side issues, except that (1) they go to McCain's much- and self-vaunted character and judgment and (2) they're about the kinds of things that seem to be important to many in the Republican base who have apparently been so energized by Palin. If she doesn't hold up under scrutiny, or if in his supposedly straight talk he's revealed to be speaking in forked tongues, many of the people who are now so hopped up over his choice of Palin will feel very let down – and might just stay home on election day.

So, speaking of football: Obama was on a path to victory, with Plouffe and Axelrod repeatedly and brilliantly producing four yards and a cloud of dust in what had, pre-Hockey Mom, shaped up as a ground game. McCain obviously saw this, so his Hail-

Mary-pass choice of Palin was a very understandable gamble. Its payoff, if any, will depend on whether the pass is caught – and by whom. With Palin presenting so many known and unknown unknowns, an interception is always possible; the ball has only just taken flight from the quarterback’s hand.

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PA has moved from Leaning for Obama to being a Toss Up state awarded to Obama on the No Toss Up State map. Hard to see why, since the PA polls haven’t changed. This does change some of the sub-calculations – most notably (and paradoxically), it increases Obama’s average and weighted average leads in both the Leaning and Toss Up states markedly – dramatically, in the case of the Leaning states. A lot of the numbers in the text will also have to be adjusted.

Except for the change of PA’s status the map itself stays the same, and the EV count that it yields doesn’t change.