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## ABOUT COSMIC LOG

Quantum fluctuations in space, science, exploration and other cosmic fields... served up regularly by MSNBC.com science editor Alan Boyle since 2002.



Alan Boyle covers the physical sciences, anthropology, technological innovation and space science and exploration for MSNBC.com. He is a winner of the [AAAS Science Journalism Award](#), the [NASW Science-in-Society Award](#) and other honors; a contributor to "[A Field Guide for Science Writers](#)"; and a member of the board of the [Council for the Advancement of Science Writing](#).

Check out Boyle's [biography](#) or send a message to Cosmic Log via [cosmiclog@msnbc.com](mailto:cosmiclog@msnbc.com).

## POLITICAL PICKS? ASK AGAIN LATER

## Political picks? Ask again later

**Posted: Wednesday, September 17, 2008 5:23 PM by Alan Boyle**

Political prediction markets may be [technically more accurate](#) than polls, but they can go through the same ups and downs that polls do. Now that the trend line has had a few days to settle down, it looks as if the Republicans as well as the Democrats got a mini-bounce after their respective conventions - but nothing near the swings that the polls recorded.

Whether you're backing the GOP's John McCain or the Democrats' Barack Obama, you can find a fresh prediction that will warm your heart.

Republicans can take encouragement from the latest projections based on state-by-state electoral votes, which are the only votes that count in the end. This week, researchers led by Sheldon Jacobson at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign [reported](#) that [their mathematical model](#) gives the edge to McCain. A "neutral" prediction puts McCain's electoral-vote count at 271, beating out Obama's tally of 267. (That's barely enough to win.)

A similar analysis was served up by the University of Washington's Darryl Holman at [Hominid Views](#). The current forecast at [Electoral-vote.com](#) also favors McCain, although it leaves 34 votes up for grabs - enough of a margin to throw victory into doubt.

These models draw heavily upon state-by-state polling, and that means there's plenty of time for the forecasts to change. So what's the verdict from other models that supposedly do a better job at long-range forecasting? The margin has tightened just a bit on the political prediction markets since [our last status report](#), but so far the Democrats are still on top.

The GOP shares in [winner-take-all trading](#) on the Iowa Electronic Markets topped off at 47 cents on Sept. 12 and have since settled down to 42 cents. The Democrats' shares bottomed out at 53.1 cents on the 12th and are at 59.2 cents today. (To refresh your memory, each share pays \$1 in November if the presidential candidate wins, and zero if he loses.)

Yale economist Ray Fair uses yet another [long-range mathematical model](#), based on economic statistics for the quarters leading up to the election. His latest analysis, issued at the end of July, sets the eventual Republican vote share at 48.5 percent.

Since then, of course, we've had not only the conventions but McCain's surprise pick of Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) as his running mate. We're also having a pretty significant [economic crisis](#), by the way.

Fair said the economic situation in particular could make things worse for the GOP.

"It's probably the case that the growth rate [for the year's third quarter] is going to be smaller than the figure I used - in fact, it could be negative," he said. If third-quarter growth is less than the 2.8 percent Fair projected, the GOP's vote-share figure would suffer.

On the other hand, Fair can't account for factors such as Palin's selection - or, for that matter, McCain's "not-your-typical-Republican" image.

"It is an intangible, and it could be a significant one," Fair said. "If he can distance himself from the current administration, it's to his advantage to do so." And that's just what he's trying to do.

In any case, a projected 51.5-48.5 vote split is within the 2.5-percentage-point margin of error that Fair has set for his model. So the bottom line, based on the long-term economic statistics, is that the election is up for grabs. And that's something the pundits told you [10 days ago](#).

**Update for 8:15 p.m. ET:** This week we addressed the [presidential platforms](#) on science and technology. To find out where your congressional candidates stand on science and technology issues, check the [SHARP Network's database](#), presented by Scientists and Engineers for America. (SHARP stands for "science, health and related policies.")

Keep up with the presidential race at [Politics.msnbc.com](#).

[Main page](#)

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## 💬 Comments

When I turn to Cosmic Log I expect to see stories about science not political BS!!! MSNBC you have sunk to a new low!!! You deserve to lose readers!!!

**Jerry Sauerbrei Berlin WI** (Sent Wednesday, September 17, 2008 6:59 PM)

Jerry Sauerbrei - you must be a new reader of the Cosmic Log - Alan has been covering the prediction markets for sometime. I appreciate the coverage - its interesting and is always just reporting of whats going on with no spin at all.

**Ben, Syracuse, NY** (Sent Thursday, September 18, 2008 9:13 AM)

What factors do these long range mathematical models take into account? I would be curios to see if they take into account negative feelings about one candidate people have despite being in the same party. Is there any way to factor economic or foreign issues or disasters into these models?

**S.B. Stein E.B. NJ** (Sent Thursday, September 18, 2008 2:31 PM)

I think you are going to find that the economy is exactly like Mr. McCain said. It will be a non issue. Today the Fed is setting up a depository for all default debt. This will leave the banks that were struggling with none of this default debt on their books. The market is already coming back with a vengeance. I have put some personnel money on this yesterday.

**Delmar Fairchild Barron, WI** (Sent Thursday, September 18, 2008 4:04 PM)

Hey Jerry -

This is pure science. Using statistics and math to find out what may be. A model like this could even predict the end of the world or perhaps the price of corn in the year 2025. Every day, people bet on the futures markets using a math model such as this. It just needs the right information and the correct scheme to use that information. Nature uses this same type model along with some bonafide rules and laws that can be apply with/to math. You can predict when we find other life out there, it probably will look much like us due to the way nature uses fractals, multi dimensional forms, 3D and 4D, etc, here on Earth. Why would it use anything else out there?

This is actually exciting stuff.

**Delmar Fairchild Barron, WI** (Sent Thursday, September 18, 2008 5:09 PM)

The real issue is not how well Obama or McCain might do state-by-state, but that we shouldn't have battleground states and spectator states in the first place. Every vote in every state should be politically relevant in a presidential election. And, every vote should be equal. We should have a national popular vote for President in which the White House goes to the candidate who gets the most popular votes in all 50 states.

The National Popular Vote bill would guarantee the Presidency to the candidate who receives the most popular votes in all 50 states (and DC). The bill would take effect only when enacted, in identical form, by states possessing a majority of the electoral vote -- that is, enough electoral votes to elect a President (270 of 538). When the bill comes into effect, all the electoral votes from those states would be awarded to the presidential candidate who receives the most popular votes in all 50 states (and DC).

Because of state-by-state enacted rules for winner-take-all awarding of their electoral votes, recent candidates with limited funds have concentrated their attention on a handful of closely divided "battleground" states. In 2004 two-thirds of the visits and money were focused in just six states; 88% on 9 states, and 99% of the money went to just 16 states. Two-thirds of the states and people have been merely spectators to the presidential election.

Another shortcoming of the current system is that a candidate can win the Presidency without winning the most popular votes nationwide.

The National Popular Vote bill has passed 21 state legislative chambers, including one house in Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, North Carolina, and Washington, and both houses in California, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The bill has been enacted by Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, and Maryland. These four states possess 50 electoral votes-- 19% of the 270 necessary to bring the law into effect.

See <http://www.NationalPopularVote.com>