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COLES COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
*Bagwell Center for the Study of Markets
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Commentary

Title:

*"The Importance of Omaha to
the 2024 Presidential Election"*

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In the words of Peyton Manning, “Omaha! Omaha! Omaha!”¹ Manning shouted this throughout the end of his career as an audible to indicate that his offense was changing the play right before the snap, but it could just as well indicate the small geographic area in the U.S. that will determine the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election. The voters of Nebraska’s 2nd Congressional District could possibly determine the next President, only because of the unique rule which Nebraska has adopted for allocating its electoral votes.

Before getting into why this is the case, let’s first think broadly about how we elect our President. When a society is confronted with a social/public choice which is made by way of voting, it is often the case that the voting rules can impact the decision – that is, with fixed voter preferences/votes, two different sets of voting rules could lead to two different outcomes or choices.

As anyone who follows politics even casually knows, we have always elected our President indirectly by way of the Electoral College, as opposed to directly by way of a national popular vote.² Each state has a number of Electors equal to the number of Representatives it has in the U.S. House, plus the number of Senators it has (since every state has two Senators, the number of Electors is also equal to “its number of Representatives in the House plus two”; the District of Columbia – which has no voting members in the U.S. House or Senate – has three Electors, which is the number it would have if it were a state).

Currently (and since the election of 1964), there are 538 Electors in the Electoral College. If a Presidential candidate gets 270 or more Electoral Votes (i.e., more than 50%), they are elected President. If no candidate reaches this threshold, then the House of Representatives elects the President, with each state delegation getting one vote. These votes must be cast for one of the candidates who was in the “top 3” in terms of initial Electoral College votes, with 26 or more votes (i.e., more than 50%) needed to win.³

These rules for electing the President and Vice President were established by the 12th Amendment to the Constitution, which was ratified shortly before the election of 1804. Since then, there has only been one election in which no candidate got more than 50% of the Electoral votes: the election of 1824. In that election, there were 261 Electoral Votes. Andrew Jackson got 99, John Quincy Adams got 84, William Crawford got 41, and Henry Clay got 37 – nobody got the 131 needed for a majority. Subsequently, the House of Representatives met for the delegations of the then 24 states to each cast a vote for one of the “top 3” candidates. John Quincy Adams got 13 of these votes, just enough to be elected President (Jackson got 7 and Crawford got 4).

In recent decades we have become accustomed to “very close elections” in regard to the Electoral College tallies.⁴ To support this claim, we can look at the percentage of all Electoral Votes that go to the candidate getting the most Electoral Votes. The average of this percentage was 67.39% in the 1800s and 76.37% in the 1900s. For the six elections thus far in the 2000s, this average percentage is 57.74%. In fact, the most lopsided election of the twenty-first century was

¹ See <https://www.denverbroncos.com/video/peyton-and-omaha-12446431>.

² Whether popular vote would be a “better way” to elect the President is a topic for a different *Commentary*. Our broad opinion, informed by a famous result from Social Choice Theory known as Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem, is that there is no best election mechanism. For a full description of the Electoral College, see <https://www.usa.gov/electoral-college>.

³ The Vice President would be chosen by the Senate, with all Senators getting to vote for either Vice Presidential Candidate who was one of the “top 2” in terms of initial Electoral College votes.

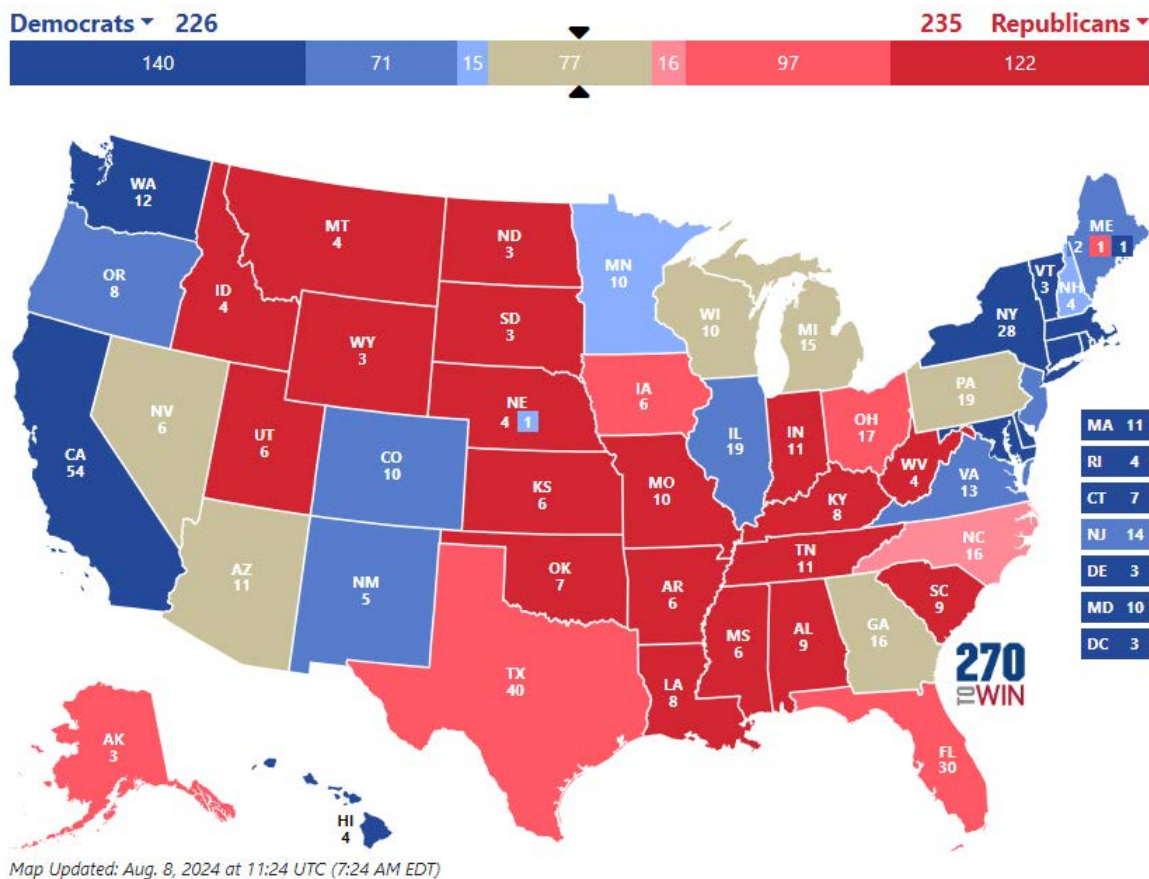
⁴ A closely contested election is generally a sign of a functioning democracy; autocrats such as Vladimir Putin often win “elections” by wide margins (e.g., Putin got over 88% of the vote in the 2024 Russian Presidential Election).

the Election of 2008, in which President Barack Obama defeated Senator John McCain by getting 67.84% of the Electoral Votes (365 to 173), a percentage roughly equal to the average winning percentage in the 1800s and almost 10 percentage points less than the average winning percentage of the 1900s.

Recent Presidential Elections have become such close contests in part because there are many states that vote reliably for Republicans, many states that vote reliably for Democrats, and a relatively small number of “swing states.” Looking ahead to the 2024 election, as of early August 2024, there are six states that could be considered “swing states,” which could reasonably go to either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. We make this claim based upon information reported on the websites <https://www.270towin.com/> and <https://electionbettingodds.com/>.

Figure 1 illustrates the projected electoral map on the site [270 to Win](https://www.270towin.com/) as of 8/8/24. The shades of blue (Democrat/Harris-Walz) and red (Republican/Trump-Vance) from lightest to darkest indicate states that “lean” toward a candidate, are “likely” wins for a candidate, and are “safe” for a candidate. The swing states are shaded in gray.

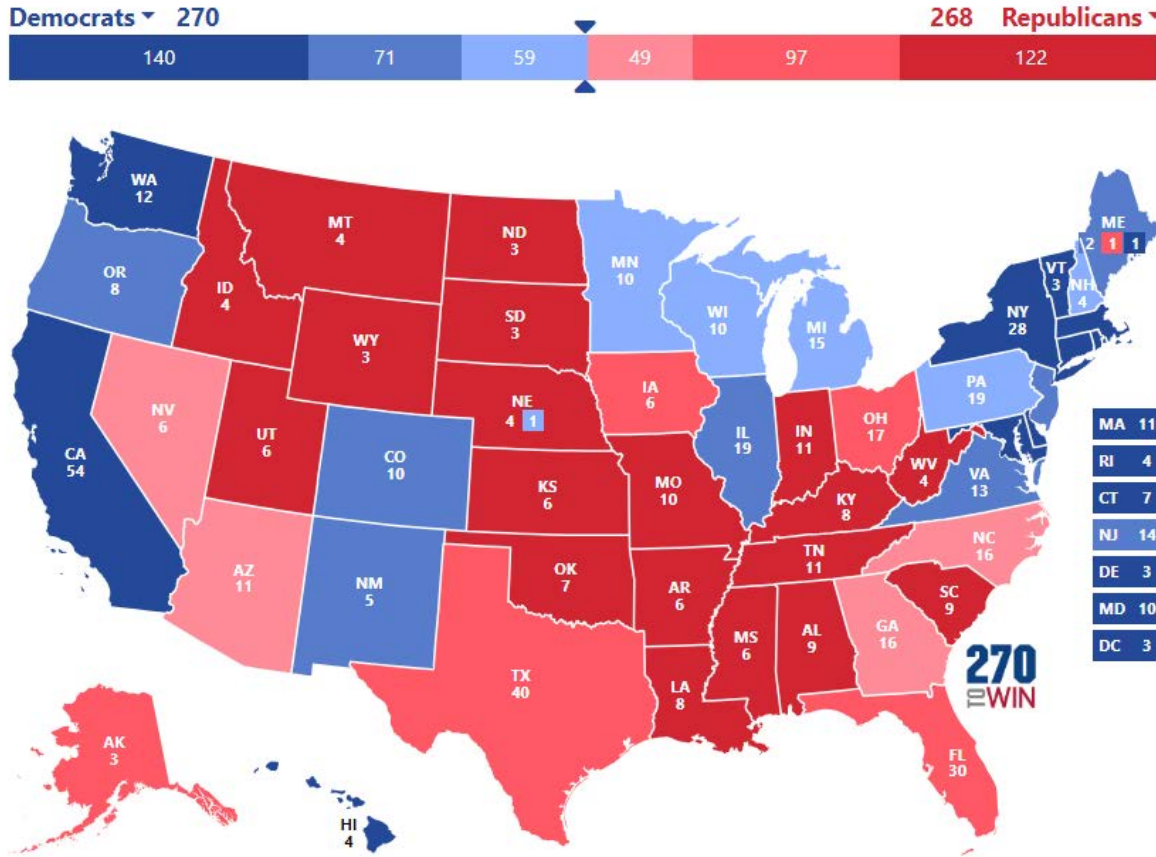
Figure 1 – Projected Electoral Map with Swing States Undecided



If we allocate the six swing states to respective candidates based upon the “state level probabilities” indicated on the [Election Betting Odds](https://www.electionbettingodds.com/) webpage as of 8/8/24, Harris-Walz carry Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, while Trump-Vance carry Arizona, Georgia, and

Nevada. These outcomes give us the electoral map illustrated in Figure 2, with Harris-Walz getting the bare minimum number of Electoral Votes needed to win (i.e., 270).

Figure 2 – Projected Electoral Map with Swing States Decided



But if you look closely at these two maps, you will notice a small blue box inside red Nebraska (and a small red box inside blue Maine). This is because Maine and Nebraska allocate their electoral votes in a way that is different than any other states. In all other states, whichever candidate gets a plurality of popular votes (i.e., the most votes, even if it is not more than 50%) is awarded all of the Electoral Votes for the state. So, for example, when George W. Bush got 537 more votes in Florida than Al Gore in 2000 (out of a total of 5,963,110 votes cast), Bush was awarded all of Florida’s Electoral Votes.

The Constitution allows states flexibility in how Electoral Votes are allocated. Maine and Nebraska award their Electoral Votes as follows. Whichever candidate gets the plurality of votes in the state as a whole is awarded two Electoral Votes (equal to the number of U.S. Senators that the state has), and whichever candidate gets the plurality of votes in each Congressional District is awarded one Electoral Vote.⁵ Maine has two congressional districts; Nebraska has three congressional districts.

⁵ Maine adopted this “split electoral rule” prior to the 1972 election, and Nebraska did so prior to the 1992 election.

Focusing on Nebraska, the state as a whole and both the 1st and 3rd congressional districts are “safe” for Trump-Vance, while the 2nd congressional district “leans” toward Harris-Walz (according to [270 to Win](#)).⁶ Nebraska’s 2nd district contains the state’s largest city: Omaha!

The Cook Partisan Voting Index (which provides a measure of “how partisan” a Congressional District is), ranks Nebraska’s 2nd District as “even” (i.e., favoring neither Democrats or Republicans; only 7 of 435 Congressional Districts are assessed as “even”). While [270 to Win](#) has this district as “leaning” toward Harris-Walz, it is truly a “swing district” – it favored Obama over McCain in 2008, Romney over Obama in 2012, Trump over Clinton in 2016, and Biden over Trump in 2020.

If this district were to favor Trump-Vance (with all other swings states going as indicated in Figure 2), then the Electoral College vote would be tied 269 to 269. Also recognize that if Nebraska did not have this peculiar set of rules for allocating its Electoral Votes, then all 5 Electoral Votes from Nebraska would be “safe” for Trump-Vance, in which case the Electoral College vote would be tied 269 to 269.

As already noted, if no candidate gets 270 Electoral Votes, then the House of Representatives elects the President, with each state delegation getting one vote. If this were to happen in the upcoming Presidential Election, the House would have their election in early 2025 and it would be the members of the “new” House (i.e., the 119th U.S. Congress; those elected in November 2024) casting these votes.⁷

We obviously do not yet know what the composition of the House for the 119th U.S. Congress will be, but we can speculate. Republicans have a majority of House members in 26 states in the 118th Congress. This number of states in which Republicans have a majority of House members is expected to increase to 29 or more after the Congressional Elections in November.⁸ Consequently, it seems safe to assume that if the Presidential Election were to be decided by the House, Trump (the Republican candidate) would prevail, with the caveat that the political landscape is in flux since President Biden’s replacement by Kamela Harris as the Democratic candidate.

As noted, assuming the current most likely outcome in each state, under the existing Electoral College rules, Harris would get 270 Electoral Votes (the bare minimum to win the election). However, there would be a tie in the Electoral College (with the U.S. House members in the 119th Congress choosing the President, which would likely be Trump) if either: (i) under the existing rules the Trump-Vance ticket could swing Nebraska’s 2nd Congressional District in their favor or (ii) Nebraska instead allocated their Electoral Votes in the same way as every other state except Maine. This latter observation reveals how the voting rules (as opposed to the preferences of voters) can impact the outcome of the social choice.

To summarize, the unique rules which Nebraska has chosen for allocating its Electoral Votes could possibly be the difference between a Trump victory and a Harris victory in the 2024 Presidential Election. Under the existing rules, the outcome of the election may hinge on which candidate is able to carry Nebraska’s 2nd Congressional District. We will just have to wait and see

⁶ As for Maine, its 2nd Congressional District is “likely” to go to Trump (i.e., it is more secure for Trump than Nebraska’s 2nd District is for Harris). Moreover, flipping this single Electoral Vote (with all others fixed) does not alter the winner of the overall election.

⁷ See <https://www.270towin.com/content/electoral-college-ties>.

⁸ See <https://www.270towin.com/2024-house-election/state-by-state/consensus-2024-house-forecast>.

whether it is Republicans or Democrats who emulate Manning in a victorious chant of, “Omaha! Omaha! Omaha!”