

# Weeks Before Election Day, Early Voting Kicks Off

BY PHILIP ELLIOTT AND JIM KUHNHENN  
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Heard enough from the presidential candidates? Here's an answer: Vote now and put the election behind you.

Early voting in the presidential race begins this month, and in the weeks to come millions of people in key states will cast ballots that could prove decisive on Election Day. They did in 2008, when President Barack Obama's margin of victory relied to a great degree on early votes cast in such crucial states as Florida, Colorado, North Carolina and Iowa.

These days, a call to vote early is a standard plea in Obama's campaign speeches.

"Because in Iowa, you don't have to wait till Nov. 6 to vote. You can be among the very first to vote in this election, starting Sept. 27," Obama told supporters Saturday in Urbandale, Iowa.

Republican challenger Mitt Romney is looking to build up that early vote as well, eager to erect a better firewall than John McCain did four years ago. But early voting has favored Democrats, drawing heavily from the African-American community, and this year Republi-

can legislatures have tried to limit early voting in states such as Ohio and Florida.

If votes cast on Election Day decided the 2008 election, McCain would have won in Florida, Colorado, North Carolina and Iowa. But Obama won those states with an overwhelming early vote advantage, gained by mobilizing not only committed voters but also non-habitual voters with Internet ads, email and text messages and person-to-person home visits and phone calls.

This time, putting votes in the bank is even more crucial for Obama. Amid a fragile economic recovery and a persistently weak job market, every voter who decides early is a voter who can't change his mind later, if unemployment worsens.

The Romney camp is counting on four years taking their toll on Obama's supporters, lowering their intensity and making them a harder sell. Indeed, Obama's camp in 2008 closely monitored early voting patterns to determine whether they were in fact expanding the look of the electorate. The early voting patterns this time will show not so much whether Obama is changing the electorate and more whether he is actually mobilizing it.

"The key for Obama is getting the best votes out of their lowest propensity voter," Romney political director Rich Beeson said. "With an intensity gap, that's the first problem they are going to have."

What could be missing in intensity, the Obama campaign is trying to make up with extensive organizing. Obama campaign manager Jim Messina said his team is pushing a "commit to vote" program as the Democratic National Convention unfolds that encourages supporters to vote early.

He said the campaign has expanded on its 2008 effort, including registering 147 percent more voters than it did four years ago. He said their organizing efforts have far surpassed Romney's.

"They're doing more than the McCain campaign did," he said. "But they are nowhere near where we are on the ground."

Idaho and South Dakota can begin early voting on Sept. 21, followed later in the month by Vermont, Iowa and Wyoming. Contested states such as Ohio begin early voting Oct. 2 and Florida on Oct. 27. Most states also allow voting by absentee ballot, provided voters offer an excuse, and those ballots become available beginning this month.

In all, 32 states and the District of Columbia allow voters to cast early ballots, by mail or in person, without having to give a reason. Early voting has been expanding every four years, setting records in 2008, when more than three out of 10 votes were cast before Election Day. More than half of the ballots in Colorado, Nevada, North Carolina and Florida were cast before Election Day, with Colorado leading the pack with 78 percent of total votes cast early.

Across the country, Republicans have worked to curtail early voting over the past four years, and their effort is ongoing. Florida and Ohio officials are embroiled in lawsuits over early voting.

Republicans in Florida approved a law last year shaving the number of early voting days from as many as 14 to eight. Early-voting advocates are challenging that, and a panel of three federal judges recently determined the changes could hurt participation by blacks, who lean heavily toward the Democrats.

In Ohio, another election battleground, the Obama campaign sued over a Republican-backed state law cutting off early voting for most people on the weekend and Monday before Election Day. A federal judge on Friday agreed to restore the voting days, although Ohio's

Republican attorney general, Mike DeWine, plans to appeal the ruling.

Weekend voting has been an effective tool for Democrats. Black churches in 2008 promoted "take your souls to the polls" programs, helping deliver churchgoers from Sunday services to polling places.

But whether this election can match or exceed the 2008 early vote is an open question.

"We're not dealing with a candidate who's running for the first time; we're not dealing with the establishment of an historic change, and we have an economic downturn," observed Kareem Crayton, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina who specializes in voting rights.

Paul Gronke, director of the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College in Portland, Ore., said that without the level of enthusiasm and excitement that existed in 2008 the early voting patterns might build up more slowly. He also noted, however, that Romney, unlike McCain, has embraced some of the same social media techniques that Obama used in 2008 to motivate his early voters.

"For that alone, Obama has a bigger challenge," he said.

## Cappel

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referred to his primary doctor or will be advised to set up an appointment with a health care professional for guidance.

"I'm so appreciative of the medical community here for providing this," Cappel said. "I encourage men to take advantage of it. I hope nothing is found in anybody."

According to the National Cancer Institute, many doctors and professional organizations up until recently encouraged yearly PSA screenings for men beginning at age 50.

"Some organizations recommended that men who are at higher risk of prostate cancer, including African-American men and men whose father or brother had prostate cancer, begin screening at age 40 or 45," the National Cancer Institute website states. "However, as more has been learned about both the benefits and harms of prostate can-

cer screening, a number of organizations have begun to caution against routine population screening. Although some organizations continue to recommend PSA screening, there is widespread agreement that any man who is considering getting tested should first be informed in detail about the potential harms and benefits."

PSA tests can lead to the over-diagnosis and over-treatment of relatively harmless small tumors, the Institute says. They can also give false-positive or false-negative results.

Despite the disagreement in the medical community, Cappel said he is a firm believer in getting an annual prostate screening starting at 50. That is how he discovered his own cancer 16 years ago, which led to the removal of his prostate.

Also, it was a regularly-scheduled PSA test that revealed recently that Cappel's PSA level was starting to climb.

"That raised red flags," he said.

After undergoing further tests, it was confirmed in June that the

prostate cancer had moved below the surface of a hip bone. It is also suspected of being in the bladder, according to Cappel.

Last month, he received a hormone shot that stops the body from producing testosterone in an attempt to weaken the cancer cells.

"If they can reduce the size of the cells and their aggressiveness, sometime in October I will begin radiation treatments to try to knock them out," Cappel said.

After leaving the Yankton Area Chamber of Commerce in 2009, Cappel became an associate pastor at the First United Methodist Church in Yankton.

Developments in the treatment of prostate cancer, as well as his religious faith, have helped him keep a positive outlook since learning of the recurrence.

"I feel good. I'm optimistic," Cappel said. "The Lord has walked me through this, and I'm totally at peace with what's happening. He is taking care of me."

You can follow Nathan Johnson on Twitter at [twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage](https://twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage)

## Swim

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after a week into the journey."

Cornthwaite is no stranger to adventurous journeys like this one.

From August 2006 to January 2007, he skateboarded 3,618 miles across Australia. He also kayaked 1,540 miles in the Murray River in Australia. In 2011, Cornthwaite and his friend pedaled a tandem bicycle from Vancouver to Las Vegas, a total of nearly 1,400 miles, in just 14 days. He also broke a Guinness World Record in 2011 by paddling the Mississippi River for a total of more than 2,400 miles.

Despite all the adventures he has gone on, Cornthwaite insisted he did not do that much training for this trip.

"Slowly, my body is getting used to being a swimmer. I never really swam before," he said. "This is just a big challenge and we are all learning as we go."

"I didn't really do a huge amount of training. I love these

journeys, and I've done a few before in the past."

Cornthwaite said he decided on the Missouri River trip because there is no river big enough in the UK, and he wanted to do a 1,000-mile swim journey. He added the Missouri River had been on his mind since he passed its meeting point when he was on his Mississippi River journey last year.

"Swimming is a really difficult sport. It uses every muscle in your body," he said. "I was ready psychologically, I knew if I could swim 10 meters — and I knew I could because I tried the week before I started the journey — then I could swim 1,000 miles."

"It's really just a case of being positive, knowing I could do it and slowly building up my fitness."

One big inspiration for him on the journey is his mother.

"My mom got me some swimming goggles for Christmas, so I decided to use them well on this journey," Cornthwaite said.

During the times when the team is not swimming, they camp out on sandbars and along the banks of the river in each town at which they stop.

One thing that Cornthwaite really likes about these adventures is meeting new people along the way that help support his team and the cause they are fighting for.

"I love adventures where I have not visited the place before, so everything is brand new," he said. "Every person we meet is a brand new friend in the making. We've had so much support and we're doing the trip for a really great cause."

"Everyone we meet helps us achieve that goal of raising \$150,000 for breast cancer and also helps make a little bit of noise about our journey. We want to meet as many people as we can along the journey," Cornthwaite added.

The next leg of the journey will take the team 80 miles to Sioux City by Friday.

For more information, follow the team on Facebook at [facebook.com/expedition1000](https://facebook.com/expedition1000) or at [swim1000.com](https://swim1000.com).

You can follow Andrew Atwal on Twitter at [twitter.com/andrewatwal](https://twitter.com/andrewatwal)

## Fires

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longed to a family that lived three miles west of Pine Ridge — a town of about 3,300 and the largest population center on the isolated reservation.

The blaze would have destroyed other homes if not for outside emergency crews, said Oglala Sioux Tribe Emergency Management Director Wayne Weston.

"The fire was heading directly toward a housing development, but the firefighters did a fantastic job," Weston said. "The cooperation between the state of Nebraska, South Dakota and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is the best I've ever experienced."

Weston said the Red Cross was helping the displaced family, and the tribe was planning to place them in another home.

Emergency crews warned that at least 100 power-line poles were damaged or destroyed in the fire, and the downed lines may still pose a danger to the public. And they said trees damaged by the fire could fall without warning. Tribal officials were also concerned now about fire damage to a buffalo-grazing pasture, which Weston said destroyed much of their food supply.

The Wellnitz fire has an estimated cost of \$700,000 and count-

ing, as firefighters expect to have it contained by Wednesday.

Nebraska Emergency Management Assistant Director Al Berndt said the Douthit and West Ash fires in the Nebraska Panhandle were expected to cost \$2.5 million.

Berndt said the U.S. Forestry Service will cover firefighting costs on federal parks, grasslands, and forests, while Nebraska and South Dakota will reimburse local departments for fire services on state and private property.

Nebraska will also receive grant money from FEMA to cover its costs. But Berndt said he won't know how much the state and federal government will end up paying until mapping experts determine who owns what.

"We will split the cost," Berndt said. "If 30 percent of the burn area is on federal ground and 70 percent is on state and private ground, then we're responsible for 70 percent of the cost."

The Douthit fire, northwest of Crawford in Sioux and Dawes counties, was almost totally contained Tuesday after burning nearly 47 square miles — an area half the size of Lincoln.

The West Ash fire in Dawes County, southwest of Chadron, was 65 percent contained after burning more than 91 square miles. The fire has not expanded since Monday, said Sheila French, a spokeswoman for the fire response team.

Nebraska firefighters have spent most of the summer battling blazes

sparked by lightning amid an intense drought. Last month, six fires burned an estimated 60,000 acres around Lake McConaughy, the state's largest reservoir and a popular summer getaway. In July, three wildfires in north-central Nebraska blackened nearly 120 square miles and destroyed at least 14 homes.

Last month, Berndt estimated that the state would receive bills totaling at least \$7.5 million. The Nebraska Emergency Management Agency started the year with about \$10 million, thanks in part to lower-than-expected Missouri River flood recovery expenses.



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