



The Path to 270 In 2016, Revisited

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Introduction and summary

When discussing elections, political analysts and commentators frequently talk about overarching fundamentals—such as the state of the economy, demographic shifts, trends in partisanship, and the popularity of the sitting president—that together indicate the contours and likely outcome of a particular race. In the political science community, these factors are generally believed to matter more than the specific tactics of campaigns or the characteristics of candidates. With the nomination of businessman Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for president, these assumptions are being seriously tested in 2016.¹

With approximately five weeks to go in the campaign, nearly all signs—national and state-level polling; President Barack Obama’s rising favorability; the decent if not great state of the economy; campaign fundraising; and on-the-ground infrastructure—point to a victory for Democratic nominee and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in both the popular vote and the Electoral College. Even with polarization of the electorate along party lines, the strong desire for change among the electorate, and the serious personal doubts many voters have about Clinton, Trump has failed thus far to convince a solid majority of Americans that he is fit to lead the country. On the four major poll aggregation sites, Trump trails Clinton by 3 to 5 percentage points nationally at the end of September after the first presidential debate and has never led consistently at any point in the campaign.²

As outlined in our December 2015 report “The Path to 270 in 2016,” the nomination of Trump, and his subsequent actions as the nominee, strongly suggest a political strategy based upon maximizing white turnout and vote preference, particularly among white non-college-educated voters, rather than trying to broaden the Republican Party’s appeal to reach more diverse voters.³ The Electoral College path for this strategy appears to involve trying to win Florida plus a significant chunk of Midwest states to achieve a narrow victory built on the votes of white Republicans and independents, as well as hoped-for lower Democratic enthusiasm for Clinton.

There is little evidence to date that this strategy is working well enough to produce a solid victory. Although the race has tightened in recent weeks, including in some key states such as Florida and Ohio, Trump is behind nationally and is trailing on average in nearly all of the major battleground states.⁴ He is losing badly with voters of color and—more surprisingly—is underperforming substantially relative to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney among white, college-educated voters.⁵ In the process of trying to attract disenchanted non-college-educated whites with a tough message on immigration, national security, and global trade, he has driven significant numbers of white, college-educated voters away from the Republican Party and toward voting for Clinton; voting for third-party candidates such as Libertarian and former new Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson; or potentially not voting at all.

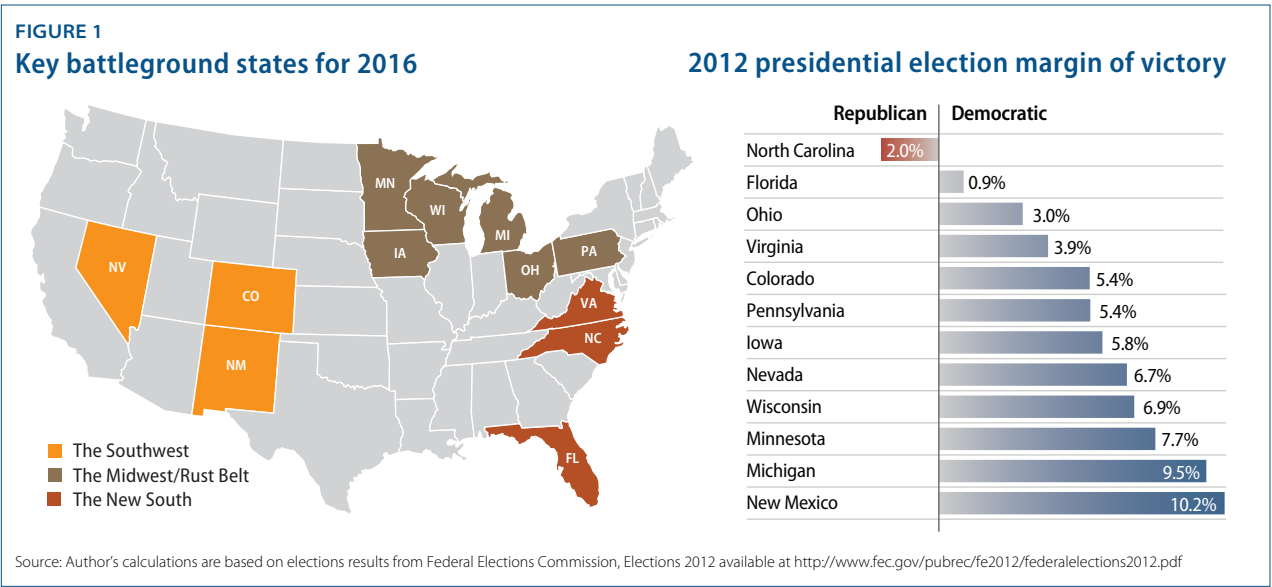
If the election were held this week, Trump would likely lose based on all of the available evidence. But, despite the Republican nominee's seemingly narrow political strategy, the eventual outcome of the race is not yet a foregone conclusion for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, a significant percentage of voters remain discontented with the state of politics overall and with the specific choices they face between Clinton and Trump, both of whom are viewed quite unfavorably outside of their core voting bases. At the end of September, Hillary Clinton's unfavorable ratings remain in the mid-50s and Donald Trump's unfavorable ratings are closer to 60 percent or higher.⁶ This larger dissatisfaction creates uncertainty about overall voter turnout and vote choice. Currently, about 7 percent of voters nationally are undecided about the election and another 10 percent say they will support third-party candidates Gary Johnson or Jill Stein. And the rates of potential third-party support are even higher among younger, Millennial generation voters that the Democrats hope to attract.⁷ These trends are more pronounced at the national level than in the battleground states, but they could alter the outcome of the election in unpredictable ways if they hold through November 8.

Second, it is not clear at this stage whether the Democrats will be fully able to recreate or approximate the electorate that twice elected President Obama to office. To date, there is little evidence of core Democratic voters turning to Trump.⁸ But it is conceivable that lingering questions about Clinton among younger voters and among supporters of Bernie Sanders could reduce turnout levels in ways that amplify the effect of third-party support when coupled with strong turnout from

Trump’s core base. However, there is solid evidence in polling at this stage that the Clinton campaign is offsetting any potential reduced enthusiasm among core Democratic voters with significant inroads into the Republican-leaning white, college-educated bloc, especially women.⁹

This report explores in detail the national and state-level demographic and voting trends as they exist in late September just after the first presidential debate; the possible influence of factors such as a potentially large third-party vote, a widening gender gap, and differentials in campaign effort levels; and the basic strategies both parties need to deploy in order to achieve victory.



	D—2012	R—2012	Projected change in share of actual voters, 2012 to 2016
Minorities	81%	17%	2
White college graduates	44%	55%	1
White working class	38%	60%	-3

Note: Due to rounding error, the numbers in the projected change in share column may not sum to zero.

Sources: Authors' calculations based on data from the Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey 2012: November Supplement* (2012), available at <https://cps.ipums.org/cps/>; data from the Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey 2014: June* (2014), available at <https://cps.ipums.org/cps/>; data from the Bureau of the Census, *American Communities Survey*, (2008–2013), available at Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2010), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>; CCES Dataverse "CCES Common Content, 2012," available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H4T14477> (last accessed November 2015); Roper Center, "National Election Pool Exit Polls" (2012), available at <http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/exit-polls/>; projections from Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, and Robert Griffin, "States of Change: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate 1974–2060" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/report/2015/02/24/107261/states-of-change/>.

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