

Presidential Campaigning in Big Cities and Rural Areas

July 6, 2024s

Some people have speculated that, in a national popular vote for President, candidates will concentrate disproportionately on heavily populated metropolitan areas and ignore rural areas.

However, there is no need to speculate as to how presidential candidates would campaign in an election in which every vote is equal, and in which the winner is the candidate receiving the most popular votes.

If there were any tendency for a nationwide presidential campaign to overemphasize heavily populated metro areas or ignore rural areas, we would see evidence of this in the way presidential campaigns are actually conducted **today** inside the closely divided battleground states. Indeed, inside battleground states, every vote is already equal, and the winner is the candidate receiving the most popular votes.

Geography of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's 12.7 million people are divided into two almost equal parts:¹

- 6.4 million in the Philadelphia² and Pittsburgh³ metro areas
- 6.3 million in the rest of the state ("The T")⁴

2020 Campaign in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania was a closely divided "battleground" state in 2020. In fact, it received more general-election campaign events⁵ than any other state (45 of 212). These 45 events were divided almost exactly in proportion to population between the two halves of the state.

- 23 events in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh metro areas
- 22 events in "The T"

¹ Pennsylvania has a population of 12,702,379, according to the 2010 census. The Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and the Pittsburgh MSA had a combined population of 6,365,279 (50.1% of the total), while the remainder of the state had a population of 6,337,100 (49.9% of the total).

² The Philadelphia metropolitan statistical area (MSA) consists of five counties (Philadelphia county, Montgomery, Bucks, Delaware, and Chester).

³ The Pittsburgh MSA consists of seven counties (Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington, and Westmoreland).

⁴ The rest of the state consists of 55 counties.

⁵ The 2020 general-election campaign for President started on August 28, 2020 (the day after the end of the Republican National Convention) and ended on Tuesday November 3, 2020 (Election Day).

The Democratic ticket won Pennsylvania in 2020 by a 50.6%–49.4% margin.

In 2020, the Democratic ticket won the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh metro areas by a 60%–40% margin, while the Republican ticket won “The T” by an almost identical 62%–38% margin. That is, politically, the two halves of the state are mirror images of each other.

	Republican	Democratic
2 biggest metro areas	40.4%	59.6%
The T	61.8%	38.2%
Total	49.4%	50.6%

In 2020, there were 22 Republican events (Trump, Pence) and 25 Democratic events (Biden, Harris). Each ticket devoted slightly more attention to the areas where it had highest support—with an overall result that the two biggest metro areas and “The T” received almost exactly the same overall amount of attention.

	Republican	Democratic	Total
2 biggest metro areas	8	15	23
The T	12	10	22
Total	20	25	45

2016 Campaign in Pennsylvania

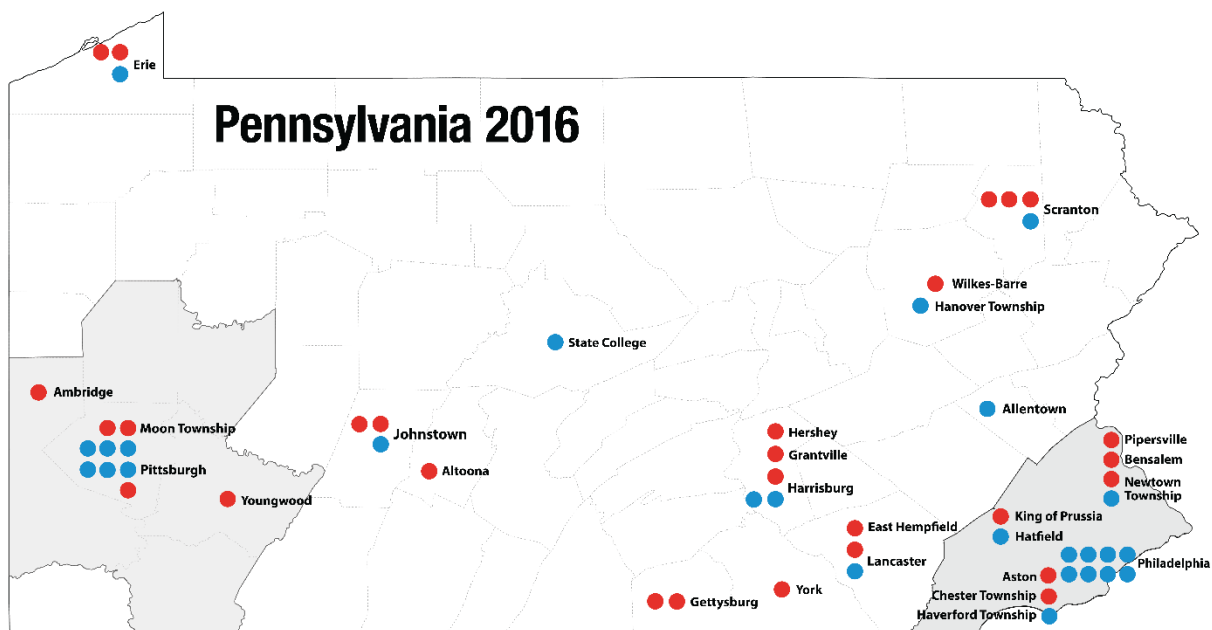
Pennsylvania was a closely divided “battleground” state in 2016. It received 54 of the nation’s 399 general-election campaign events.

The locations of Pennsylvania’s 54 general-election campaign events in 2016 are shown in the table below.

As can be seen, there is a mix of small towns, middle-sized places, and big cities.

Location of Pennsylvania’s 54 Campaign Events in 2016

Place	Population	Candidate and date of campaign event	County	C D
Youngwood	3,050	Pence (11/1)	Westmoreland	18
Grantville	3,581	Pence (10/5)	Dauphin	11
Chester Twp.	3,940	Trump (9/22)	Delaware	7
Pipersville	6,212	Pence (8/23)	Bucks	8
Ambridge	7,050	Trump (10/10)	Beaver	12
Gettysburg	7,620	Pence (10/6), Trump (10/22)	Adams	4
Hanover Twp	10,866	Kaine (8/31)	Northampton	15
Hershey	14,257	Trump (11/4)	Dauphin	11
Aston	16,592	Trump (9/13)	Delaware	7
Hatfield Twp	17,249	Clinton-Kaine (7/29)	Montgomery	6
Newtown Twp	19,299	Kaine (10/26), Trump (10/21)	Bucks	8
King of Prussia	19,936	Pence (8/23)	Montgomery	7
Johnstown	20,978	Clinton-Kaine (7/30), Pence (10/6), Trump (10/21)	Cambria	12
East Hempfield	23,522	Trump (10/1)	Lancaster	16
Moon Twp	24,185	Pence (11/3), Trump (11/6)	Allegheny	14
Wilkes-Barre	41,498	Trump (10/10)	Luzerne	11
State College	42,034	Kaine (10/21)	Centre	5
York	43,718	Pence (9/29)	York	4
Altoona	46,320	Trump (8/12)	Blair	9
Haverford Twp	48,491	Clinton (10/4)	Delaware	7
Harrisburg	49,528	Clinton (10/4), Clinton-Kaine (7/29), Trump (8/1)	Dauphin	11
Lancaster	59,322	Pence (8/9), Kaine (8/30)	Lancaster	16
Bensalem	60,427	Pence (10/28)	Bucks	8
Scranton	76,089	Trump-Pence (7/27), Clinton (8/15), Pence (9/14), Trump (11/7)	Lackawanna	17
Erie	101,786	Trump (8/12), Kaine (8/30), Pence (11/7)	Erie	3
Allentown	118,032	Kaine (10/26)	Lehigh	15
Pittsburgh	305,704	Clinton-Kaine (7/30, 10/22), Pence (8/9), Kaine (9/5, 10/6), Clinton (11/4, 11/7)	Allegheny	14
Philadelphia	1,526,006	Clinton (8/16, 9/19, 11/5, 11/6, 11/7), Kaine (10/5), Clinton-Kaine (7/29, 10/22)	Philadelphia	2



These 54 events were divided almost exactly in proportion to population between the two halves of the state.

- 28 events in in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh metro areas
- 26 events in “The T”

In 2016, the Democratic ticket won the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh metro areas by a 60%–40% margin, while the Republican ticket won “The T” by 62%–38%. Overall, the Republican ticket won the state in 2016 by a 50.4%–49.6% margin.

	Republican	Democratic
2 biggest metro areas	40.4%	59.6%
The T	61.8%	38.2%
Total	50.4%	49.6%

In 2016, there were 28 Republican events (Trump, Pence) and 26 Democratic events (Clinton, Kaine). Each ticket devoted slightly more attention to the areas where it had highest support—with an overall result that the two biggest metro areas and “The T” received almost exactly the same overall amount of attention.

	Republican	Democratic	Total
2 biggest metro areas	11	17	28
The T	17	9	26
Total	28	26	54

2012 Campaign in Pennsylvania

The 2012 presidential campaign in Pennsylvania illustrates another important characteristic of the current state-by-state winner-take-all method of awarding electoral votes—namely that battleground status is fleeting and fickle.

The Democratic ticket was comfortably ahead in Pennsylvania in 2012. In fact, the Obama-Biden ticket ended up by winning Pennsylvania by 323,931 votes—a 54%–46% margin.

Under the current winner-take-all system, almost all general-election campaigning for President takes place in states where the major-party candidates are within less than eight percentage points of each other—that is, within a 54%–46% margin. Thus, in 2012, Pennsylvania was at the outer limit of states where presidential candidates bother to campaign.

Because polling showed that the Democratic ticket was comfortably ahead in Pennsylvania throughout 2012, there was virtually no general-election presidential campaign in the state. Pennsylvania received only five of the nation’s 253 general-election campaign events in 2012—compared to 54 events in 2016 (out of 399 nationally) and 45 events in 2020 (out of 212). That is, Pennsylvania received only about 1/10 of the attention in 2012 that it received in 2016 and 2020. The fact that Pennsylvania was “not on the map” in 2012 is further illustrated by the fact that neither President Obama nor Vice President Biden bothered to visit Pennsylvania.

As the campaign drew to a close, Governor Romney and Congressman Ryan made five visits to Pennsylvania—four at the very end of the campaign.

The locations of Pennsylvania’s five general-election campaign events—all Republican—in 2012 are shown in the table below.

Location of Pennsylvania’s 5 Campaign Events in 2012

Place	Population	Candidate and date of event	County
Morrisville	8,728	Romney (11/4)	Bucks
Middletown	45,436	Ryan (11/3)	Dauphin
Moon Twp.	24,185	Ryan (10/20)	Allegheny
Wayne	31,531	Romney (9/28)	Delaware
Pittsburgh	305,704	Romney (11/6)	Allegheny

The fact that battleground status is fleeting and fickle is further illustrated by Michigan in 2012. Michigan received a large amount of attention in 2016 and 2020, but almost none in 2012. Michigan received 22 events in 2016 (out of 399 nationally) and 21 events in 2020 (out of 212). However, because polling showed that the Democratic ticket was comfortably ahead in Michigan throughout 2012, President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney did not bother to visit Michigan at all. The state received only one visit in 2012—from Republican vice-presidential nominee Paul Ryan. Meanwhile, neighboring Ohio (which has about the same population as Michigan) was closely divided in 2012, and it received 73 of the nation’s 253 general-election campaign events.