

Economically-depressed Nevada will be key in 2012 election

By Andy Sullivan, Reuters

LAS VEGAS – A Republican debate will play out in one of this city's glittering casinos, but the real battleground for next year's U.S. presidential election lies in the foreclosure-racked neighborhoods that sprawl beyond the Las Vegas Strip's bright lights.

Few U.S. cities have been hit harder by the recession than Las Vegas, which is likely to be one of the most hotly contested prizes in an election dominated by economic concerns.

Las Vegas leads the nation in foreclosures and the unemployment rate is also among the highest.

One out of six people in the region have wondered over the past month where they will find their next meal, according to Three Square, a food bank serving the area.

"I know so many people who are desperate," said Linda Overby, a painter who has been out of work since April.

Though the economy may not pick up any time soon, Overby and other Las Vegas residents will get plenty of attention from presidential candidates over the coming months.

Nevada, which has backed the winning candidate in every election stretching back to 1976, is one of a handful of battleground states that could decide next year's election.

This time, the state's early caucus, tentatively set for Jan. 14, will also give it an outsized influence in the Republican primary race, although some candidates are threatening to boycott the vote here due to a fight over which states should hold primaries first.

The caucus will be the first in the West, a region that features high numbers of independent and Hispanic voters and relatively few of the Christian conservatives who play a large role in other early contests.

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