

# **The Role of Cities in National Popular Vote Elections**

*Lessons from presidential election results in metropolitan statistical areas*  
By Andrea Levien and Rob Richie<sup>1</sup>

## **Overview**

In debating options for reforming presidential elections in the United States, the most promising alternative to the status quo is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPV). NPV would guarantee the election of the presidential candidate who earns the most popular votes in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Even though we use popular vote elections to select every member of Congress and all 50 governors, some NPV skeptics warn that its adoption would have a partisan impact on presidential elections. They fear that Democrats could increase their national vote totals by focusing resources on major metropolitan areas, while Republicans could achieve similar gains only by spreading their resources across more geographically dispersed, non-urban areas.

This report challenges this argument in three ways. First, we demonstrate that urban areas, when properly defined as metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), lean only modestly toward the Democratic Party. Using data from the 2004 presidential election (the closest of the last three presidential elections, in which Republican nominee George W. Bush won with 51.2% of the two-party popular vote), we show that: Democratic and Republican presidential nominees are almost evenly supported in metropolitan areas: Bush won a majority of MSAs; and the number of votes cast in the 100 largest cities proper and cast by voters living outside MSAs were comparable.

Second, we address the premise of a potential Democratic advantage in national popular vote elections due to the possibility of them focusing resources on large cities. Using data from the 2008 election (in which Democratic nominee Barack Obama won with 53.7% of the two-party popular vote), we show that even if the candidates were to focus their attention heavily on the nation's largest urban areas (the 21 MSA with at least 2.5 million voters), thereby increasing their vote shares there, they would still need to earn almost as many votes in the rest of the nation in order to maintain their original national popular vote share. Simply put, when every vote is equal in a close election, candidates cannot afford to ignore large portions of eligible voters.

Third, we review evidence from presidential and gubernatorial elections to demonstrate how campaign strategy might work under a national popular vote system. Today, when campaigning to win the statewide popular vote in swing states, presidential candidates campaign in urban, suburban, and rural areas in proportion to those areas' share of the swing state's vote. This strategy is similar to those in gubernatorial elections, which Republicans are able to win in almost every

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state. Republican candidates, like Democrats, are able to earn votes across any state, demonstrating that in winning statewide popular vote elections, successful candidates need not, and do not, focus only on urban areas.

Our analysis confirms that the national popular vote has no inherent partisan bias. Dismissing this concern can allow us to focus on the real problem: the unacceptable inequity of the current system. As a point of comparison between a prospective national popular vote for president and the current system, for example, consider that in 2012, there were only ten states where both major parties sent their presidential nominees to campaign after the conventions. Voters in those ten states were also the targets of more than 99% of all general election advertisement spending, meaning that voters in 40 of the 50 states were spectators in a highly competitive election for our highest office. The 2004 and 2008 elections were similarly unequal for voters based on their state of residence, with an average of 12 hotly contested battleground states that largely overlapped with the 2012 battlegrounds. With charges of partisan bias so effectively dismissed, it is time for both Democrats and Republican to come together in support of a reform that would make every vote equal.

### **Defining “Cities” and “Metropolitan Statistical Areas”**

The United States is a politically and geographically diverse country, and therefore cannot be neatly organized into Democratic urban areas and Republican non-urban areas. While it is indeed true that a majority of voters who live within the traditional boundaries of most major cities are Democratic, each city across the country – as well as their surrounding suburbs – contains a sizable number of Republicans.

Furthermore, the assumption that urban areas are overwhelmingly Democratic is based on an improper definition of an urban area. For the purpose of analyzing large-scale elections, the most appropriate definition of an urban area is what the U.S. Census calls a “metropolitan statistical area” (MSA). While a “city” is a geographical unit with a degree of legal autonomy, a MSA is an entire economically and culturally interconnected settlement, typically a central city and the counties surrounding it. The MSA has long been a popular geographical unit of analysis about which the Census releases extensive data and analysis. To be an MSA, an area must include a core city of at least 50,000 people or an urbanized area of at least 100,000 people.

Our analysis in this report uses the U.S. Census’ official designation of MSAs, of which there were 361 in 2004. These MSAs range in size from the twenty-three counties in the nation’s largest MSA, the New York metropolitan statistical area, to just one county, as in Auburn, Maine. We use the MSA unit to measure voting patterns because cities do not exist in vacuums, but rather are shaped by residents both of the core city and its surrounding suburbs. Chicago, for example, is the urban center of the Chicago metropolitan statistical area, which relates symbiotically to surrounding counties in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Many residents in these counties commute into Chicago or visit the city on the weekends, and issues that are important to voters in the city proper are also often important to voters in the outlying areas. Residents of core cities and their suburbs also typically share news stations and one or more daily newspapers.

In presidential elections, campaigns spend the majority of their money on television advertisements. These TV ads are not limited to the airwaves of any one city or town, but play regionally, often reaching hundreds of thousands or even millions of viewers. For example, an

advertisement aired in New York City also reaches voters in Long Island, Westchester County, Northern New Jersey, and Southern Connecticut, about 7,384,340 households in all.<sup>2</sup> If candidates are buying television ads in urban areas, they will reach voters living in entire MSAs rather than just core cities.

Therefore, the metropolitan statistical area provides a better unit of analysis for research on demographics, politics, and voting patterns in urban areas than do core cities. Of the 2004 election's 122,303,590 voters, 82.6% (101,013,490) lived in the nation's 361 MSAs. That leaves 17.4% of the nation's voters living in non-MSA rural areas. Instructively, this percentage is comparable to the percentage 2004 voters (16.5%) who lived within the boundaries of the nation's 100 most populous cities (the smallest of which was Springfield, Missouri, with a population of 151,580 people).

### **Exploring the Political Leanings of Voters in Metropolitan Statistical Areas**

With more than four in five Americans living in MSAs, it is not possible for a presidential candidate, Republican or Democrat, to win an election without doing very well in MSAs, regardless of whether the outcome is governed by the national popular vote or statewide popular votes (the current system). Nevertheless, opponents of a national popular vote for president often argue that if candidates were incentivized to collect as many votes as possible across the country, without any consideration state-by-state popular votes, they would spend the majority of their time "camped out" in our nation's largest cities, such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. This would advantage Democrats, they contend, because Democrats would need to travel to fewer places and concentrate their spending on fewer areas than Republicans to reach potential supporters.

Our findings, however, show that Republicans would not be disadvantaged by a switch to a national popular vote for president. While large and medium-sized cities and their suburbs tend to be slightly more Democratic than the nation as a whole, Republicans who chose to make their campaign stops in cities and their suburbs would find tens of millions of potential Republican voters there, only slightly fewer in number than potential Democratic voters. Consequently, campaign attention and resources allocated by each party to urban areas would reach roughly the same number of Democrats and Republicans, and they would certainly reach many more undecided voters than campaigns do under our current, state-based system, in which only the voters in swing states are targeted.

This misconception of the voting patterns in urban areas stems from the fact that many of our nation's largest cities do vote heavily for the Democrats in presidential elections. According to data collected by Bay Area Center for Voting Research, in 2004 New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco voted for the liberal presidential candidates (Democratic, Reform, and Green) at rates of 79.1%, 81.2%, and 84.2% respectively. But any candidate, Democratic or Republican, who spent the majority of his or her campaign resources in these cities alone would lose, since these three cities combined made up less than 4% of the country's total population. Furthermore, many large cities, such as Phoenix, San Antonio, and Jacksonville favored conservative candidates for president (Republican, Libertarian, and Constitutional) over liberal candidates in 2004.

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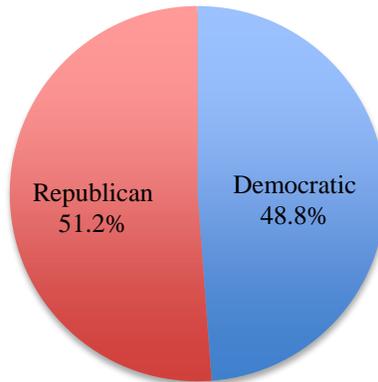
<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB\\_Market\\_Profiles\\_Nielsen\\_Household\\_DMA\\_Ranks2.pdf](http://www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB_Market_Profiles_Nielsen_Household_DMA_Ranks2.pdf)

As we explain in this report, the metropolitan statistical area is a better unit of analysis with which to measure the political leanings of urban areas. Analysis of the voting patterns in MSAs reveals that partisan imbalances are much smaller in MSAs than those in core cities, and shows why Republican and Democratic candidates would be on equal geographical footing if they were to campaign under a national popular vote system.

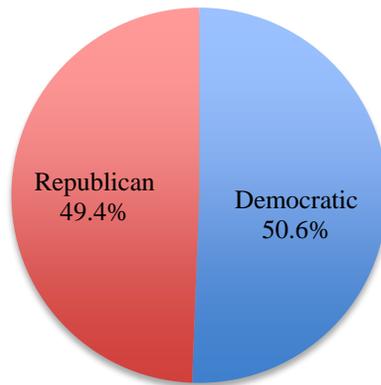
### **Lessons from the 2004 Presidential Election**

The 2004 election was competitive nationally, with George W. Bush defeating John Kerry by a little more than three million votes, 51.2% to 48.8% in the two-party vote. In that election, 83% of voters lived in MSAs. MSA voters narrowly favored to Kerry 50.6% to 49.4% in the two-party vote, which means that voters in MSAs voted only 1.6 percentage points less Republican than the nation as a whole. This 1.6% difference is small compared to difference between the nation and cities with populations of 100,000 or more, which voted 12.4 points more Democratic than the nation.

**National Two-Party Vote, 2004**

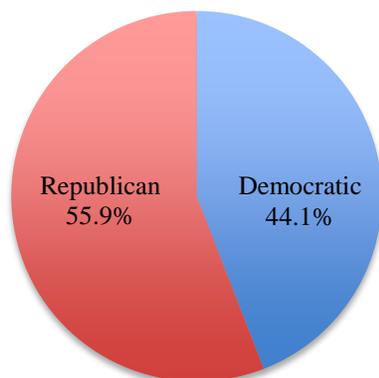


**Two-Party Vote in All MSAs, 2004**



In addition, the mean two-party vote among all MSAs without regard to population leaned 5.9% towards Republicans in the 2004 election. Of all 361 MSAs, a majority of 259 delivered more votes to Bush than to Kerry.

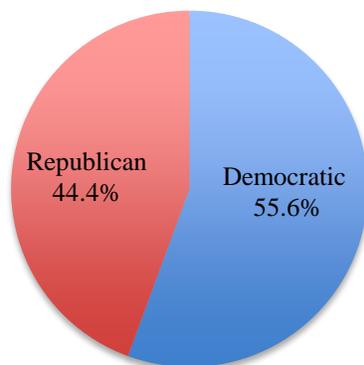
### Average Two-Party Vote Among All MSAs, 2004



Of course, it is unlikely that candidates on a major party presidential ticket would be able to make personal campaign stops at every single one of the nation’s 361 MSA during a single general election campaign, even if the race were being decided by a national popular vote. While resources such as advertising money, field offices, and “get-out-the-vote” calls would likely be spread broadly across the country, campaign rallies would almost certainly be directed towards cities and towns within the nation’s 100 biggest MSAs, with additional visits to smaller MSAs and rural areas. It is therefore valuable to examine the partisan breakdowns of these populous MSAs.

In 2004, the 25 most populous MSAs varied in which candidate they preferred and by how much. While a majority (17) leaned towards Democrat John Kerry, there were still eight MSAs that supported Republican George W. Bush over Kerry. Overall, only 55.6% of voters in the 25 largest MSAs preferred Kerry to Bush, meaning that even while Kerry received 26.8 million votes from these MSAs, Bush received 21.5 million. And as these 25 MSAs collectively contained only 40% of voters in the 2004 election, presidential candidates would certainly have needed to travel elsewhere in search of votes in a national popular vote election.

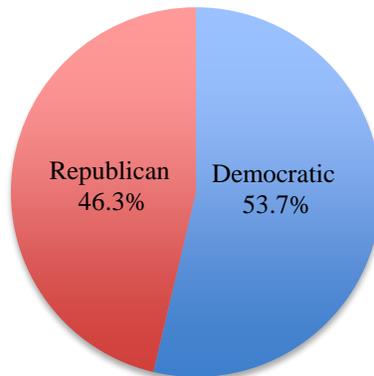
### Two-Party Vote in 25 Largest MSAs, 2004



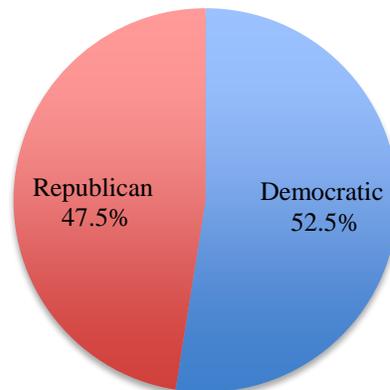
A look at the 50 largest MSAs shows an even smaller Democratic lean of 3.7%. The lean shrinks to 2.5% in the 100 largest MSAs, in which 64.7% of the country’s ballots were cast in 2004. While

the Democratic lean still exists in these metropolitan areas, it is not large enough that a Republican candidate would be severely disadvantaged in a national election for president. In fact, while 17 of the 25 largest MSAs voted for Kerry over Bush in 2004, 19 of the next 25 largest MSAs preferred Bush. As a whole, 27 of the 50 largest MSAs voted for Bush over Kerry, as did 56 of the 100 largest MSAs.

### **Two-Party Vote in the 50 Largest MSAs, 2004**

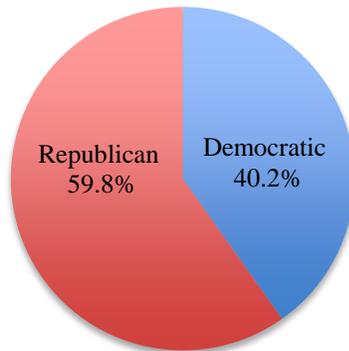


### **Two-Party Vote in the 100 Largest MSAs, 2004**

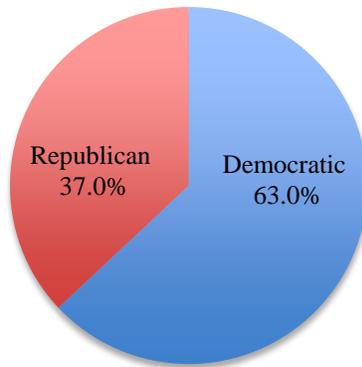


As mentioned previously, 17.4% of voters in the 2004 election resided in counties not associated with metropolitan statistical areas, a percentage comparable to that of voters who lived within the boundaries of our nation's 100 largest cities (16.5%). As one might expect, these counties preferred the Republican candidate (59.8% to 40.2%), just as the 100 largest cities supported the liberal presidential candidates (63.0% to 37.0%).

### Two-Party Vote in Non-MSA Counties (17.4% of 2004 votes)



### Liberal vs. Conservative Vote in 100 Largest Cities (16.5% of 2004 votes)



## A Spotlight on Metropolitan Statistical Areas in New York City and Chicago

A closer look at two of the nation's largest MSAs, the New York and Chicago metro areas, demonstrates the varied political views of people who live within the same MSA. The U.S. Census defines the New York MSA as consisting of twenty-three counties and metropolitan Chicago as consisting of thirteen. While New York City (consisting of New York, Queens, Kings, Bronx, and Richmond counties) voters preferred liberal presidential candidates 79.1% to 29.1% in 2004, according to Bay Area Center for Voting Research, the New York metropolitan statistical area preferred Democrat John Kerry by a much smaller margin, 60.8% to 39.2%.

In the City of Chicago, 81.3% of voters preferred liberal candidates for president, while in the Chicago metropolitan statistical area, 60.4% voted for Kerry. These two large cities and MSAs reveal the difference between these two metrics and show the importance of using the proper unit of analysis. The pure city vote compiles political views of only those living within the boundaries of a city, an artificially small measure of who would be affected by campaign visits and advertisements in an urban area. New York and Chicago are certainly Democratic, but not as Democratic as they may appear at first glance. For the purposes of presidential campaigning under a national popular vote, the two would be valuable target for both Republicans and Democrats alike.

*New York Metropolitan Statistical Area*

<i>County</i>	<i>% Two-Party Vote Democratic</i>
Bergen County, NJ	52.2%
Bronx County, NY	83.4%
Essex County, NJ	71.0%
Hudson County, NJ	67.8%
Hunterdon County, NJ	39.5%
Kings County, NY	75.5%
Middlesex County, NJ	56.9%
Monmouth County, NJ	45.0%
Morris County, NJ	42.0%
Nassau County, NY	52.8%
New York County, NY	83.1%
Ocean County, NJ	39.3%
Passaic County, NJ	55.8%
Pike County, PA	41.0%
Putnam County, NY	42.6%
Queens County, NY	72.3%
Richmond County, NY	43.1%
Rockland County, NY	49.6%
Somerset County, NJ	47.8%
Suffolk County, NY	50.5%
Sussex County, NJ	35.0%
Union County, NJ	59.1%
Westchester County, NY	59.0%
<b>New York MSA</b>	<b>60.8%</b>
<b>Median</b>	<b>52.2%</b>

*Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area*

<i>County</i>	<i>% Two-Party Vote Democratic</i>
Cook County, IL	70.7%
DeKalb County, IL	47.7%
DuPage County, IL	45.1%
Grundy County, IL	43.0%
Jasper County, IN	31.3%
Kane County, IL	44.5%
Kendall County, IL	38.7%
Kenosha County, WI	53.0%
Lake County, IL	49.1%
Lake County, IN	61.5%
McHenry County, IL	39.7%
Newton County, IN	35.1%
Porter County, IN	45.8%
Will County, IL	47.3%
<b>Chicago MSA</b>	<b>60.4%</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>45.5%</b>

## Lessons from Metropolitan Statistical Areas in Swing States

When discussing the way that metropolitan statistical area voting patterns would affect a national popular vote for president, it is also instructive to look at how MSA voting patterns affect presidential elections under our current system. In 2004, there were only 13 competitive swing states (states deciding the outcome of the election), and all had a majority of their populations living in MSAs.

The table below demonstrates that in all but one of the 2004 swing states (New Hampshire), voters in MSAs voted more heavily for Democrat John Kerry than the swing state as a whole. Even with so many of these MSAs voting Democratic, Republican George W. Bush was able to win in eight of these 13 swing states, proving that even in jurisdictions with heavily populated Democratic-leaning areas, Republicans can win.

<i>State</i>	<i>State's Two-Party Vote (Kerry)</i>	<i>MSA's Two-Party Vote (Kerry)</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)</i>	<i>Percent All Two-Party Votes Cast in MSAs</i>
Colorado	47.6%	48.5%	+ 0.9	Boulder, Colorado Springs, Denver-Aurora, Fort Collins-Loveland, Grand Junction, Greeley, Pueblo	85.9%
Florida	47.5%	48.1%	+ 0.6	Cape Coral-Fort Myers, Daytona Beach, Fort Walton Beach, Gainesville, Jacksonville, Lakeland, Miami-Fort Lauderdale, Naples, Ocala, Orlando, Palm Bay, Panama City, Pensacola, Port St. Lucie, Punta Gorda, Sarasota, Tallahassee, Tampa, Vero Beach	93.6%
Iowa	49.7%	52.1%	+ 2.4	Ames, Cedar Rapids, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Iowa City, Omaha-Council Bluffs, Sioux City, Waterloo-Cedar Falls	55.4%
Michigan	51.7%	53.5%	+ 1.8	Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Bay City, Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Holland, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Lansing, Monroe, Muskegon, Niles, Saginaw, South Bend	81.5%
Minnesota	51.8%	52.1%	+ 0.3	Duluth, Fargo, Grand Forks, La Crosse, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Rochester, St. Cloud	63.7%
Missouri	46.4%	49.9%	+ 3.5	Columbia, Fayetteville, Jefferson City, Joplin, Kansas City, Springfield, St. Joseph, St. Louis	75.4%
Nevada	48.7%	51.1%	+ 2.4	Carson City, Las Vegas, Reno	88.0%
New Hampshire	50.7%	49.4%	- 1.3	Boston, Manchester	61.1%
New Mexico	49.6%	52.1%	+ 2.5	Albuquerque, Farmington, Las Cruces, Santa Fe	67.0%
Ohio	48.9%	51.0%	+ 2.1	Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Huntington, Lima, Mansfield, Parkersburg, Sandusky, Springfield, Toledo, Weirton, Wheeling, Youngstown	81.9%
Pennsylvania	51.3%	53.4%	+ 2.1	Allentown, Altoona, Erie, Harrisburg, Johnstown, Lancaster, Lebanon, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Reading, Scranton, State College, Williamsport, York, Youngstown	85.6%
Virginia	45.9%	46.8%	+ 0.9	Blacksburg, Charlottesville, Danville, Harrisonburg, Kingsport, Lynchburg,	86.1%

<i>State</i>	<i>State's Two-Party Vote (Kerry)</i>	<i>MSA's Two-Party Vote (Kerry)</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)</i>	<i>Percent All Two-Party Votes Cast in MSAs</i>
				Richmond, Roanoke, Virginia Beach, Washington DC, Winchester	
Wisconsin	50.2%	51.1%	+ 0.9	Appleton, Chicago, Douglas, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville, La Crosse, Madison, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Oshkosh, Racine, Sheboygan, Wausau	73.2%
All Swing State MSAs	49.2%	50.6%	+ 1.4	...	81.3%
United States	48.8%	50.6%	+ 1.8	...	82.6%

*\*Some of these swing state voters live in MSAs of cities in neighboring states.*

## **Potential Negative Consequences of an Metro-Centric Campaign: Lessons from 2008**

Since the National Popular Vote plan was first proposed, some of its opponents have suggested that its enactment would incentivize presidential campaigns, regardless of party, to focus all of their attention and resources on big cities, thereby neglecting voters in the rest of the country. To evaluate the validity of this claim, FairVote analyzed vote totals from the 21 largest metropolitan statistical areas (that is, all metropolitan areas with populations above 2.5 million) nationwide in the 2008 presidential election. Residents of these 21 MSAs cast 38.1% of all votes in the 2008 election.

We evaluated how much of the vote outside of the 21 largest MSAs the candidates would need in order to maintain their original national popular vote percentages when we increased their vote totals by 5 or 10% in the 21 largest MSAs. Our analysis strongly supports the claim that, in a popular vote election, candidates would not pursue a campaign strategy of focusing on a few cities, as this type of strategy would likely lessen their overall popular vote share.

While our analysis focuses on the effect of an increase of 5% or 10% in the 21 largest MSAs, we must emphasize how improbable a campaign-based increase of even 5% for a presidential candidate would be in an MSA. For example, during the 2004 election, controversy flared in Cleveland due to the city's lack of voting machines; voters waited up to seven hours at some polling locations in order to cast their votes. Four years later, there were no such wait times or controversies due to better investment in election administration. Barack Obama's large Cleveland staff led a massive early voting push and orchestrated a robust get-out-the-vote effort on Election Day. Indeed, increasing voter turnout was a crucial component of Obama's strategy to win Ohio.

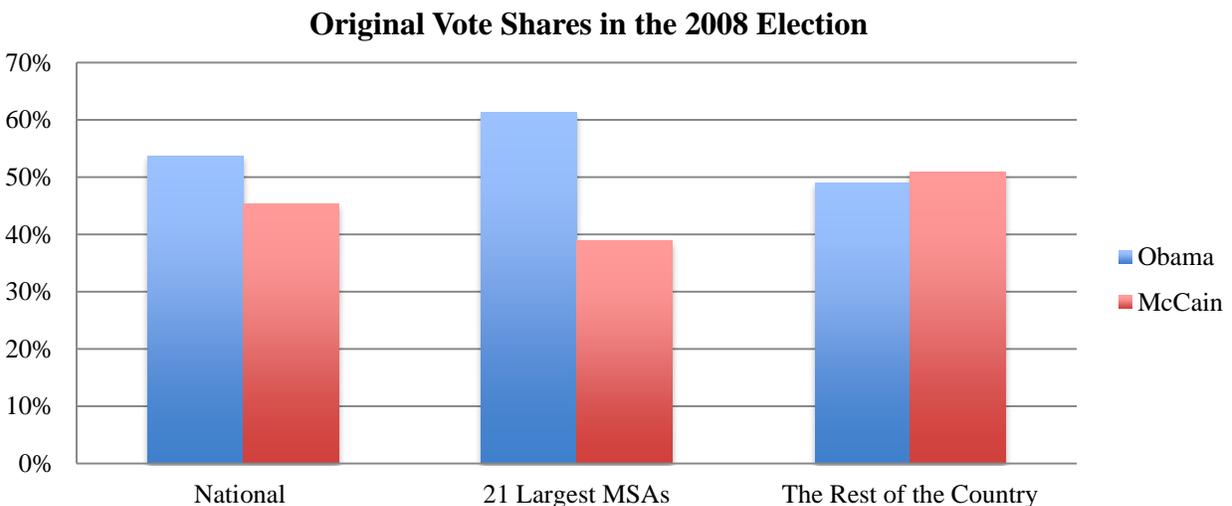
Even with this dramatic difference in circumstances between the 2004 and 2008 elections, Obama received only 3.6% more votes than Kerry did in the Cleveland MSA, and overall, turnout decreased in the area between the two elections, even as the national turnout increased. Keep this in mind as you examine the results of our simulations, as it helps to clarify that even the greatest fear of national popular vote opponents would not have the impact they envision.

To simplify our simulations, we removed all votes for third party and independent candidates, whose combined vote total was a mere 1.4% of votes cast in 2008. Overall, Democrat Barack Obama received 53.7% of the two-party vote and Republican John McCain received 46.3%. In the 21 largest MSAs, Obama received 61.2% of the two-party vote while McCain received 38.8%. In each of our simulations, the goal was to find how much of the vote the candidates could afford to lose in the rest of the country while increasing their vote in big MSAs and maintaining their original shares of the national popular vote. In short, could a candidate afford to neglect the rest of the country in favor of big cities?

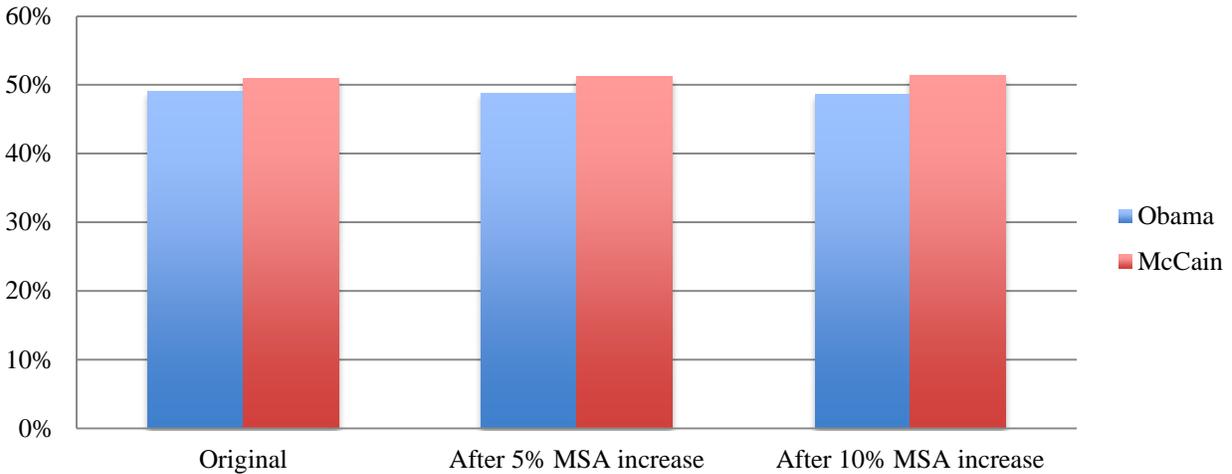
### Simulation 1: Both Candidates Increase Vote Share in Big Metro Areas

We first looked at what would happen if both candidates focused on the nation’s biggest urban areas at the expense of the rest of the country, and managed to each raise their raw popular vote totals in those areas by 5%. In the unlikely event that the campaigns could succeed in this ambitious goal, Obama could have afforded to let his votes total decrease by just 0.23 percentage points (184,487 votes) in the rest of the country to maintain his national popular vote share of 53.7%. That is to say, even if both candidates had campaigned heavily in major metropolitan areas (which contained 38.1% of all voters before the increase in urban turnout, and 39.3% after) and were thus able to increase their vote shares in those areas by 5%, Obama would have still needed to garner 48.4% of the vote in the rest of the country in order to maintain his national 7.4% lead over John McCain. By no means could Obama, and reciprocally McCain, have afforded to ignore the rest of the country while focusing all of their campaign energy and resources on the biggest metropolitan areas.

In the even more extreme event that both candidates were able to increase their vote totals a staggering 10% in the 21 largest MSAs, Obama could only afford to let his vote total elsewhere decrease by 0.46 points (370,143 votes) in the rest of the country to maintain his national popular vote share.



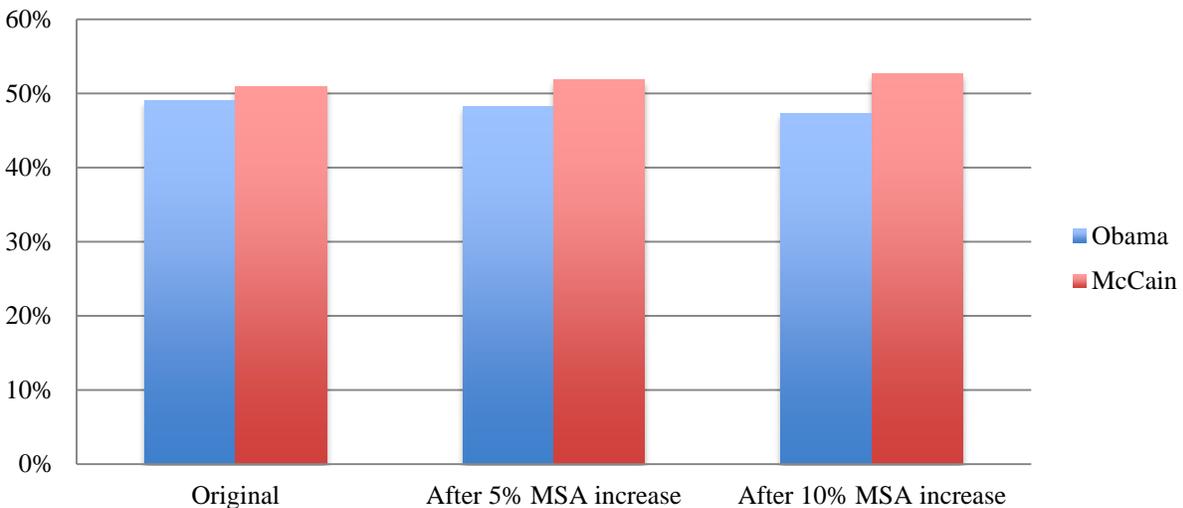
**Sim. 1: Vote Shares Obama Must Garner in the Rest of the Country to Maintain his 7.4% National Lead**



**Simulation 2: Only Obama Increase His Vote Share In Urban Areas**

We also calculated how well Barack Obama would have had to do in the rest of the country if only his campaign had focused on the largest urban areas, and therefore only Obama had increased his vote share in them. If Obama had increased his vote share in the 21 largest metropolitan areas by 5%, an increase of over 1.5 million votes, he would have still needed to garner 48.1% of the vote in the rest of the country to maintain his share of the national vote, a decrease of only 0.87 percentage points from his original vote share in the rest of the country. If he had increased his vote share by an even more unrealistic 10% in the 21 largest MSAs, Obama still would have needed 47.3% of the vote in the rest of the country to do as well as he had done originally.

**Sim. 2: Vote Shares Obama Must Garner in the Rest of the Country to Maintain his 7.4% National Lead**



As we can see, while candidates might find it tempting to concentrate a substantial portion of their campaign resources on major cities, they cannot afford to ignore the rest of the country without earning a lower percentage of the national vote than they would have garnered under a more geographically even strategy. There simply are not enough voters in major cities and MSAs to incentivize candidates to only target them. To win a national popular vote for president, a candidate must campaign nationally, and not simply within cities. Therefore, any suggestion that presidential elections would become focused on big cities, let alone on individual cities like Los Angeles and New York, under a national popular vote system is incorrect.

## **What can campaigning under the current system tell us about campaigning under National Popular Vote?**

Most opponents of the National Popular Vote plan often fail to address the biggest flaw with our current method of electing the president: the way that it incentivizing campaigning in only a few swing states, to the exclusion of all others. They suggest that National Popular Vote will exchange a few coveted swing states with a few coveted urban areas, and then warn ominously what while the identity of swing state may changes, the identifies of the big urban areas never will.

Take, for example, the Heritage Foundation's Hans von Spakovsky in his 2011 memorandum against the National Popular Vote plan: "Although the point has been argued that under the current system, swing states garner the majority of candidates' attention, swing states can change from election to election, and many states that are today considered to be reliably 'blue' or 'red' in the presidential race were recently unpredictable...With rare exceptions, however, established urban centers like Houston, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles will always have high populations that vote in a predicable fashion. While the Electoral College assures that minority interests in a variety of geographic regions are protected, the NPV will help to protect only select urban interests."<sup>3</sup>

Von Spakovsky's assumption that the current system allows for more campaign target diversity than would a national popular vote is misguided. As von Spakovsky explains, candidates trying to win statewide popular vote elections under the current Electoral College system do not just campaign in cities; rather, they visit and seek to mobilize voters in urban, suburban, and rural areas. However, candidates only do so in a handful of swing states, the number of which has been steadily decreasing over the last three decades. Therefore, while candidates may visit farmers in Iowa and urbanites in Denver, there are 35 states that consistently receive absolutely no attention from presidential candidates and another five states that rarely do. Under a national population vote, urban, suburban, and rural voters in every state would be targeted.

Additionally, von Spakovsky exaggerates the frequency with which new swing states emerge. In recent decades, voting patterns within states have become more rigid, making a state's identity as a swing or safe state more immutable. Consider that North Carolina is the only swing state in 2008 and 2012 that was not also a swing state in 2004, and there are no indications that there will be any

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/10/destroying-the-electoral-college-the-anti-federalist-national-popular-vote-scheme>

new swing states in 2016. Today, the great majority of Americans are shut out of the process of electing the president, with little hope of entering it, unless they move to a swing state.

The reason that presidential candidates ignore three-quarters of the county under the current system is the use of state-by-state winner-take-all laws, which award all of a state’s electoral votes to the candidate who receives the most popular votes in each state. Presidential candidates have no reason to poll, visit, advertise in, organize in, or pay attention to states where they are safely ahead or hopelessly behind. Candidates just concentrate their attention on a small handful of closely contested battleground states.

Indeed, inequality in presidential elections between the few lucky swing states and all the rest is quite staggering. In 2004, the presidential campaigns funneled two-thirds of their visits and money to just five states. In 2012, the inequality was even more dramatic: 79% of visits were to just five states, and 99% of advertising money was targeted to influence voters in just ten. Under the current system, three-quarters of the states are considered “flyover country,” unworthy of any campaign attention at all.

But by looking at campaign activity under the current system, we can learn what it takes to win a presidential election, either under a state-by-state system or a national popular vote. Consider that the presidential and vice presidential candidates only traveled to 12 states for public campaign events in the two months leading up to the 2012 general election – and that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney both visited only eight of them. Given that swing states are by definition very close, the candidates would be wise to do all they can to increase their vote shares within them.

The evidence from major party campaign events shows that candidates do not focus only on state’s largest urban areas, but instead travel throughout swing states in search of votes. Indeed, during the 2012 campaign, the candidates and their running mates visited swing states’ largest MSAs in proportion to those MSAs’ share of the swing states’ populations. If the most populous MSAs contained half of a state’s population, then those MSAs – the core city and its surrounding towns – received half of the candidates’ visits to that state.

**Candidate visits in states with 13 or more campaign events between Sept. 7 & Nov. 6, 2012**

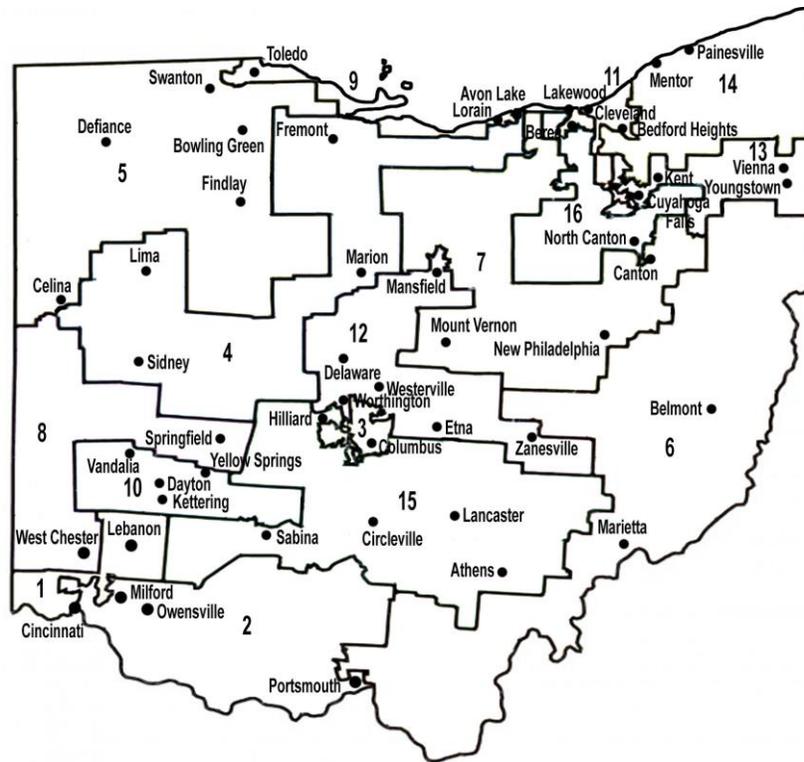
<i>State</i>	<i>Most Populous MSAs</i>	<i>% population of state living in those MSAs</i>	<i>Number of campaign events occurring in those MSAs</i>	<i>Number of unique towns and cities visited in the state</i>
Colorado	Denver	<b>51%</b>	11 of 23 events ( <b>48%</b> )	15
Iowa	Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Davenport, Waterloo, Iowa City	<b>37%</b>	11 of 27 events held ( <b>44%</b> )	18
Florida	Miami, Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville	<b>63%</b>	28 of 40 events held ( <b>70%</b> )	28
Nevada	Las Vegas, Reno	<b>94%</b>	13 of 13 events held ( <b>100%</b> )	4
New Hampshire	Boston (Combined Statistical Area)	<b>78%</b>	12 of 13 events held ( <b>92%</b> )	9
Ohio	Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati	<b>48%</b>	38 of 73 events held ( <b>48%</b> )	49
Virginia	Washington, D.C., Virginia Beach, Richmond	<b>69%</b>	25 of 36 events held ( <b>69%</b> )	22

Wisconsin	Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay	42%	10 of 18 visits (56%)	13
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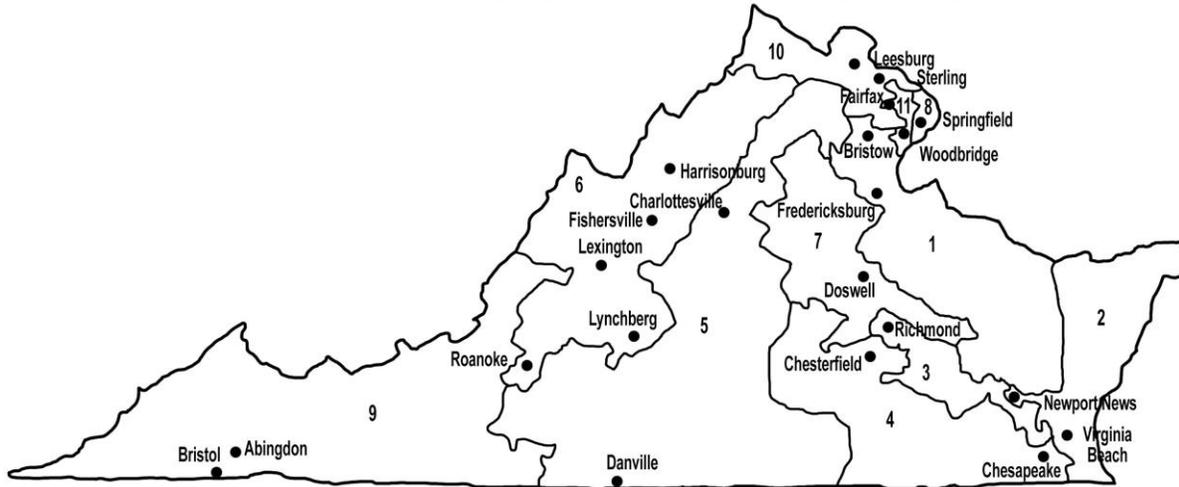
Ohio, the state to receive the most candidate events during the fall campaign (73 in total), serves as a good example of how campaigning might work in a national popular vote election. In such a vitally important swing state – which, like the nation as a whole, is a diverse place, with large cities, small towns, and rural counties – candidates cannot afford to ignore any sizable portion of the electorate for fear of forfeiting the state’s 18 electoral votes. Therefore, 48% of the candidates’ events were held in Ohio’s largest metropolitan statistical areas, and with good reason: only 48% of Ohio population lives in those metro areas. To focus only on those MSAs would be to ignore more than half of the state’s voters – a clear recipe for defeat.

The diversity of towns and cities that candidates visit in swing states is not simply numerically striking, but visually striking as well. Consider these maps tracking campaign events during the two months prior to the 2012 presidential election in Virginia, Florida, and Ohio. Note that visits occurred throughout each of the states, in a wide variety of congressional districts, and in towns both very big and very small.

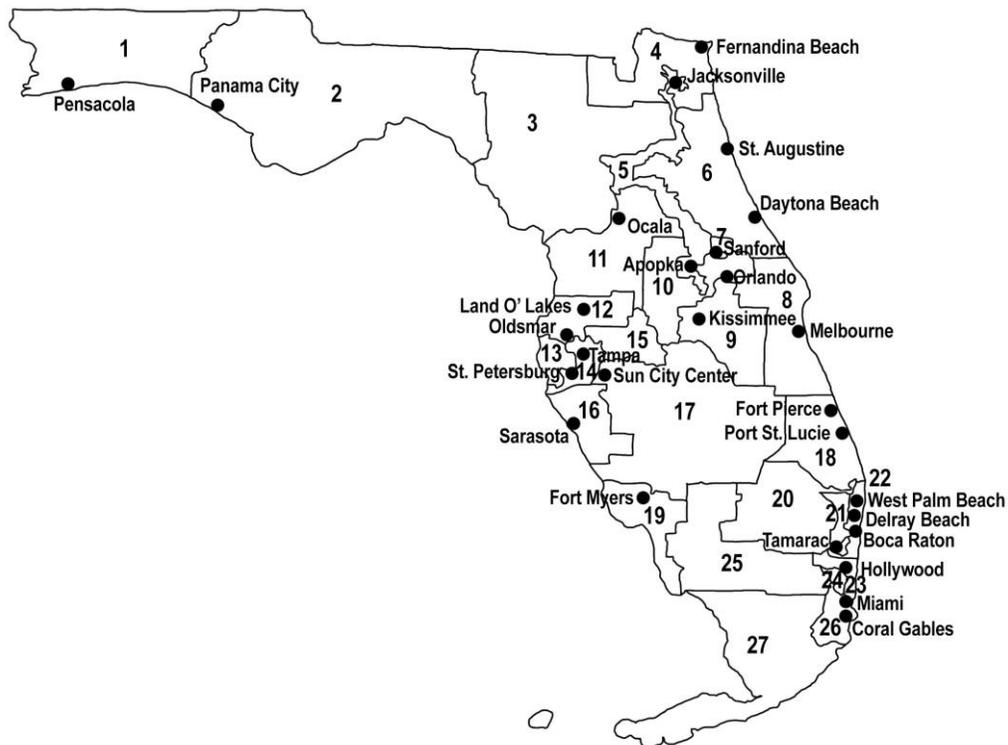
**Locations of Presidential and VP Campaign Events Held in Ohio, Sept. 7 –Nov. 6, 2012**



**Locations of Presidential and VP Campaign Events Held in Virginia, Sept. 7 – Nov. 6, 2012**



**Locations of Presidential and VP Campaign Events Held in Florida, Sept. 7 – Nov. 6, 2012**



In these three states (the states that received 59% of all presidential and vice presidential candidate events during the fall of 2012), the candidates' strategy is clear. Any votes in any part of a contested area are valuable and are therefore worthy of campaign attention. Under a national popular vote for president, the whole country would be contested, and therefore, votes in every part of every state would be worthy of pursuit.

## **Instructive Results in Gubernatorial Elections**

Similarly, gubernatorial candidates of both parties campaign in every part of their state, not just in urban centers. Otherwise, it would be rare for Republicans to win statewide elections in states with the nation's biggest, Democratic-leaning cities. But Republicans regularly win gubernatorial elections in almost every state, with or without big Democratic cities, having done so in 44 of 50 states between 2002 and 2012, including in 24 of the 26 most populous states (the exceptions are Illinois, where the Democratic incumbent barely won with 46.8% in 2010, and Washington, where Republicans have won the last seven statewide elections for secretary of state). Republicans currently occupy governor's mansion in a number of states with large heavily-Democratic cities: Pennsylvania (with the large cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh), Michigan (Detroit), Ohio (Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati), and Florida (Miami, Tampa, and Orlando.)

There is nothing special about a vote in a big state or a small state, a big city or the countryside. Although no one can predict exactly how a presidential campaign would be run if every vote were equal throughout the United States, it is clear that candidates could not ignore voters in any state. The result of a national popular vote would be a 50-state campaign for president that both major parties would regularly have a chance to win.

## **Conclusion**

The winner-take-all method of allocating of a state's electoral votes based on the statewide popular vote is not in the Constitution and did not become the norm until decades after the Constitution was ratified. Today, however, it is used by 48 states and the District of Columbia. This winner-take-all system forces candidates to focus their attention on a handful of swing states. Some proponents of this winner-take-all rule argue that a national popular vote would favor one party over the other, since candidates would focus on urban centers, which seem to disproportionately favor one party. This report has shown the flaws in this reasoning.

Metropolitan statistical areas, or MSAs, properly encompass the character of the urban areas to which these winner-take-all proponents are referring. MSAs are more inclusive than cities proper and incorporate the areas socially and economically tied to those cities. As the data presented in this report shows, MSAs do not greatly favor either party. Throughout the United States, both major parties share roughly the same percentage of the votes in MSAs. Consequently, if candidates campaigned primarily in MSAs, neither major party candidate would significantly benefit from this altered campaign strategy. However, the voters in the many MSAs that get ignored under the current system would greatly benefit. Every vote throughout the nation would be equally important under a national popular vote, and voters in previously ignored states would be incorporated into the important process of electing the president.

There is no evidence to suggest that a national popular vote system would result in candidates campaigning solely in population centers. In fact, that strategy would likely lead to a candidate's defeat. Evidence from simulated presidential elections and from actual gubernatorial and presidential campaigns (within battleground states) indicates that candidates would spread their resources throughout a variety of areas, both urban and rural, in order to maximize votes. To do otherwise would mean risking their election as President of the United States.