

“War is the continuation of politics by other means.”

*—Carl von Clausewitz,
Prussian military strategist*

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The Battleground: Swing State Campaign Strategy and How It Affects Your Vote

Every vote counts, but some votes are more important than others. At least that’s how the campaign strategists for George W. Bush and John Kerry look at it.

If you live in one of this year’s key swing states or “battleground states,” as they are often called in this year of war, you can expect to be barraged with a wave of television advertising for—and against—the candidates. You can expect regular campaign stops from W and JFK, and you can expect to have your opinion on the hot-button issues matter more than those of voters from other states.

Shaping a Battle Plan

Because the Electoral College provides for a winner-take-all system of allocating delegates from each state, candidates focus on a select number of battleground states where the margin of victory has been close in recent elections. The projected battleground states in 2004, with their associated electoral votes, are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

☆☆ How a Campaign Strategist Sees Your Vote ☆☆

Projected Bush States			
State	Electoral Votes	State	Electoral Votes
Texas	34	Mississippi	6
Georgia	15	Nebraska	5
North Carolina	15	Utah	5
Indiana	11	Idaho	4
Alabama	9	Alaska	3
Kentucky	8	Montana	3
South Carolina	8	North Dakota	3
Oklahoma	7	South Dakota	3
Kansas	6	Wyoming	3
Total			148

Projected Kerry States			
State	Electoral Votes	State	Electoral Votes
California	55	Hawaii	4
New York	31	Rhode Island	4
Illinois	21	District of Columbia	3
New Jersey	15	Delaware	3
Massachusetts	12	Vermont	3
Maryland	10	Maine District 1	1
Connecticut	7		
Total			169

Battleground States			
State	Electoral Votes	State	Electoral Votes
Florida	27	Colorado	9
Pennsylvania	21	Louisiana	9
Ohio	20	Iowa	7
Michigan	17	Oregon	7
Virginia	13	Arkansas	6
Missouri	11	West Virginia	5
Tennessee	11	New Mexico	5
Washington	11	New Hampshire	4
Arizona	10	Nevada	4
Minnesota	10	Maine at large and District 2	3
Wisconsin	10		
Total			221

Note:

Electoral votes for Maine and Nebraska are not winner take all. They are allocated by Congressional district and can be split among candidates.

See Chapter 1, page 3 to learn more about how the Electoral College works.

Count yourself lucky if you live in these battleground states (or unlucky, if you hate political ads). Your vote will play a crucial role in determining who takes office in 2005. The election in each of these states is expected to be decided by a few thousand votes. In fact, early polls show the 2004 election shaping up to be just as close as the disputed election of 2000.



Targeting swing voters has become a science.

Kerry Goes Big

As has been the trend for Democrats in recent elections, Kerry has a lock on several of the largest Electoral College states, including California (55 electoral votes), New York (31 electoral votes), and Illinois (21 electoral votes). That's 107 votes in only three states, more than a third of the way to 271.

Winning these large population centers means Kerry is likely to capture a high percentage of the popular vote. But can he come up with a winning formula to triumph in the electoral vote?

Bush Plays Small Ball

Bush's largest projected Electoral College state is Texas, with 34 votes. North Carolina and Georgia are next, with 15 votes each. Indiana is the only other core "Bush state" with double-digit electoral votes.

Bush's top five "gimmies" account for only 84 electoral votes, whereas Kerry's top five deliver 134. But Bush is projected to rack up a lot of other states, covering a large swath of territory from the Deep South through the Great Plains and the Mountain West. The campaign strategists predict that Bush has 18 states safely tucked away in his camp, accounting for 139 electoral votes, plus 11 of the battleground states that are projected to go his way, depending on whose survey you look at.

The Sunbelt Factor

Another factor analysts consider in projecting the electoral vote is population change. Every ten years, the distribution of electoral votes is updated to reflect the most recent census. Population growth has been most dramatic in southern and western states where Bush has the upper hand.

Table 3.2 illustrates that Bush is projected to gain five electoral votes in Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina, his top three core states, whereas Kerry is projected to suffer a net loss of two electoral votes in California, New York, and Illinois, the top three Democratic core states.

Table 3.2

☆☆☆ Electoral Vote Change Due to the 2000 Census ☆☆☆

Bush States in 2000			
State	2000 Electoral Votes	2004 Electoral Votes	Change
Texas	32	34	2
Florida	25	27	2
Ohio	21	20	-1
Georgia	13	15	2
North Carolina	14	15	1
Virginia	13	13	0
Missouri	11	11	0
Tennessee	11	11	0
Indiana	12	11	-1
Arizona	8	10	2
Colorado	8	9	1
Louisiana	9	9	0
Alabama	9	9	0
Kentucky	8	8	0
South Carolina	8	8	0
Oklahoma	8	7	-1
Arkansas	6	6	0
Kansas	6	6	0
Mississippi	7	6	-1
West Virginia	5	5	0
Nevada	4	5	1
Nebraska	5	5	0
Utah	5	5	0
New Hampshire	4	4	0
Idaho	4	4	0
Alaska	3	3	0
Montana	3	3	0
North Dakota	3	3	0
South Dakota	3	3	0
Wyoming	3	3	0
Total	271	278	7
Net Gain in Core States			2

Gore States in 2000

State	2000 Electoral Votes	2004 Electoral Votes	Change
California	54	55	1
New York	33	31	-2
Pennsylvania	23	21	-2
Illinois	22	21	-1
Michigan	18	17	-1
New Jersey	15	15	0
Massachusetts	12	12	0
Washington	11	11	0
Minnesota	10	10	0
Wisconsin	11	10	-1
Maryland	10	10	0
Oregon	7	7	0
Iowa	7	7	0
Connecticut	8	7	-1
New Mexico	5	5	0
Maine	4	4	0
Hawaii	4	4	0
Rhode Island	4	4	0
District of Columbia	3	3	0
Delaware	3	3	0
Vermont	3	3	0
Total	267	260	-7
Net Loss in Core States			-3

Content of Table credited to David Leip, www.uselectionatlas.org.

Of the key battleground states, Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and Nevada gained six electoral votes. These were all Bush states in 2000. The battleground states Gore carried—Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—lost electoral votes, four in all. Granted, Florida was a questionable win at best for Bush, but the bottom line in this analysis is that if things break anywhere near what they did in 2000, Kerry has a tougher road to achieving 271 based on population and electoral vote change.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Political strategists often talk about the *alignment* of states in national elections. In the most general terms, the current alignment has the Democrats controlling the most populous and most urban states along both coasts and in the upper Midwest. Republicans control most of rural America—the South, the Great Plains, and the interior west.

And some states are staunchly Republican or Democrat, no matter what the current alignment. Indiana has voted Republican for President all but one election since 1940. Massachusetts has gone the other way all but four times since 1928.

So, what should you do if you don't live in a battleground state and you're a supporter of the candidate who isn't expected to win?

Well, first of all, of course, you vote. Throwing up your hands and saying it's hopeless only makes the state you live in more firmly entrenched in the other party's camp. If the margin of victory is larger for the other guy in your state this time, you can bet that neither party will pay as much attention to your state and your opinions on the issues the next time around.

Try to build some grass-roots momentum for change in the hostile territory you happen to live in. Try to find some kindred spirits in your neighborhood, your town.

Join the party of your choice and be active in it. Vote for and work to elect local, state, and congressional candidates in your area. If no one from your party is on the ballot in a local election, run for the office yourself or try to encourage someone you would like to see in office run. You can't complain about a lack of choices if you don't do anything about it.

Even putting a bumper sticker on your car or a sign in your yard may help—at least it lets others know there are people who have other opinions about the election and what's going on in the world.

You can also try to affect the outcome of the election in battleground states. If you have friends or relatives who live in a battleground state, try to influence how they vote. Send them information about your candidate and your point of view. Get behind national efforts and organizations that represent your views on particular issues. Or, if you can, travel to a nearby battleground state and volunteer for your candidate there.

Visit the campaign Web sites for Bush, Kerry, and Nader to find out more about ways you can get involved in their campaigns, such as

- ✓ Contributing money
- ✓ Hosting or attending a “house party” or “meetup”
- ✓ Volunteering for the campaign
- ✓ Downloading campaign posters, brochures, and placards, or purchasing yard signs, pins, and other campaign gear
- ✓ View lists of unofficial grass-roots Web sites and organizations that support the candidates in battleground states—and in *your* state.

The candidates’ official campaign Web sites are

www.georgewbush.com

www.johnkerry.com

www.votener.org

Tactical Maneuvers

After deciding which states they will focus on, campaign strategists typically hit these states hard with TV advertising and grass-roots efforts such as house parties, bus tours, and the more traditional stump speeches and handshaking meet-the-voter events.

Most of the campaign budget goes to producing skillfully crafted—and often negative—TV ads, which can be shown hundreds of times in carefully selected key markets and aimed at specific issue groups such as pro-choice or seniors concerned about Social Security and Medicare.

Is Kerry a Flip-Flopper?

Bush decided to go negative early, launching a \$10-million-per-week TV ad onslaught in the battleground states shortly after Kerry clinched the Democratic nomination. The ads were designed to portray Kerry as a waffling liberal who is weak on defense and wants to raise taxes.

Matthew Dowd, the Bush campaign's chief strategist, said the ads accomplished their goal. "The two things voters know about Kerry today more than anything else is that he's a flip-flopper and he's going to raise your taxes."

Oregon and New Mexico appear to be two western states where Bush has a chance to turn up the volume on his libertarian anti-government message that has worked well in other western states.

Oregon has voted Democrat the past four elections, but Gore carried state by less than 7,000 votes in 2000. Early polls showed the state to be a dead heat, with Kerry leading in urban Portland and Bush out in front in the rest of the state, where the anti-tax message has been playing well. In New Mexico, where Gore narrowly won by fewer than a 1,000 votes in 2000, the same anti-tax message might work, but it will be countered by rapid growth in the state's Latino population.

★ **WHAT HE SAYS:**

We must "stay the course." —George W. Bush

★ **WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO HEAR:**

Keep me in office—I'm not a "flip-flopper."

★ **BUT DON'T FORGET...**

My course led us into the war in Iraq.

Bush can also try to steal some heartland states that went Democrat in 2000. Gore won Iowa and Wisconsin together by 9,200 votes, so either one could slip into Bush's hands in 2000 with a strong family-values message. The same strategy could apply to Michigan and Minnesota, although the large urban areas in Detroit and the Twin Cities make a shift less likely. Nader had a particularly strong showing in Minnesota in 2000, siphoning off 127,000 votes from Gore. Nader could be a big factor in tilting any of these states towards Bush this year if Nader can make himself heard on the issues without the benefit of the huge ad budgets the major party candidates have.

The "flip-flopper" ad campaign gained a lot of traction for Bush in the battleground states until it was drowned out by a nasty wave of insurgent fighting in Iraq, the noise of the 9/11 Congressional hearings, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal—a series of events that put the Bush

campaign in crisis mode and sent his approval ratings to the lowest point in his presidency.

Who's John Kerry?

Despite this opening, Kerry has had a difficult time taking advantage of the President's problems in Iraq. When the turmoil of the war dominates the news, it shoves everything else to the back burner, including Kerry's efforts to introduce himself to voters and unveil his policy initiatives.

Kerry spelled out his plan to cut the budget deficit in half on the same day Iraqi insurgents launched a series of attacks that captured parts of three cities and killed several U.S. soldiers. The policy speech was relegated to the inside of most papers and virtually ignored by the network news.

Two key prongs of Kerry's strategy depend on being able to turn attention away from the war and back to domestic and economic issues. Kerry has been trying to focus on the loss of jobs even in the midst of recovery to swing several key states his way, including Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

The best demographic trend for Kerry is the rapid growth in the nation's Latino population, which could help him make inroads in Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and Nevada.

★ **WHAT HE SAYS:**

"This administration has a truth deficit, not just a fiscal deficit." —John Kerry

★ **WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO HEAR:**

Bush knew there were no WMDs in Iraq and sent us to war anyway. And he can't balance the budget.

★ **BUT DON'T FORGET...**

I supported the war, but not the funds to pay for it.

Although Kerry's official fundraising total is only two-thirds of what Bush has raised, total spending on TV advertising has been relatively even if you count ads supplemented by Democratic political activist groups such as MoveOn.org and the Media Fund.

One of the ads questions why the Bush administration has spent \$7 billion on Iraq: “Shouldn’t America be his top priority?” Another shows a factory with Chinese characters on the smokestack and suggests that Bush’s policies have led to the export of American jobs.

Shifting Sands

Much to the chagrin of the campaign strategists, the 2004 election may depend more on how each candidate responds to the shifting sands of current events than any detailed campaign strategy. Although the electoral vote analysis shows a dead heat that neither Bush nor Kerry can win by more than the slightest margin, a key event or untimely statement may turn the election into a rout for one or the other.

William Carrick, a consultant to Dick Gephardt’s presidential campaign put it this way: “Anyone who says they know what’s going to happen in this race is not telling the truth.”



WHAT IF?

What would happen to campaign strategy if the U.S. were hit with another terrorist attack in the months or weeks leading up to the election? Many analysts say the terrorist bombings of commuter trains in Madrid three days before the election turned the outcome from the heavily favored incumbent to the Socialist Party. How would a similar attack impact election results here? Would your views of either candidate be affected?

A Volatile Mix

A volatile mix of issues—Iraq, post 9/11 terrorism, gas prices, and an economy that’s shedding jobs in the midst of recovery—is frustrating efforts by both candidates to gain an edge.

Iraq is a double-edged sword for both candidates, but it could end up costing Bush the election. He is, after all, the president who pushed for the war—America’s first “pre-emptive” war—in the face of strong opposition. His approval ratings sank to the lowest level of his presidency in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. In a survey by the Pew Research Center shortly after the scandal became news, public satisfaction with national conditions fell to 33%, its lowest level in eight years.

Public response to the problems in Iraq shows that this will likely be the deciding factor in the election. Voter Carolyn Engberg from Albuquerque said, “I’d like to see a smooth transition [in Iraq], but I don’t see a smooth transition coming out of this. We’re so deep into this, if [the transition] fails, we’ll be blamed. And if it succeeds, we’ll be blamed for not doing it earlier.”

BETTER OFF NOW?

While the war in Iraq may get the bulk of the media attention, jobs and the economy are still a key issue for most voters, especially in key battleground states. Bush radio and TV ads target battleground states with the message that the economy is growing again and Kerry is pessimistic, focusing on “days of malaise and the Great Depression.”

Despite the economic growth, the picture isn’t as bright as the Bush ads would paint it for everyone in the battleground states. Median household income is down slightly for the nation overall from 2000. Median income is up in 9 battleground states but down in 10, including the key states of Florida, Michigan, and Ohio. The election may come down to Ronald Reagan’s famous challenge to voters in the 1980 campaign: Are you better off now than you were four years ago?

Michael Yost, a teacher who supports the war, said, “The bottom line is, if I don’t see it, between June 30th and the election, getting better in some way, that’s something that might affect my decision.”

But many are still uncomfortable with the idea of Kerry as commander-in-chief. “I think he still has a lot to prove to me,” said Donna Urban. “Kerry voted for the war, now he’s anti-war. He’s just dancing around. I’d like to see what he’d do.”

Urban voted for Bush in 2000, but said he should be concerned about losing her vote this time.

ALL'S FAIR...IN WAR

War and terrorism are Bush issues. In many ways, they play into his hands: He can point to his strong defense stance, say he's the better choice for commander-in-chief, and divert attention from the social and economic policy issues Kerry wants to highlight. But the election is riding on events that may be beyond his control.

One way to look at election strategy is to find a comparable set of circumstances and candidates from the past and see whether any patterns or similarities emerge. A wartime incumbent can benefit greatly from his role as commander-in-chief—if we won the war or it's going well.

The Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the concerns about the transition of power in Iraq may make this election resemble 1980 or 1968, years in which we were embroiled in difficult, divisive situations overseas.

In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson was so drained and demoralized by the turmoil of leading the war effort in Viet Nam that he declined to run for re-election as the Democratic incumbent. Hubert Humphrey was left to try and unify a party—and a nation—that was bitterly divided over a failing and questionable war promoted by the Democratic administration. Humphrey lost the election to Richard Nixon—who ran as a peace candidate—by a narrow margin in the popular vote and a wide margin in the electoral vote.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter was faced with the grim drama of the Iran hostage crisis. For months the nation was demoralized by pictures of Americans held captive in a faraway land and hostile mobs taking over our embassy and burning American flags.

When an attempt to free the hostages ended in a flaming helicopter wreck in the middle of the desert, Carter's fate was sealed. Carter's "crisis of confidence" speech would end up prompting a crisis of confidence *in him*. He lost to Ronald Reagan in a landslide.



/AFP/Getty Images

Scenes like this from Abu Ghraib add an unexpected crisis to the Bush campaign.

Will the shocking images of tortured Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib be President Bush's version of the hostage crisis? If Bush handles the prison scandal and the transition to Iraqi power skillfully, he can point to his record as the best man to lead the country in a dangerous and uncertain era.

If Bush isn't able to bring our troops home without incident, the war will trump all other issues and render any campaign strategy meaningless.

