

Obama Leads; Romney Has A Chance

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — President Barack Obama enters the final hours of the 2012 campaign with an edge in the hunt for the 270 electoral votes needed to win and more ways to reach that magic number. Yet the race is remarkably close in at least six states that could go either way, giving Republican Mitt Romney hope that he can pull off a come-from-behind victory.

If the election were held now, an Associated Press analysis found that Obama would be all but assured of 249 votes, by carrying 20 states that are solidly Democratic or leaning his way — Iowa, Nevada and Pennsylvania among them — and the District of Columbia. Romney would lay claim to 206, from probable victories in 24 states that are strong Republican turf or tilt toward the GOP, including North Carolina.

Up for grabs are 83 electoral votes spread across Colorado, Florida, Ohio, New Hampshire, Virginia and Wisconsin. Of those, Republicans and Democrats alike say Obama seems in a bit better shape than Romney in Ohio and Wisconsin, while Romney appears to be performing slightly better than Obama or has pulled even in Florida and Virginia.

The AP's analysis is not meant to be predictive, but instead to provide a snapshot of a race that has been extraordinarily close from the outset. The analysis is based on interviews with more than a dozen Republican and Democratic strategists in Washington and in the most contested states; public polls; internal campaign surveys; early vote figures; spending on television advertising; candidate travel; and get-out-the-vote organizations.

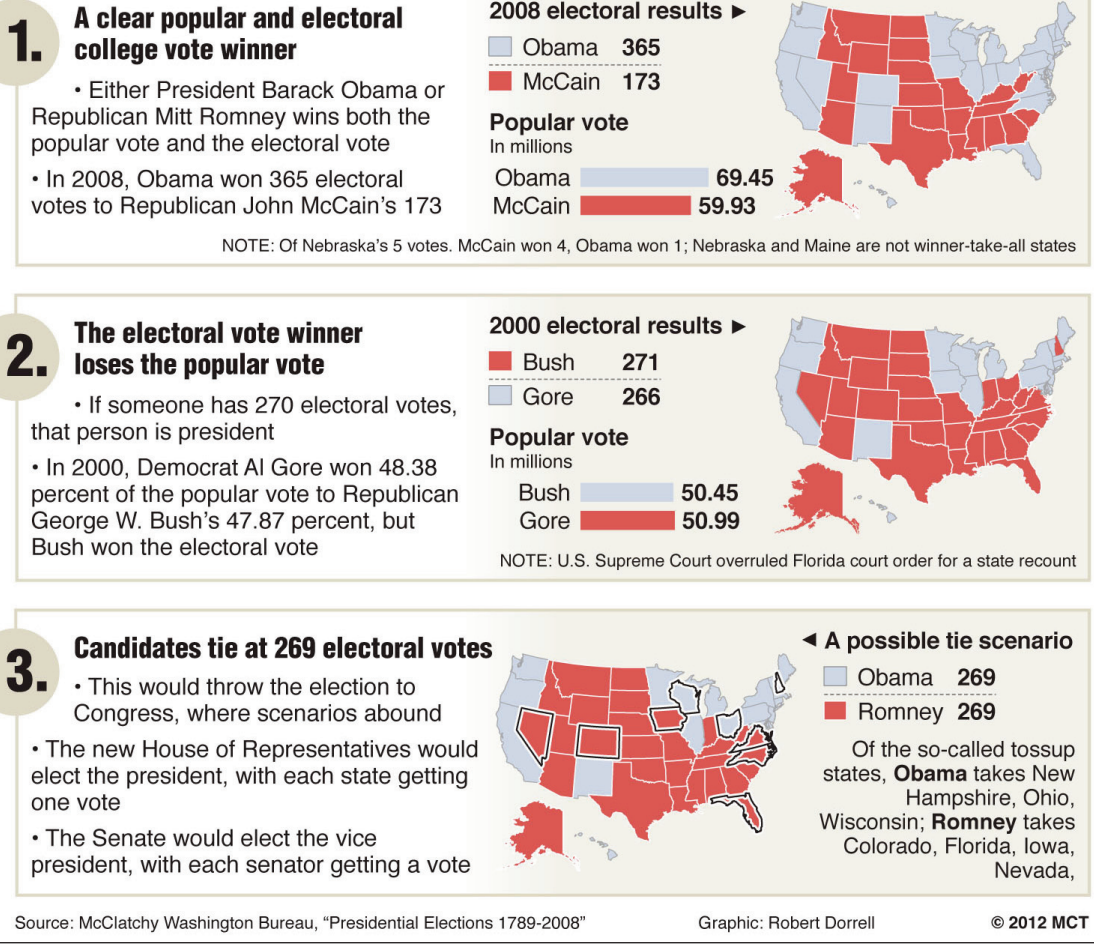
Both Republicans and Democrats say Tuesday's election has tightened across the board the homestretch. Many factors are adding to the uncertainty, including early vote tallies, Election Day turnout and the impact of Superstorm Sandy in the East. There's no telling the impact of Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson, who's on the ballot in 48 states, including all the battlegrounds, or Virgil Goode, an ex-congressman from Virginia who's running on the Constitution Party ticket.

But here's perhaps the biggest issue complicating efforts to get a handle on where the race really stands: different assumptions that each party's pollsters are making about the demographic makeup of the electorate. Republicans are anticipating that the body of voters who end up casting ballots will be more like the 2004 electorate, heavily white and male. Democrats argue that 2012 voters as a whole will look more like the electorate of four years ago when record numbers of minorities and young people turned out.

The difference has meant wildly disparate polling coming from Republicans and Democrats, with each side claiming that it's measuring voter attitudes more precisely than the opposition.

Electoral tally scenarios

In the race for the White House, a candidate needs 270 out of the total 538 electoral votes in the Electoral College. Considering three scenarios for what could happen on Election Night:



Said Republican strategist Phil Musser: "The conviction with which both sides say they are on a trajectory to victory is unique."

Tuesday will determine which side is correct. For now, the gulf between the two sides' polling has made it difficult to judge which candidate is faring better in the six up-for-grabs states.

In the final hours of the campaign, national polls show a neck-and-neck race for the popular vote.

But it's the Electoral College vote that elects the president. In that state-by-state race, Obama long has had the advantage because he's started with more states — and votes — in his column, giving him more ways to cobble together the victories he needs to reach 270. Romney has had

fewer states and votes, and, thus few paths — though victory remained within his reach.

Said Mo Elleithe, a Democratic strategist who specializes in Virginia: "A 1 percent shift in any demographic group in Virginia is the difference between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney being president. That's how close this election is."

Over the past month, Romney's standing in national polls improved following strong performances in the October debates, and he's strengthened his position in several states, including Colorado, Florida and Virginia.

But all three are too close to call and both Romney and Obama had final weekend campaign appearances in them, underscoring their fluidity. Romney has gained

ground in North Carolina, which now is tipping his way. Obama's team has all but acknowledged that it's the weakest for the Democrat of the competitive states, and the president himself isn't visiting the state in the final stretch.

Weather Compounds Misery In Sandy's Wake

NEW YORK (AP) — Storm victims went to church Sunday to pray for deliverance as cold weather settling in across the New York metropolitan area — and another drenching in the forecast — added to the misery of people already struggling with gasoline shortages and power outages.

Hundreds of parishioners in parkas, scarves and boots packed the pews and stood in the aisles for Mass at a chilly Church of St. Rose in storm-ravaged Belmar, N.J., where the floodwaters had receded but the streets were slippery with strong-smelling mud. Firefighters and police officers sat in the front rows and drew applause.

Roman Catholic Bishop David O'Connell said he had no good answer for why God would allow the destruction that Superstorm Sandy caused.

With temperatures dipping into the 30s overnight and close to 700,000 homes and businesses in New York City, its northern suburbs and Long Island still without electricity six days after the storm, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo warned that many homes are becoming uninhabitable and that tens of thousands of people are going to need other places to stay.

Syrian Rebels Capture Oilfield After Long Battle

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian rebels firing mortars and rocket-propelled grenades captured an oilfield in the country's east on Sunday after three days of fierce fighting with government troops protecting the facility, activists said.

The head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdul-Rahman, said rebels overran the Al-Ward oilfield in the province of Deir el-Zour near the border with Iraq early Sunday. About 40 soldiers were guarding the facility that the rebels had been pounding for the past three days, he said, adding that opposition fighters also captured several regime troops.

Oil was a major source of revenue for the cash-strapped regime of President Bashar Assad before the European Union and the United States imposed an embargo on Syria's crude exports last year to punish the government for its brutal crackdown on protesters early on in the uprising.

Election Officials Hopeful, Despite Storm

NEW YORK (AP) — Power generators are being marshaled, polling locations moved and voting machines hurriedly put into place as officials prepare to hold the election in storm-ravaged sections of New York and New Jersey barely a week after Superstorm Sandy.

Organizers expressed guarded confidence Sunday that the presidential vote will proceed with no major disruptions in most areas hit by the storm. But it was unclear whether the preparations would be enough to avoid depressed turnout in communities where people still lack power or have been driven from their damaged homes.

Some voters will be casting ballots in places different from their usual polls. And some polling places will be running on generators and using emergency lights and portable toilets.

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