



October 2014

How Presidential Battleground Status Affects Voter Turnout in States

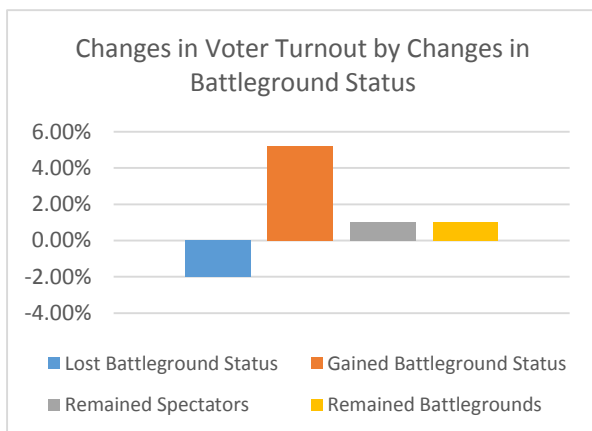
Gaining or Losing Campaign Attention Closely Correlated to Voter Turnout in 2008 and 2012

In presidential elections, states can generally be categorized into two groups: battleground states and spectator states. FairVote defines battleground status with our attention index, which measures relative campaign spending and campaign events. If a state receives more attention than merited by its population, it is labeled a battleground state.

To study the effect that battleground status has on voter turnout, FairVote looked at how voter turnout changes when a state gained or lost battleground status between two presidential election cycles.ⁱ By comparing voter turnout in states in 2004, 2008, and 2012, we reached two conclusions:

Conclusion #1: States losing battleground status experience a greater-than-average decrease in voter turnout.

Conclusion #2: States gaining battleground status experience a greater-than-average increase in voter turnout.



Comparing turnout in the elections of 2004 and 2008 (when turnout rose from 60.1% in 2004 to 61.6% in 2008), we found that the five states that lost battleground status experienced an average decrease in turnout by 2.0%. In contrast, states in other categories experienced increases in voter turnout. The nine states that maintained battleground status and the 32 states that maintained spectator status both experienced an average increase in turnout of 1.0%. The four states that gained battleground status experienced an average increase in turnout of 5.2%.

The pattern was similar in 2012. The national turnout declined by 3.6% to 58.0%. The four states that lost battleground status experienced an average decrease in voter turnout of 4.9%. The 38 states that maintained spectator status experienced an average decrease in voter turnout by 3.7%, while the nine states that maintained battleground status experienced an average decrease in turnout of only 1.0%. (There were no new battlegrounds.)

Table: Average Voter Turnouts in Battleground and Spectator States, 2004, 2008 and 2012

	Average 2004 Voter Turnout	Average 2008 Voter Turnout	Difference		Average 2008 Voter Turnout	Average 2012 Voter Turnout	Difference
<i>Gained Battleground Status</i>	59.6%	64.8%	5.2%		---	---	---
<i>Lost Battleground Status</i>	69.0%	67.0%	-2.0%		62.8%	57.9%	-4.9%
<i>Remained Battlegrounds</i>	65.6%	66.6%	1.0%		67.5%	66.4%	-1.0%
<i>Remained Spectators</i>	60.4%	61.4%	1.0%		62.1%	58.5%	-3.7%

In modern presidential elections, being the subject of campaign attention matters when it comes to voter turnout. The biggest losers in voter turnout are states losing battleground status, the biggest winners are states gaining battleground status, and battleground states overall outperform spectator states. Under the National Popular Vote plan, however, presidential candidates would have to win the most votes in all 50 states, making all states “battlegrounds.” Our findings suggest that the National Popular Vote plan would increase voter turnout in most states.

ⁱ Voter turnout is based on eligible voters, as reported at ElectProject.org. The District of Columbia is treated as a state in this analysis.