

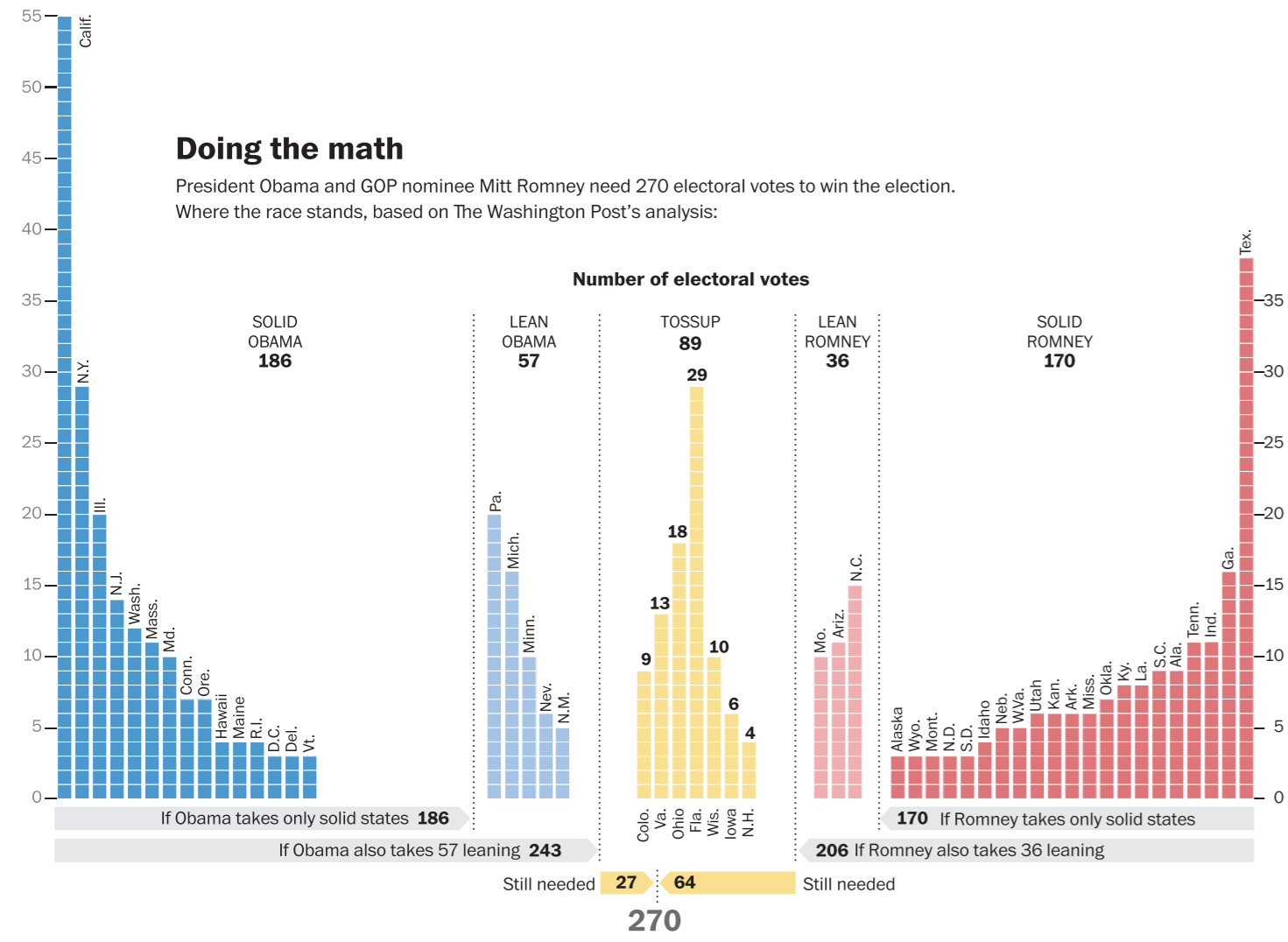
ELECTION 2012

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Political Geography: The final days

After months of campaigning and millions spent on TV ads, the 2012 presidential race is almost over. A look at the state of play as we head into Election Day:

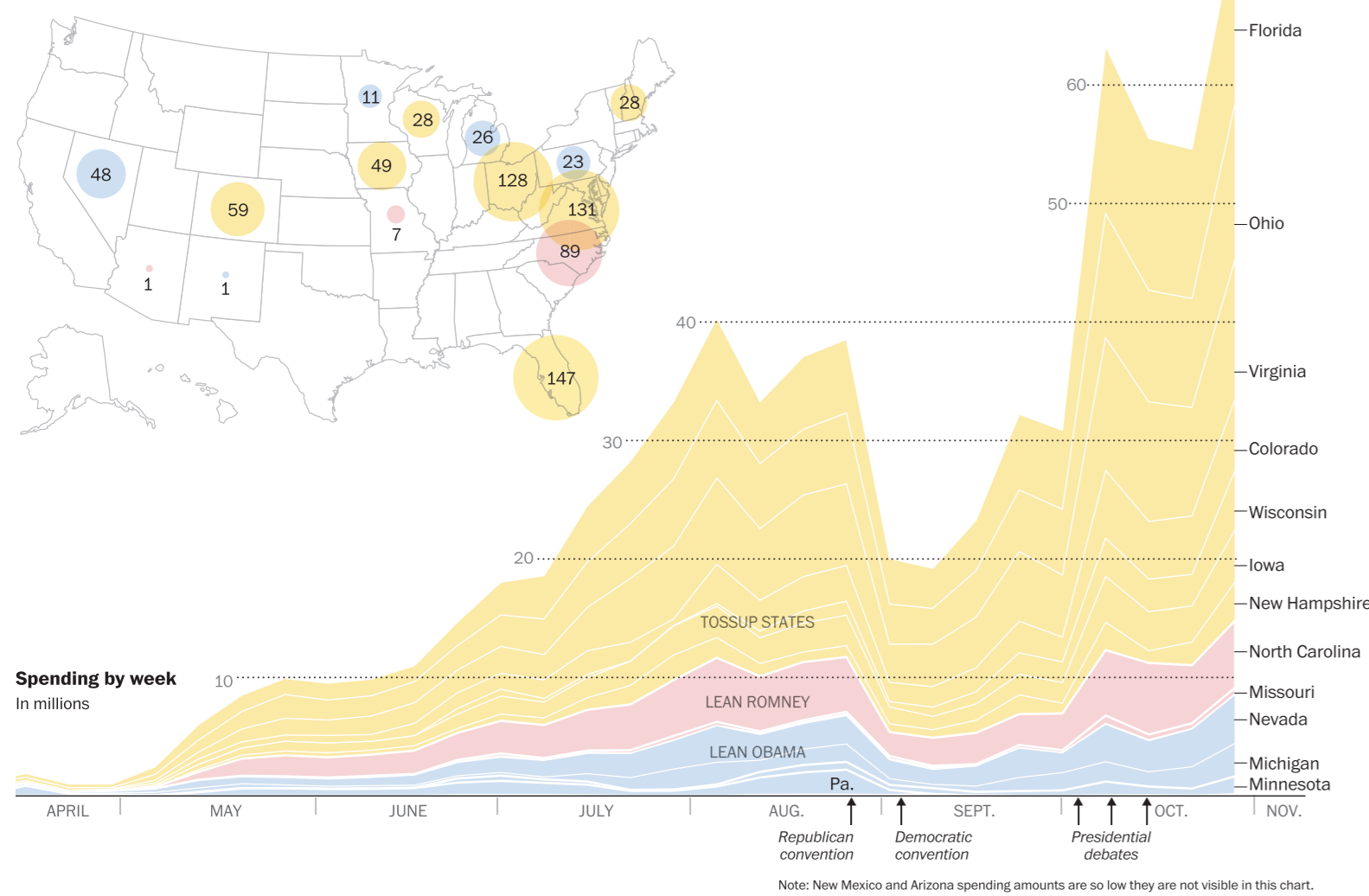
By Karen Yourish, Laura Stanton, Dan Keating, Ted Mellnik and Emily Chow



Flooding the airwaves

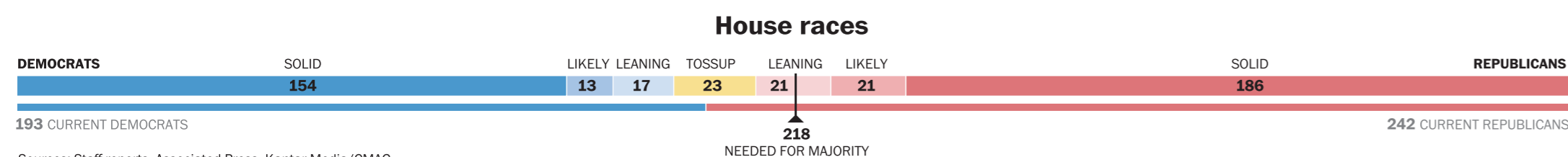
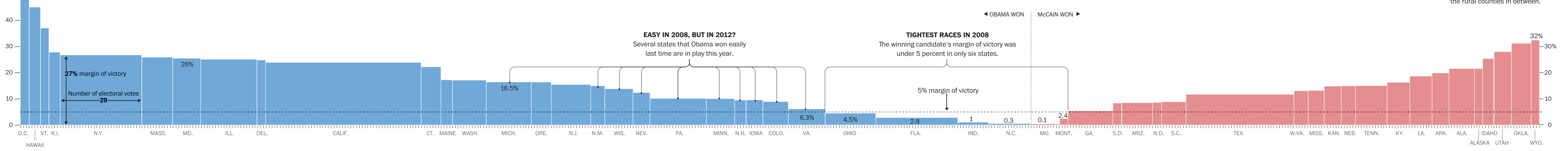
A week before the election, Team Obama and Team Romney — i.e., the campaigns, national parties, super PACs and other outside groups supporting their campaigns — had spent more than \$700 million on television ads in the battleground states.

Spending in the tossup and leaning states in millions of dollars

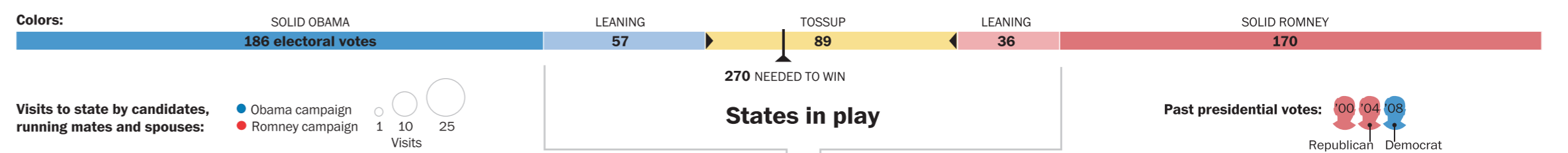


A look back

In the 2008 presidential election, only six states had a winning margin of less than five percentage points. In many states, the margin was more than 20 points with a handful of states completely one-sided. Some of the states that Obama won by more than 10 points could be much closer Tuesday, while some of the most contested are not expected to be so close this year.



Key to map



Tossups

COLORADO ELECTORAL VOTES: 9

The key to winning Colorado may be the split between the Denver area and the rest of the state. Obama needs to dominate Denver and Boulder to make up for Romney's likely strong showing in Front Range suburbs around cities like Fort Collins and Colorado Springs, as well as the rural east and west.

IOWA ELECTORAL VOTES: 6

Obama won Iowa by almost 10 percentage points in 2008 by dominating the counties around Des Moines and the eastern part of the state. The race is tighter this year, and Romney's choice of Rep. Paul Ryan (Wis.) as a running mate could shift some of the traditionally Democratic — largely Catholic — strongholds in Romney's favor.

WISCONSIN ELECTORAL VOTES: 10

No Republican has carried the Badger State at the presidential level since 1984, but it is in play following major GOP gains in 2010 (and an unsuccessful Democratic attempt in 2012 to recall Republican Gov. Scott Walker). It doesn't hurt that Ryan, Romney's running mate, was born and raised here — although Obama won Ryan's home county in 2008, as he did all but 13 of the state's 72 counties. Romney's chances may hinge on whether he can dominate the Milwaukee suburbs, which historically vote for the Republican candidate, while Obama needs to win Fox Valley, in the northeastern part of the state.

FLORIDA ELECTORAL VOTES: 29

The biggest swing state in the presidential race, Florida is basically a must-win for Romney. Without it, he would have to carry virtually every other swing state. The fundamental rule of Florida politics is that the Republican carries the north, the Democrat wins big in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, and the winner takes the I-4 corridor, the state's swingiest swath, stretching from Daytona Beach to Tampa Bay. Keep a close eye on Tampa's Hillsborough County, which has voted for the winning presidential candidate in every election but one (1992) since 1960.

OHIO ELECTORAL VOTES: 18

The award for the most important state in this year's presidential election again goes to Ohio. Without the Buckeye State, the electoral math for Romney needs extremely difficult. Romney needs solid majorities in the suburbs around Cincinnati and the small and rural areas throughout the state, including coal country in the east. Obama needs to dominate the traditionally Democratic strongholds of Cleveland, Akron and Canton. Both sides are battling for the counties clustered around Columbus, which is somewhat of a swing region.

VIRGINIA ELECTORAL VOTES: 13

Obama won Virginia in 2008 — the first Democrat to do so since 1964 — with large margins in the Washington suburbs and among black, Latino and young voters. Overall, half a million more Virginians voted in 2008 than in 2004, and the bulk of those voters were in the three regions that had the most shifts in Obama's favor. Strong turnout could be the key to another Obama victory. Romney, meanwhile, has focused on GOP-leaning communities such as Virginia Beach and the conservative but lightly populated southwestern counties. Romney is looking to minimize Obama's margins in the D.C. suburbs by targeting independent voters, while Obama is trying to stunt Romney's appeal to suburban women by casting him as an extremist on women's issues.

NEW HAMPSHIRE ELECTORAL VOTES: 4

New Hampshire is the smallest battleground state, but its four electoral votes could be the difference between winning or losing if 2012 ends up being as close as 2000 (when George W. Bush carried the Granite State). Obama dominated in 2008, winning every county, but the race may be tighter this year. As the former governor of neighboring Massachusetts and owner of a vacation home in Wolfeboro, Romney has something of a home-state advantage.

