

EXPANDING THE BATTLEGROUND

Presidential Election Reform

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Battleground states make millions of dollars each presidential campaign, while the safe states get virtually nothing. An alternative to current system is presented; it offers neither party an advantage over the current system, and safe states also reap the benefits of presidential elections by becoming relevant to the candidates.

IT'S GOOD TO BE A BATTLEGROUND STATE

In 2012, the Romney and Obama campaigns spent close to 2 billion dollars on the presidential race. Out of the \$892 million spent on TV ads alone, over 96.6% went to the 10 states that were battleground states in that election (see Table 1). In 2016, Trump and Clinton spent almost 2.4 billion dollars on the race; again, almost all of the money ended up in battleground states. The benefits to battleground states do not end on Election Day: incumbent presidents target federal dollars to battleground states, pressure government agencies to shorten processing time for awards for them, and even engage in strategic trade protectionism for their benefit. In this brief, an alternative to the current system is suggested. If implemented, it would allow the safe states to also reap the benefits currently reserved to battleground states.

State	Electoral Votes	Total spending	\$M per vote
Florida	29	173	5.97
Virginia	13	151	11.62
Ohio	18	150	8.33
North Carolina	15	97	6.47
Colorado	9	73	8.11
Iowa	6	57	9.5
Nevada	6	55	9.17
Wisconsin	10	39	3.9
New Hampshire	4	34	8.4
Michigan	16	33	2.06
Other states	412	30	0.07
Total	538	892	

Table 1: Total spending on TV ads in the 2012 campaign, in millions of dollars.

DON'T THE OTHER STATES WANT A PIECE OF THIS MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR PIE?

Almost all states use the winner-take-all method of allocating their electoral votes. Although money and political influence are strong motivators, they are insufficient to make safe states convert to a new system, as this would have other ramifications. A red state would not switch to a new system that appears to be biased against Republicans. This is the reason that red states do not support the direct election of the president: if the winner of the popular vote had been elected president, a Democrat would have been elected in 2000 and 2016. Similarly, a blue state will not switch to a system that appears biased against Democrats. A new system, therefore, has to be **unbiased against both parties**. In addition, the new system would have to meet other criteria that many legislators consider important, such as supporting a two-party system and requiring a wide distribution of popular support to be elected president.

ARE ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS COMPATIBLE?

There is a simple plan that indeed meets all of the requirements: the Competitive plan. It is not biased towards either party, would make safe states competitive, and meets the additional above requirements. In essence it is the following.

The Competitive Plan

Each state assigns its electoral votes in proportion to the statewide popular vote. Votes of candidates who do not pass a threshold go to the winner.

The idea of states assigning their electoral votes in proportion to the statewide popular vote is not new. It is often called the *proportional plan*; past suggestions for its implementation have been ad-hoc. In contrast, we approach it in an objective manner. While the technical details are omitted from this brief, the following example shows the importance of a rigorous approach: Assume that in a state with 4 electors, the Republican candidate receives 62% of the votes and the Democratic candidate receives 38%. How should the electoral votes be allocated? Under the standard

interpretation of the proportional plan, the state would allocate 2 votes to both candidates. Under the Competitive Plan, it would allocate 3 to the Republican candidate and 1 to the Democratic candidate.

In order to show that the Competitive Plan does not offer either party a partisan advantage, all of the presidential elections since 1900 were analyzed. The results of all 30 elections would have been identical if the Competitive Plan had been used. This is in contrast to all other suggestions for election reform thus far.

Despite the clear benefits to the safe states if all states were to adopt the Competitive Plan, it is not clear how to reach this goal. A constitutional amendment does not seem likely and getting all of the states to change at the same time is clearly infeasible. No state would want to change first, as it would be giving away votes to the candidate of the other party. For example, Indiana will (in all likelihood) give all 11 of its electoral votes to the Republican candidate in 2020. If it transitions to the Competitive Plan, Indiana would likely grant between 3 and 5 votes to the Democratic candidate.

UNLIKELY PARTNERS

What would happen if Vermont and Wyoming transition to the Competitive Plan together? Both states will become relevant to the candidates, and hence receive more attention and money. But what of the effect on the outcome? It turns out that not only will this have had no effect on the winner of any election since 2000, it would not have even affected any of the margins of victory! The largest effect it would have had is in 1968, when both states gave Nixon all 3 votes and Nixon won by 110 votes. Under the Competitive Plan, they would have both given Nixon 2 votes and Humphrey 1. An algorithm was developed in order to find pairs of states that “cancel each other out”. If the states transition, two at a time (according to the suggested order), at no point in this process would it have had any effect on the outcome of any election since 1900. This implies that whether or not other states transition, *even if some do and others choose not to*, there is no partisan advantage to either side if these states transition together. Compounded with the financial and political advantages gained by transitioning, it is clearly beneficial for the states to transition.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most states switched to the winner-take-all method in the 1820s to gain more political relevance. Ironically, this is the reason that 200 years later they are largely ignored by the presidential candidates. The safe states will not unilaterally transition to another system as they will be giving away votes; the battleground states do not want to – they are making millions from the status quo. The Competitive Plan offers a bipartisan alternative in which safe states become attractive to the candidates while at the same time not being biased towards either party. In addition to the plan itself, a simple method to transition is suggested, pairing up states that balance each other out politically, so that it is in their best interest to transition whether or not the other states choose to do so. The battleground states have not been addressed in this brief. Once all of the safe states have transitioned, it seems likely that the battleground states will do so too, but even if they do not, their slice of pie will be greatly diminished.