

Early voting begins in US elections

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Voters in the United States began casting absentee ballots this week and early in-person voting is beginning in half a dozen states, including several of those identified as critical to the Electoral College contest between President Barack Obama and his Republican opponent Mitt Romney.

The states of North Carolina, Virginia, Wisconsin, New Hampshire and Michigan, the first four considered key battlegrounds, have already begun absentee balloting, while Iowa, another of the most closely contested states, begins both absentee and in-person early voting on September 27.

Early voting in Ohio, where the Obama and Romney campaigns have devoted the most time and resources, begins on Tuesday, October 2, one day before the first nationally televised presidential debate. Florida begins absentee voting the same day.

Nearly 30 percent of the votes in the 2008 election—just under 40 million—were cast before Election Day, and the proportion in 2012 is likely to be even larger, as the two capitalist parties and the super PACs formed by their wealthy backers are making efforts to “lock in” votes as early as possible.

According to a report in Politico.com, early and absentee voting accounted for more than half the total 2008 vote in at least four of the battleground states, including Colorado, with 79 percent voting early; Nevada, 63 percent; North Carolina, 61 percent; and Florida, 52 percent. More states are likely to fall into this category in 2012.

These figures explain the mood of desperation in the Romney campaign, and Republican Party circles more generally, over polls showing Obama with a small but significant lead in nearly all the battleground states. Even if there is a shift away from Obama in the polls as Election Day approaches, many voters will have already cast their ballots.

Both the *Washington Post*/ABC poll published

Monday and the *New York Times*/CBS poll published Tuesday showed Obama with significant leads over Romney in critical states. The *Post* poll found Romney trailing in Ohio, Florida and Virginia, while the *Times* poll found similar margins in Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania.

Both campaigns are focusing their efforts based on the Electoral College structure, which awards electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis in nearly every state. Obama is well ahead in 18 states and the District of Columbia, with 237 electoral votes out of the 538 total. Romney leads in the polls in 23 states, accounting for 191 electoral votes.

The remaining nine states, with 110 electoral votes, are the almost exclusive focus of the election campaign. Obama and Romney visit heavily populated but uncompetitive states like California, Texas and New York only to raise money from millionaire backers and do little or no public campaigning, and no advertising.

One study found that more than half of all the spending by both campaigns was confined to just three states, Ohio, Florida and Virginia, which between them account for 60 electoral votes, more than half the total of the nine battleground states.

Both Obama and Romney campaigned in Ohio on Wednesday, with Obama appearing at college campuses in Bowling Green and Kent, while Romney addressed a business group outside Cleveland and a rally in Toledo.

The Obama campaign events in Ohio focused almost entirely on the bailout of the auto industry, which the Democratic candidate portrayed as a great boon to the working class, without mentioning that it was based on slashing wages by 50 percent for new-hires and robbing retired workers of health and pension benefits they earned in the course of decades of hard manual labor.

Romney made no mention of the auto bailout and sought to deflect popular hostility to his remarks at a

Florida fundraiser—made public last week—in which he wrote off 47 percent of the American population that receives government benefits in some form and attacked those who believe they are entitled to jobs and decent living standards. (See “Romney’s “47 percent” video and the bipartisan assault on social reform”)

In a not-very-believable effort to shake off his public image as a multi-millionaire corporate raider, his campaign released a new ad in which Romney presents himself as the advocate of workers “living paycheck to paycheck, trying to make falling incomes meet rising prices for food and gas.” The ad notes: “More Americans are living in poverty than when President Obama took office and 15 million more are on food stamps.”

These figures, if anything, understate the degree of poverty and deprivation, but the policies advocated by both Romney and Obama will only exacerbate the social crisis, drive down living standards further and devastate public services.

At his Toledo rally, Romney reiterated his support for further tax cuts for the wealthy and business, claiming that this would “create jobs.”

In Bowling Green, Obama advanced an equally reactionary perspective, based on whipping up anti-Chinese chauvinism. He denounced Chinese imports for allegedly destroying American jobs and boasted that his administration had brought more trade cases against China in one term than the Bush administration did in two.

With its poll numbers sinking, the Romney campaign and the Republican Party are redoubling their efforts to shape the electoral landscape through actions by Republican-controlled state governments to reduce voter turnout in areas considered likely to support the Democrats, particularly black and Hispanic working class neighborhoods.

The state of Florida has cut several weeks from early voting in an effort to reduce the turnout in African American neighborhoods of cities like Jacksonville and Miami, where black churches have mobilized voters to cast ballots after Sunday services.

The most blatantly discriminatory effort is in Pennsylvania, where the state government enacted a voter ID requirement that as many as 700,000 voters might not be able to meet, according to one study. A top state Republican boasted that the voter ID law

would deliver the state’s electoral votes to Romney, despite polls showing Obama with a double-digit lead.

A lawsuit against the implementation of the new voter ID law won a limited victory last week, when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ordered a lower court judge to reconsider his decision to uphold the law and take into account the likelihood that qualified voters would be denied the right to vote.

Hearings are ongoing before the lower court judge, Robert Simpson, who is to render a decision by Tuesday, October 2. Briefs were submitted by the state government in support of the voter ID law and the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups in opposition to it. At a hearing September 25, Simpson told lawyers for both sides, “I’m giving you a heads-up. I think it’s a possibility there could be an injunction here.”

State officials claimed they were streamlining requirements for getting a voter ID card because the process is so cumbersome that only 10,000 new voter IDs have been issued since March, even though the state itself estimated that 90,000 voters would need them.



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