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Chris Cillizza: Obama still has an electoral-map edge

Chris Cillizza  
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This year will not be like 2008, at least as far as the electoral map is concerned.

Four years ago, Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) swept to an eye-popping 365-electoral-vote victory — and a nearly 10 million popular-vote edge — with wins in places where a Democrat hadn't won a presidential race in decades, such as Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia.

Today, the expanded map of 2008 has shrunk somewhat, with states including Indiana and Missouri almost certain to go Republican and longtime Democratic strongholds such as Michigan and Wisconsin looking more tenuous than in the recent past because of the continuing struggles of the manufacturing economy.

That means the 2012 map is more likely to resemble the 2004 map. That year, President George W. Bush eked out a 286-electoral-vote win over Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.).

And yet, according to a detailed Fix analysis of the electoral playing field, President Obama retains major advantages over former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, the likely GOP nominee, when it comes to winning the 270 votes he needs for a second term. Not only does Obama have more paths to 270 than Romney, but he has considerable leeway — judging from his 2008 performance — in many of the purest swing states.

Let's start with the states that are genuinely a tossup. Our analysis suggests that nine of them fit well in that swing category: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Republicans would argue for the inclusion of three more — Michigan, Pennsylvania and New Mexico — but of those, only New Mexico has voted for the GOP nominee in any of the past five presidential elections (Bush in 2004).

Democrats would argue that Arizona, Indiana and Missouri should be included in the swing category. But neither Arizona nor Missouri has voted for a Democrat for president in any of the past three elections, and Obama's 0.9-percentage-point margin in Indiana seems like a major outlier in a state that backed Bush with 60 percent in 2004 and 57 percent in 2000.

That leaves us with nine states that truly qualify as swing — meaning it's nearly certain that both candidates and the national party committees will spend heavily to win them.

A detailed look at those nine states reveals Obama's strength when it comes to the electoral map.

First, he carried every one of our nine swing states in 2008. Second — and even more surprising — his average (yes, average) margin of victory across those nine states was nearly 7.6 points. Remove North Carolina, where Obama won by just four-tenths of a percentage point, from the equation and his average winning margin stands at a whopping 8.5 points. (Perhaps the most amazing state margin for Obama was in Wisconsin, which he captured by 14 points just four years after Kerry won it by four-tenths of a point.)

That means Obama's path to a second term goes through states he has already won once — and by considerable margins in most cases. Although no one — not even people within the Obama campaign — expect him to carry Virginia by seven points or Colorado by nine points, the fact that he averaged a 7.5-point win across these nine states four years ago is nothing to sneeze at.

Republicans will, rightly, point to history in these nine states — a view that suggests at least the possibility that Obama's 2008 victory was anomalous. Before his wins in 2008, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia had all voted for the Republican presidential nominee in the previous two elections.

If all six of those states revert to their 2000/2004 form, Republicans carry Indiana (as seems likely) and Obama wins no other state that he lost in 2008 (as seems likely), the incumbent would drop to 258 electoral votes and lose the presidency. But if Obama wins any one among Florida, North Carolina, Ohio or Virginia, he will be reelected.

If Romney can turn Wisconsin — and its 10 electoral votes — or Michigan (16) or Pennsylvania (20) to his side while also winning the vast majority of the six swing states mentioned above, he will have a bit more wiggle room for a national victory.

There's no doubt that the 2012 playing field will be narrower than the one Obama dominated in 2008. But the president still retains far more flexibility than Romney in building a map that adds up to 270 electoral votes.

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