

KEY STATES EMERGE AS BATTLEFIELDS IN 2004

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Although Election Day is still more than five months away, the presidential campaigns are already eyeing keys battlegrounds that both candidates are hoping to swing in their favor -- one state at a time.

Both Republican incumbent George W. Bush and Democratic contender John Kerry are preparing for a tough fight. The country is almost evenly divided between Republican states, typically colored red on election night, and Democratic, or blue, states. In some parts of the country, the race will be particularly close, and in these "swing" states -- where political analysts believe either candidate could win -- both parties are working extra hard to make sure their party comes out ahead.

With so many states -- 16 in all -- that were won by President Bush in 2000 by less than 6 percentage points, the traditional campaign strategy of focusing only on big states with many electoral votes is changing. The states that are likely to see the closest races this year include Florida, Ohio, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Iowa. Arizona, Colorado, West Virginia and Louisiana could also go either way come November.

Candidate strategies

What are the candidates doing to win over voters in these crucial parts of the country? So far, both the Bush and Kerry campaigns are spending more money than usual on advertising and visits to swing states to try and tip the balance early in the race. The candidates have more money to spend than in the past, because both declined federal campaign dollars, which have a spending limit, and chose to raise as much as possible on their own.

In addition to running television ads on cable and local stations in well over a dozen swing states, President Bush has been getting out in person by way of his "Yes, America Can" bus tour, which has already stopped in cities like Dubuque, Iowa -- which doesn't see many presidential motorcades rolling down Main Street. John Kerry spent a reported \$2 million last week on advertising in Colorado and in Louisiana, where he also campaigned in person in early May.

The battleground states

In Florida, one of the biggest battleground states, the 2000 election was decided by just 537 votes for George Bush, sending the state's 27 electoral votes his way. Mr. Bush won Florida by fewer votes than third-party candidate Ralph Nader received --- which is one reason Democrats have been publicly asking the independent candidate not to run again. Floridians have only voted for two Democratic presidents in recent history: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

Ohio, with 20 electoral votes, has voted for the winner of the last ten presidential elections, but Bush won in 2000 by only 3.5 percentage points. Cities like Dayton, Akron and Columbus are likely to vote for Kerry (as they voted for Al Gore in 2000), while suburban and rural Ohioans will probably vote to reelect George W. Bush. The state's heavy industry has been hard-hit by job losses under the current administration, which could push voters toward the Democrats. On the other hand, Ohio is a socially conservative state where gay marriage is illegal but carrying a concealed weapon is not. The Bush campaign is already building an army of volunteers 50,000 strong to get the vote out, while independent organizations that support Kerry are running tough ads across the state.

In Missouri, Democratic Rep. Dick Gephardt is said to be on a list of Kerry's potential running mates. That could help the Democrats carry the state, which Mr. Bush won by only 3 percentage points in the 2000 election. Republican Gov. Tom Vilsack of Iowa, another swing state, is also said to be in the running for the number two spot on the ticket, but then again, so are another dozen or so qualified people from around the country.

A growing Latino population and a large number of retirees could tip Arizona and Colorado, which traditionally vote Republican, in Kerry's favor. Republicans hope social conservatives coupled with growing suburbs may help the reverse happen in Pennsylvania, a historically Democratic state where Gore only got 51 percent of the vote in 2000.

The upcoming conventions

The candidates -- along with their advertising specialists, speechwriters and volunteers -- will continue pursuing voters in swing states straight through their parties' respective national conventions (July for the Democrats, August/September for the Republicans).

"It will pare down after the conventions," Matthew Dowd, one of President Bush's chief strategists, recently told The New York Times. "We will ask ourselves, is Delaware really a swing state? Is Arizona really a swing state, or is it OK for us?"

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