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How to Watch Election Night Like a Pro

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This election night will be like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic will cause delays in vote counting, which will be more pronounced in some states than others.

Polls start closing at 6:00pm ET in parts of Indiana and Kentucky and the last poll closure will be parts of Alaska at 1:00am ET on November 4.

We have put together a guide to try to help you watch election night results and make sense of them.

COVID-19 Counting

The COVID-19 pandemic could mean slower counting compared to what we are used to in this country.

This document lays out what we think will happen in these states, but we want to caution that counting in lots of places, including Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, could be excruciatingly slow. It is entirely possible Trump is winning when you go to bed, but by December, we are calling this a Democratic landslide year.

Some states allow for counties to start counting early voting and mail voting well before election day. However, others require states to wait until election day to start counting these early votes.

This could make a big difference on how results are reported. A lot of polling, including our own, expects Democrats to take advantage of early and mail voting at a much higher rate than Republicans. Therefore, in states that count these votes days in advance, the initial results will heavily favor Biden relative to the final results. However, in states that do not allow counting until election day, election day ballots tend to be reported first and this will heavily favor Trump relative to the final results.

For instance, polls close at 7:00pm ET in Virginia. Biden is expected to win Virginia handedly, and networks may choose to call the state as polls close (this didn't happen during 2008, 2012, or 2016 when Democrats won it three times straight). On the other hand, networks may choose to not call it because Virginia does not count early votes before Election Day and the initial returns will probably be Election Day ballots in Republican-leaning areas, creating a weird image of Trump winning in a state Biden was expected to easily carry.

Below is a list of key battleground states' policies on pre-election day counting.

Election Day Counting

GA
IA
MI (some minor exceptions)
MN
NV
NH
PA

President

The most important thing we can tell you is to be patient and to not follow the overall Electoral College vote count until 11:00pm ET. That is when the majority of the Pacific Coast states close including California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington, which will give Biden a combined 78 electoral votes.

For instance, in 2012, Barack Obama ultimately defeated Romney by over 100 electoral votes — 332 to 206, to be exact. But Romney led the electoral count from 7:00pm ET until 9:30pm ET, an entire two-and-a-half hours.

Because of that, the first five hours of election night coverage are better spent watching movement in swing states than watching the overall scoreboard.

It is also very unlikely that anyone is declared the winner before 11:00pm ET. The last person to win before that hour was Bill Clinton in 1996 who was declared the winner at 9:00pm ET as polls closed in states like New York. Barack Obama was declared the winner at exactly 11:00pm ET in 2008. Other recent contests like 2016, 2012, and 2004 were decided late in the night either on election day or the AM hours of the next day. Of course, we all know what happened in 2000.

Going into election night, it seems likely that Biden will win at least 212 electoral votes and Trump will win at least 125. This election has about 13 swing states, but it will almost certainly come down to six core states: Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Below is a chart to help you watch the results by focusing on the swing states. We have created three separate categories. Each candidate has a must win column which are states or districts that each candidate needs to win if they want a path to victory. This does not mean they are favored, but that it is hard to see them winning without running the table on these contests. The middle column is the core six states. There are some weird quirks you need to know:

- **Split poll closure times:** The times listed below are when the last polls close in that state. But some states like Kansas, Michigan, and Texas will have results coming in an hour earlier than the time listed below. The reason we list the later time is because that is the earliest the race can be called.

- **Electoral vote by congressional district:** Maine and Nebraska award electoral votes by congressional district. Both of their 2 nd congressional districts (ME02, NE02) are competitive.

- **Ranked choice voting:** Maine has ranked choice voting, so to win on election night would require over 50% of the vote. If neither candidate hits that number, there will be a second count at a later date.

You can use the below chart on election night by starting the evening giving Biden 212 electoral votes and Trump 125 electoral votes. Then, add these states' electoral votes to the starting totals as the states are called. Remember, the winning number is 270 electoral votes.

den Must Win	Core Six	Trump Must Win
		GA (16)
	NC (15)	OH (18)
(4)	FL* (29) PA (20)	ME02 (1)
(10)	AZ (11) MI* (16) WI (10)	TX* (38) NE02 (1)
(6)		IA (6)

* Note: States with split poll closing times. The state is listed under the time the last polls close, but some polls close in the preceding hour.

Here are some counties in early poll closure states worth watching:

- **Gwinnett County, GA:** rapidly diversifying suburban Atlanta. It was Romney +9, Clinton +6, Stacey Abrams +15. Biden needs to win by an Abrams-like margin to win statewide. (Polls close here at 7:00pm ET)

- **Seminole County, FL:** Orlando suburbs that last voted Democratic for President in 1948, but hard to see Biden win Florida without Seminole. This is Rep. Stephanie Murphy's (D) district. (Polls close here at 7:00pm ET)

- **New Hanover County, NC:** This is Wilmington which has an older population but full of groups Biden might do well with like Black voters, wealthier suburbanites, and military families. It last voted Democratic for President in 1976 but routinely votes Democratic for Governor. Trump can't win North Carolina without New Hanover. (Polls close here at 7:30pm ET)

- **Mahoning County, OH:** This is Rep. Tim Ryan (D) country and it is White and Black working-class people. It was Obama +29, Clinton + 3, but snapped back in 2018 where Sen. Sherrod Brown carried it by +20. Biden needs to swing this back to show he can win in the industrial Midwest. (Polls close here at 7:30pm ET)

Below is a list of states that both candidates have a clear advantage of some degree. This does not necessarily mean the race will be called right when polls close, especially considering the burden created by COVID-19. Rather, this list exists to highlight what you should expect. If a state on this list gets called for the other candidate, that means we are headed to blowout territory.

As a note, the electoral vote counts for Maine and Nebraska are each reduced by one in the below chart as their 2nd congressional districts (ME02, NE02) are listed above.

or Likely Biden (212)	Solid or Likely Trump (125)
	IN* (11) KY* (8) SC (9)
	WV (5)
	AL (9) MO (10) MS (6) OK (7) TN (11)
	AR (6)
	KS* (6) LA (8) ND* (3) NE (4) SD* (3) WY (3)
	MT (3) UT (6)
	ID* (4)
	AK* (3)

Senate

This is going to be the hardest contest for Democrats to win. Republicans currently hold a 53-47 advantage in the chamber. Democrats must net gain three Senate seats to win the chamber, as we are assuming for Democrats to pick up that many seats they must also be winning the Presidency, which comes with the Vice-Presidential tiebreaker.

Democrats have 35 incumbents not up for reelection and 10 safe seats, so they should win at least 45 seats. Republicans have 30 incumbents not up and 11 safe seats, so they should win at least 41 seats. There are 14 seats of varying competitiveness.

The path to a Democratic majority is clear, and we are putting races in the categories of must wins, though these are the competitive races. Democrats could win more than 50 seats, but this chart is designed to help determine if Democrats are on their way to a simple majority.

There are some weird quirks you need to know:

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- **Ranked choice voting:** Maine has ranked choice voting, so to win on election night would require over 50% of the vote. If neither candidate hits that number, there will be a second count at a later date. If Gideon is leading on election night, she will probably win, as the main minor candidate is a leftwing independent.

- **Runoffs:** There is one race that is certain to go to a runoff, and that is the special election in Georgia in which Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R) is the incumbent. It is also possible that the regular election in Georgia in which Sen. David Perdue (R) is the incumbent, and the Louisiana election in which Sen. Bill Cassidy (R) is the incumbent also go to runoffs. Georgia and Louisiana are the only two states that require candidates to get a majority or 50% of the vote to win.

You can use the below chart on election night by starting the night giving Democrats 45 Senate seats and Republicans 41 Senate seats and adding these states to their starting totals throughout the night. Remember, the winning number is 51. If Democrats win every contest in the "Easiest Path to Majority" column and nothing else, it would result in a 50-50 tie, broken by the Vice President (presumably Kamala Harris in this scenario).

st Path to Majority   Majority Expanding Targets

GA GA (special) SC	

AL	

KS* TX*	

IA MT	

AK*	

* Note: States with split poll closing times. The state is listed under the time the last polls close, but some polls close in the preceding hour.

These are the 21 races that should be safe for one of the two parties.

d Democratic States	Solid Republican States
	KY*
	WV
	MS OK TN
	AR
	LA NE SD* WY
	ID*

* Note: States with split poll closing times. The state is listed under the time the last polls close, but some polls close in the preceding hour.

House

We expect Democrats will easily hold the House and would encourage you to mainly follow the race for the Presidency and Senate.

This was not a forgone conclusion but thanks to the tireless work of the Frontline Democratic Congresspeople, especially class of 2018 folks, who recognized the need to both be a check on Trump and also work to accomplish things for their constituents. They also ran great races and were fundraising superstars all cycle. We have encouraged our network to give to vulnerable incumbents and promising challengers all cycle. This support and attention will help build the kind of majority House Democrats will have. We will be following up after the election with more information about how our House allies and friends did once we have results in the individual races.

One race worth watching early in the night will be Indiana's 5 [th] congressional district. The earliest poll closures in the country are parts of Indiana and Kentucky at 6:00pm ET. Indiana's 5 [th] district is the Indianapolis suburbs, and Democrats hope to flip it with moderate, New Dem Action Fund-endorsed Christina Hale (D), a popular former state representative. This could be a bellwether for if Democrats are going to win in other Midwest suburbs later in the night. This will be the only interesting contest from 6:00pm ET until full states start closing at 7:00pm ET.

After that, if you do want to track some key early House races that feature Third Way friends, we would recommend these three districts with 7:00pm ET poll closure times and all voted for Trump in 2016: Lucy McBath (GA06), Joe Cunningham (SC01), and Abigail Spanberger (VA07).

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