

Obama ★ McCain

Electoral Votes (Provisional)



Final Projection

Obama ★ McCain

Electoral Vote



Win Percentage



Popular Vote



Sunday, August 17, 2008

Voter Contacts

Some time ago, I had a conversation with a friend who works field for campaigns. I was encouraging him to think about joining a House campaign near where I lived. "Sounds like a good candidate," he said, "but I would only think about it if they're serious about ID'ing voters."

The other day, after Jonathan Martin wrote a piece that suggested John McCain's field campaign was moving up closer into competition, we wrote that if Martin's reporting is accurate with McCain's numbers, the state of the organizing race is now something more like a 35-to-1 edge for Obama rather than the 567-to-1 edge it held earlier in the summer. That's not a field office edge or number of organizers edge, that's the voter contacts edge, and both ratios are absurd.

Despite publishing an inside scoop on Obama's Ohio numbers, our piece didn't make much noise. But it's not because the numbers aren't shocking – they are – it's because reporters and most people don't really understand how to put voter contacts in context. Marc Ambinder will note that the Obama campaign has "preternatural self-confidence" about its strategy, but that confidence has to come from some type of hard data.

So let's explain what voter contacts are, and what they are not. A voter contact occurs whenever someone from a campaign – organizer or volunteer – collects information from a voter about candidate preference or indecision, party preference (strong, lean, independent), or important issues to that voter in making the ultimate choice between candidates. A contact would ideally get an answer on all these questions to qualify as a contact, but even if the voter is only able or willing to give some meaningful data feedback, that counts. It takes about 4 attempts for every 1 contact, or roughly 25%.

Every bit of information gleaned helps the campaign make choices about how to target these voters for further messaging and GOTV. A strong Obama supporter will be targeted for volunteer work, early voting and/or GOTV. A strong McCain supporter will likely be ignored. A voter who describes herself as normally a Republican but who is undecided in this race and has health care as a critical issue will be targeted with persuasion mail pieces and/or person-to-person contacts about each candidate's health care positions and voting records.

If one geographic area shows more of a particular issue getting hits than another, or more potential Obamacans ripe for the picking, the campaign can use radio and television ads targeted to that region to educate and persuade voters (consider the Obama campaign running the DHL piece in southwestern Ohio). On the flip side, if the campaign is playing defense it can use its field contacts to inform it where an issue is gaining traction. For example, if McCain's campaign or his 527s are blanketing Montana's Hi-Line region with abortion and gun pieces attacking Obama, voter contacts will pick this up and target that region for an answer. It's all of a piece.

Since voters are typically identified through a voter file, the caller generally already knows the voter's name, age and phone number. Sometimes, former members of a household have moved, or calling a number results in getting an entirely different voter than the voter file said was there. This is why valuable voter files from four and eight years ago are not sufficiently reliable in the current cycle. People move, people change their phone numbers, people change party preferences, people change issues important to them, new voters grow up in the households, voters move out of households... it doesn't take long for a voter file to become out of date.

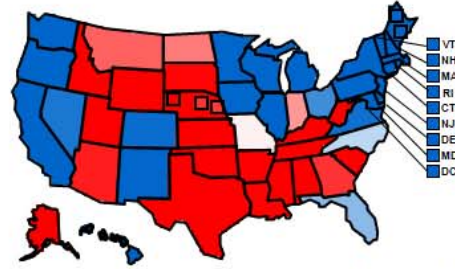
As a result, those who say that the Republicans can sit back and just do some last-minute exam cramming with a 72-hour program that will substitute for months of voter contact lead-up work, that's like an out of condition athlete saying that only recently were they the top performer in their sport, so all they have to do is show up at the starting line the next time out and they should win. That athlete's muscles will certainly have some residual memory of how to compete at the top level, but you wouldn't bet on them.

It's like building an advanced sonar map of the ocean floor. With a highly detailed map the campaign navigates, and this map cannot be developed except without a huge force of organizing and volunteer effort. When David Plouffe talks about six million volunteers on Election Day, that number is Bob Beamon's thunderstrike in Mexico City. Nobody has ever seen anything like it.

Obama vs McCain, 2008

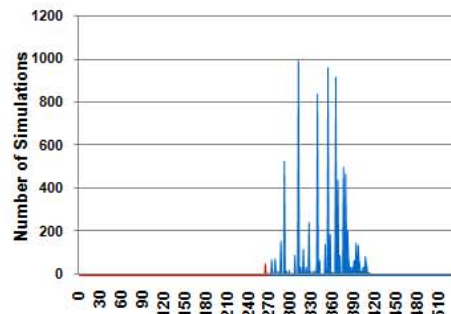


Obama vs McCain: Final Pre-Election Projection



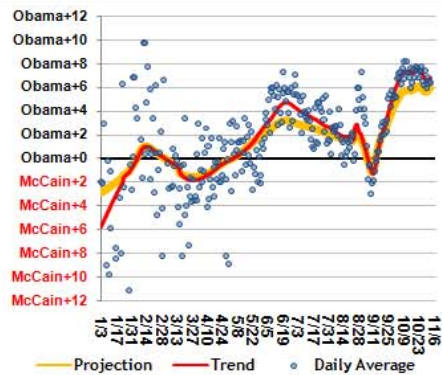
© FiveThirtyEight.com 11/4/2008 Obama 348.6, McCain 189.4

Electoral Vote Distribution

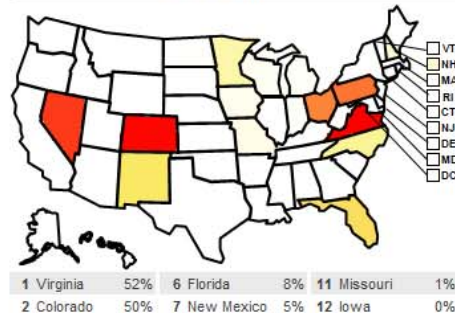


Most Likely Obama EV totals: 311, 353, 364, 338, 291

Super Tracker



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- PresidentElectionPolls.com
- Public Policy Polling
- Quinnipiac
- Rasmussen
- Real Clear Politics
- SurveyUSA
- Swing State Prect
- The Page / Halperin
- TPM Poll Tracker
- Wikipedia

Other Resources

- [2004 Exit Polls](#)
- [2004 Vote by CD](#)
- [American Fact Finder](#)
- [ARDA \(data on religion\)](#)
- [Dem Con Watch](#)
- [Factcheck.org](#)
- [FEC \(fundraising\)](#)
- [IEM \(futures\)](#)
- [Intrade \(futures\)](#)
- [Leip's Election Atlas](#)
- [Nat'l Council on Public Polls](#)
- [Pew Research Center](#)
- [Strange Maps](#)
- [The Green Papers](#)
- [USA QuickFacts](#)
- [WaPo Candidate Tracker](#)

Labels

- [12th amendment](#) (3)
- [2004](#) (4)
- [2010](#) (1)
- [2012](#) (2)
- [50-state strategy](#) (4)
- [advertising](#) (23)
- [african-americans](#) (10)
- [alabama](#) (20)

The preternatural confidence would be like Beamon in mid-flight with full self-awareness of what he's in the process of doing.

And this, ironically, perhaps explains more than anything else why journalists and pundits have been so slow off the mark in understanding the context of something like 109,209 phone calls in a single night in a single state with only a mid-August organizer and volunteer force. In their defense, Beamon's record isn't official until he lands over the previously un-contemplated 29-foot line. But every sports writer would have killed to have written a story during Beamon's mid-flight predicting what viewers were about to see. But our national political writers and discussers are a cautious bunch. Conventional wisdom rules. This is why you will hear MSNBC spend countless hours dissecting something like the Saddleback forum compared with this voter contact story unfolding right under their nose.

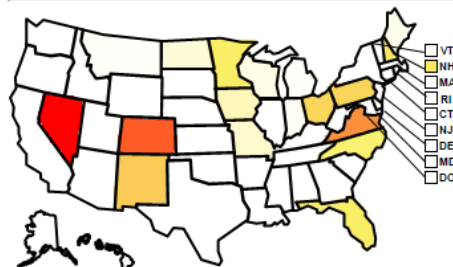
In the end, voter contacts are an advanced mapping tool of the electorate, but they are not done fancily. It's still one voter calling or doorknocking to persuade another at a time, and then accurately recording that info. It's still shoe-leather effort. People still have to give up their time to make a difference. It's just that this cycle, the Obama campaign is proving amazingly prepared to funnel its volunteers into concrete tasks that lead to the candidate winning. When Bob Beamon lands, remember that this time his in-flight could have been appreciated in super slo-mo.

-- Sean Quinn at 3:12 PM

Labels: [organizing](#)

3 Nevada	40%	8 N. Carolina	3%	13 Wisconsin	0%
4 Pennsylvania	28%	9 Minnesota	2%	14 Michigan	0%
5 Ohio	25%	10 New Hamp.	1%	15 Indiana	0%

Return on Investment Index



1 Nevada	22.4	6 Ohio	2.8	11 Iowa	0.2
2 Colorado	14.1	7 New Hamp.	1.2	12 Missouri	0.1
3 Virginia	9.1	8 Minnesota	0.6	13 North Dakota	0.1
4 New Mexico	3.8	9 Florida	0.6	14 Wisconsin	0.1
5 Pennsylvania	2.9	10 N. Carolina	0.4	15 Maine	0.1

Scenario Analysis

Electoral College TIE	0.12%	(12 of 10000)
Recount (one or more decisive states <=0.5%)	0.88%	(88 of 10000)
Obama wins Popular Vote	98.67%	(9867 of 10000)
McCain wins Popular Vote	1.33%	(133 of 10000)