

What to Watch For

The most important state to watch is Pennsylvania, where the polls close at 8pm EST. If Obama wins there, all he needs to do is pick up six more electoral votes to get to 270, which he can do by picking up any of CO, FL, GA, IN, MO, NC, OH, or VA, or by getting any two of ND, NV, or MT. If McCain wins PA, Obama can still win, but he'll need to pick up a few more swing states than he would otherwise.

The networks are going to be reluctant to call any state too early, and probably won't call the election until at least 10pm EST (as they've been asked to do by Congress, to allow for polls to close in the West). Regardless, you can get some sense of where things are going from the early results. In each state, expect Obama's numbers to start out at a fairly low level and increase as more precincts report in. The reasons for this are that a) Obama's support among new voters means that he'll do better in areas with very high turnout (which means that those areas will take longer to count their votes), and b) Obama has high support in urban and minority areas, which are traditionally underserved in terms of number of staff and voting machines in polling places (meaning, again, that votes from those places will take longer to count). This trend was clear throughout the primary season, and looks likely to continue (perhaps even more strongly) in the general election. So if Obama's winning a state when 25% of the votes are in, we can be very sure he'll have it when 100% are counted, but McCain would need a lead of at least 10-15% at that point to make the same prediction.

As far as the overall results go, it may be clear very early if Obama does well. At 7pm EST, Georgia, Indiana, and Virginia's polls all close. If Obama wins any of these, the odds are very much in his favor, but if he loses all three, we could be in for a long night. Virginia is a good bellwether state; it's one of the most likely states for Obama to pick up on our In Play list (below), and it can give us a good sense of whether his ground game is as strong as predicted. If he wins it easily, then he's likely to pick up at least Colorado, Nevada, and Pennsylvania, and probably a few of the closer swing states as well (Florida, North Carolina, and maybe Ohio). If Virginia is close, then we're likely to have close races in most of the swing states, with McCain probably picking up more of them than Obama. If Obama loses Virginia, his best hope is to get Colorado and hold Pennsylvania.

At 7:30pm EST, polls close in North Carolina and Ohio. By 8pm, polls will be closed in FL, GA, IN, MO, NC, OH, PA, and VA. Results should start coming in from those states quickly, and a couple may even be called by that time if the exit polls show a clear winner. The two big numbers to watch for are from Florida and Pennsylvania. If Obama wins Florida, the night's over. If he wins Pennsylvania, it'll be a race to see which state puts him over the top. Given all the effort McCain's put into that state in the past two weeks, it's unlikely that Obama would still win there and not pick up at least a couple more swing states that McCain's been forced to ignore. If McCain wins both, Obama will need to find some combination of states to add up to 27 electoral votes. The likeliest combination would be Virginia, Colorado, and Nevada (27 votes); North Carolina and possibly Ohio could factor in as well.

List of States and Electoral Votes

This list breaks down states by whether they're considered safe for Obama or McCain, or whether they're "in play". It's certainly possible that a few of the "safe" states could cross over to the other side—for example, Obama could pick up Arizona, or McCain could get New Hampshire—but this would only happen in the case of a blowout victory by one side. If it's at all close, you can count on these safe states going to their respective candidates.

As each "in play" state is called, add it to its winner's Electoral vote total. When somebody hits 270, it's over.

Obama States	In Play	McCain States
California (55)	Colorado (9)	Alabama (9)
Connecticut (7)	Florida (27)	Alaska (3)
Delaware (3)	Georgia (15)	Arizona (10)
District of Columbia (3)	Indiana (11)	Arkansas (6)
Hawaii (4)	Missouri (11)	Idaho (4)
Illinois (21)	Montana (3)	Kansas (6)
Iowa (7)	Nevada (5)	Kentucky (8)
Maine (4)	North Carolina (15)	Louisiana (9)
Maryland (10)	North Dakota (3)	Mississippi (6)
Massachusetts (12)	Ohio (20)	Nebraska (5)
Michigan (17)	Pennsylvania (21)	Oklahoma (7)
Minnesota (10)	Virginia (13)	South Carolina (8)
New Hampshire (4)		South Dakota (3)
New Jersey (15)		Tennessee (11)
New Mexico (5)		Texas (34)
New York (31)		Utah (5)
Oregon (7)		West Virginia (5)
Rhode Island (4)		Wyoming (3)
Vermont (3)		
Washington (11)		
Wisconsin (10)		
TOTAL: 243 Electoral Votes	TOTAL: 153 Electoral Votes	TOTAL: 142 Electoral Votes

270 Electoral Votes needed to win; tie of 269-269 throws election to House of Representatives, which is likely to vote for Obama. This could be complicated, however, if McCain wins the popular vote; some Democrats may feel compelled to go with popular vote, but this is less likely given that Bush lost the popular vote in 2000 but still won the election.

Poll Closing Times

(all times EST; some states have multiple closing times; this reflects the latest closing time for each state)

7:00pm:	Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia
7:30pm:	North Carolina, Ohio, West Virginia
8:00pm:	Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee
8:30pm:	Arkansas
9:00pm:	Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Texas, Wisconsin, Wyoming
10:00pm:	Iowa, Montana, Nevada, Utah
11:00pm:	California, Hawaii, Idaho, Oregon, Washington
1:00am:	Alaska