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## McCain's options limited as he tries to catch up

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November 2, 2008



With two days left before [Election Day](#), [John McCain](#) faces a very narrow path for a come-from-behind victory in the presidential election, according to polling data and a variety of experts.

While experts point to scenarios in which McCain could win, most public polls paint a grim picture for the [Arizona](#) senator.

Major poll tracking sites - [pollster.com](http://pollster.com), [fivethirtyeight.com](http://fivethirtyeight.com)

and [RealClearPolitics.com](http://RealClearPolitics.com) - show Obama leading McCain by 6 percentage points nationwide. No modern pre-election national tracking poll has ever erred by more than 2.5 points, said Charles Franklin, a [University of Wisconsin](#) professor and co-founder of [pollster.com](http://pollster.com).

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Of course, polls have missed late surges by underdogs before. In the 1948 presidential race, polls a week before election day predicted a victory of between 5 percent and 15 percentage points for Republican Thomas E. Dewey over Democrat [Harry S. Truman](#). Truman won by 4.4 points.

Nonetheless, the preponderance of polls on the final weekend of the 2008 election show Obama with potentially safe leads in enough states to win 270 electoral votes, the number necessary for election.

'Too many must-win states'

"A McCain sweep [of battleground states] is highly improbable," said David Paleologos, director of the Suffolk University Political Research Center in Boston. "The problem is, there are too many must-win states."

Such a sweep would require McCain to win in states where polling shows Obama with significant leads - [Pennsylvania](#), [Ohio](#) and [Virginia](#) - make comebacks in states, including [Colorado](#) and [New Mexico](#), win [Florida](#) and then nearly every remaining tossup state: [Missouri](#), [Indiana](#), [North Carolina](#) and [Georgia](#), Paleologos said.

The situation had McCain and running mate [Sarah Palin](#) spending much of the last week in Pennsylvania, despite being between 7 percent and 12 percentage points behind in statewide polls. McCain's alternative to winning that single large state, Franklin said, would be at least as difficult - flipping two or three states that have the same combined number of electoral votes.

McCain's campaign pollster, Bill McInturff, released a memo Tuesday that claimed the Arizona senator was making "impressive strides" in battleground states and that [the election](#) may be too close to call.

McCain pollster sees shift

McInturff predicted the remaining undecided voters - about 5 percent of the electorate in Pennsylvania - would break decidedly for McCain.

But virtually no independent analyst shares that view. Even if McCain swept the state's undecided voters, it wouldn't make up for all of Obama's lead.

"Pennsylvania has been polled more than any other state," said Nate Silver, author of [fivethirtyeight.com](http://fivethirtyeight.com). "They're all showing the same thing: Obama with a lead ranging from 7 to 14 points."

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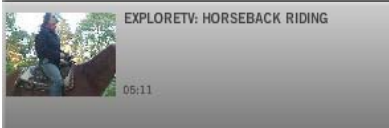
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Working in McCain's favor is that voters in Pennsylvania, unlike residents of other battleground states, don't have access to early voting.

That may give the [GOP](#) ticket a few extra days to spread its message.

"If there is some kind of last-minute change, it could help them there," Silver said.

Undecided voters typically split close to evenly in presidential elections, said James Campbell, chairman of the University at Buffalo political science department.

"If there is a strong, compelling message, it's possible" that undecided voters break in large numbers for McCain, Campbell said. "But what I've found in the past is they split more evenly than early deciders."

FINAL DAYS

With the 2008 presidential campaign in the homestretch, experts are watching a handful of states where the race remains close, or where John McCain and [Barack Obama](#) are focusing resources for strategic reasons.

PENNSYLVANIA

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 51.6%

McCain 43.2%

21 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 9

Obama/Biden: 4

THE OUTLOOK: McCain has led Obama in only one Keystone State poll since April, but some polls show he gained some traction in the last two weeks. If McCain pulls a comeback, it will make for a long night before the election is decided.

2004 RESULTS

Kerry 51%

Bush 48%

FLORIDA

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 47.7%

McCain 45.1%

27 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 6

Obama/Biden: 7

THE OUTLOOK: McCain appeared to have the edge until the financial crisis, when it began trending toward Obama, who has held a slight lead since late September.

2004 RESULTS

Bush 52%

Kerry 47%

OHIO

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 49.6%

McCain 43.3%

20 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 9

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Obama/Biden: 5

THE OUTLOOK: Another state where McCain led until the economic crisis hit. While McCain and Palin have logged as many visits here as anywhere else in the campaign's last week, Obama still maintains a small edge.

2004 RESULTS

Bush 51%

Kerry 49%

NORTH CAROLINA

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 48.5%

McCain 46.7%

15 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 3

Obama/Biden: 3

THE OUTLOOK: Obama has been gaining ground since the conventions and has held a slight lead in most state polls since late September. Its polls close at 7:30 p.m. and if Obama is declared the winner early, it could portend a long night for McCain.

2004 RESULTS

Bush 56%

Kerry 44%

VIRGINIA

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 50.9%

McCain 43.7%

13 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 6

Obama/Biden: 3

THE OUTLOOK: After running a dead heat with McCain for three months, Obama opened a lead in September. McCain should be strong in rural areas and with military families, but that may not be enough to offset the growing D.C. suburbs that lean Democratic.

2004 RESULTS

Bush 54%

Kerry 46%

MISSOURI

WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 48.6%

McCain 46.7%

11 ELECTORAL VOTES

VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 1

Obama/Biden: 4

THE OUTLOOK: The Show-Me State has voted for every presidential winner since

1960. Obama drew 100,000 people to a [St. Louis](#) rally last weekend and 40,000 at the University of Missouri on Thursday.

#### 2004 RESULTS

Bush 53%

Kerry 46%

#### INDIANA

##### WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 46.8%

McCain 47.3%

##### 11 ELECTORAL VOTES

##### VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 1

Obama/Biden: 2

THE OUTLOOK: Few states are more Republican; [Hoosiers](#) have voted for a Democrat only once since 1936. But Obama is benefiting from his Democratic primary effort, which created an organization the campaign built upon for the general election.

#### 2004 RESULTS

Bush 60%

Kerry 39%

#### COLORADO

##### WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 51.6%

McCain 44.5%

##### 9 ELECTORAL VOTES

##### VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 0

Obama/Biden: 2

THE OUTLOOK: Up to one-third of the state's voters will have cast ballots early. While pollsters aren't sure which candidate that helps, the consensus is that a high turnout boosts Obama.

#### 2004 RESULTS

Bush 52%

Kerry 47%

#### NEVADA

##### WHERE THE RACE STANDS

Obama 50.3%

McCain 44.4%

##### 5 ELECTORAL VOTES

##### VISITS LAST WEEK:

McCain/Palin: 0

Obama/Biden: 1

THE OUTLOOK: Obama's Western strategy hinged on competing here and in Colorado and New Mexico. An Obama win in all three would make up some of the

ground if he were to lose Pennsylvania.

2004 RESULTS

Bush 50%

Kerry 48%

ELECTORAL VOTES NEEDED TO WIN: 270\

Leaning McCain 13

Solidly McCain 129

TOTAL McCAIN 142

Leaning Obama 47

Solidly Obama 264

TOTAL OBAMA 311

TOSS-UP 85

"WHERE THE RACE STANDS" figures are based on a statistical analysis as of yesterday by Pollster.com of all available public polls for the race. Figures are estimates of trends and where the race stands according to latest data available

(State electoral votes in parentheses)

SOLIDLY McCAIN

Idaho (4)

Wyo. (3)

[Utah](#) (5)

Neb. (5)

Kan. (6)

Okla. (7)

[Texas](#) (34)

[Alaska](#) (3)

Ark. (6)

La. (9)

Miss. (6)

Tenn. (11)

Ky. (8)

Ala. (9)

W. Va. (5)

S.C. (8)

Leaning McCain

Ariz. (10)

S.D. (3)

SOLIDLY OBAMA

Wash. (11)

Ore. (7)

Calif. (55)

Minn. (10)

[Iowa](#) (7)

Wis. (10)

Ill. (21)

Mich. (17)

Pa. (21)

N.Y. (31)

D.C. (3)

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Del. (3)

N.J. (15)

Conn. (7)

R.I. (4)

Mass. (12)

[Maine](#) (4)

N.H. (4)

Vt. (3)

[Hawaii](#) (4)

Leaning Obama

Nev. (5)

Colo. (9)

Ohio (20)

Va. (13)

Toss-up

Mont. (3)

N.D. (3)

Mo. (11)

Ind. (11)

Ga. (15)

Fla. (27)

N.C. (15)

COMPILED BY REID J. EPSTEIN

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