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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE ARITHMETIC OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The strategy of winning an election to the Presidency of the United States lies in carrying the States in which the strength of the two major parties is relatively equal. Success depends upon securing a majority of the presidential electors, not necessarily a majority of the voters. In eight of the elections from Lincoln to Hoover, the successful candidate received the endorsement of less than half of the people who voted. During the whole period of seventy years no Democrat polled a popular majority, though Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson each held the office two terms. The object is to carry several of the populous States — the twelve largest, only one-fourth of the whole number, is more than enough. And the Democratic candidate who can depend upon the electors from the "Solid South" needs to carry only five other States.

When William Jennings Bryan ran for the Presidency in 1900, he might have counted among his political resources 112 votes from the South and 60 votes from the eleven other States he car-

ried in 1896. He needed only 52 additional elec-
tors. The most likely prospects were in the States
where he had previously polled between forty-five
and fifty per cent of the popular vote. These
States — Oregon and California on the Pacific
Coast and the four Ohio Valley States of West
Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana — would
yield seventy presidential electors. And there the
battle lines were drawn, though brisk skirmishing
prevailed in the Upper Mississippi States where
agrarian discontent was rife, for Bryan was also
commander-in-chief of the Populist forces.

The Republican plan was to hold the ten States
that had never voted for a Democratic President
since the Civil War — all of New England except
Connecticut, and the north central States of
Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and
Iowa, with a total of 124 electors. Such a nucleus,
combined with the adjacent normally Republican
States of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey,
Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin would produce a
majority in the electoral college.

According to Bryan and Roosevelt, who made
strenuous speaking tours in the contested area, the
crucial issues were imperialism and prosperity.
Each candidate aroused tremendous partisan en-
thusiasm and no doubt heartened his friends, but
the fact that the price of corn had doubled and

pork trebled since 1896 probably influenced the voting as much as campaign oratory.

Of the four pivotal States in the Ohio Valley, Bryan won only Kentucky, and retained four western States in which the Populist sentiment still survived; while McKinley carried the entire industrial and agricultural North as well as the Pacific States. In the midwest, the Democrats registered a slight gain only in Illinois. Iowa returns showed that forty per cent of the voters had supported Bryan just as in 1896, with this difference — he carried seventeen counties then but only six in 1900.

In political arithmetic the whole may be greater or less than the sum of its parts, but it is seldom the same and always uncertain.

J. E. B.