

# Lower Presidential Election Turnout in Safe GOP States

FairVote, November 2011

Thirteen states have voted for Republicans in every presidential election since 1980: Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Nebraska, North Dakota, Mississippi, Texas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Kansas, Utah, and Wyoming. Such a track record makes these states the most consistently “safe Republican” strongholds in modern presidential election politics.

To study the effects of living in a safe state on voter turnout, FairVote compared the average turnout over the last six elections in these 13 states with turnout in the nation’s remaining states – starting with the Bush-Dukakis election of 1988 and ending with the Obama-McCain election of 2008. In 1988, the average turnout of “safe GOP” states barely trailed that of the rest of the country, by 2.6%. Yet in every election since 1988, these 13 states have fallen further and further behind their less conservative counterparts. In 2008, for instance, their turnout was 6.2% behind the rest of the nation.

The 12 safest Democratic states (those voting for Obama in 2008 by more than 10% and for either

Kerry in 2004 or Gore in 2000 by more than 10%) have experienced a comparable decline in turnout relative to the rest of the nation (although their turnout started off higher than the safe GOP states).

Our findings should come as no surprise. Under the Electoral College system as states currently use it, people vote for president at the state-level. Once all votes are tallied in a state, the winner of the statewide popular vote in nearly all states receives all of that state’s electoral votes. This is known as the winner-take-all rule, in place as a statute in 49 of the 51 states (including the District of Columbia).

Due to states’ winner-take-all rules, presidential candidates focus solely on the few competitive states that could affect the election and ignore states with more pronounced political leanings. As demonstrated by our findings, voters in the safest states are reduced to irrelevancy; as a result, they are less inclined to vote, and candidates are far less likely to seek their support.

**Turnout in “Safe GOP” States Versus Turnout in Other States, 1980 – 2008**

