



The Electoral College Process



Counting electoral vote 1921

What is the Electoral College?

In the age of social media, mobile polling, and a 24-hour news cycle, the Electoral College might seem old-fashioned. Created in 1787 by the Framers of the Constitution, the College is not a place, but instead the official process for selecting the president of the United States. The College is made up of individuals called “electors” from each state who are selected by a state’s political party leaders to cast support for a specific candidate. These electors are usually selected for their dedicated service to the party. (Federal employees, including members of Congress, may not serve as electors.) The number of electors for each state is determined by the state’s total number of U.S. Congressional seats plus its U.S. Senators. This means that at a minimum each state (and the District of Columbia) has three electors, no matter how small its population.

How does the Electoral College system work?

In the presidential election, when a candidate wins the popular (people’s vote) for a state, then that candidate’s appointed electors from that state cast their votes in support of their candidate. There are 538 electors, and a candidate must win 270 of these electoral votes to become president. It is this vote by the electors - not ordinary people - that determines the winner of the election. All but two states (Maine and Nebraska) award electoral votes on a winner-takes-all basis; for instance, a hypothetical candidate Josephine Smith can

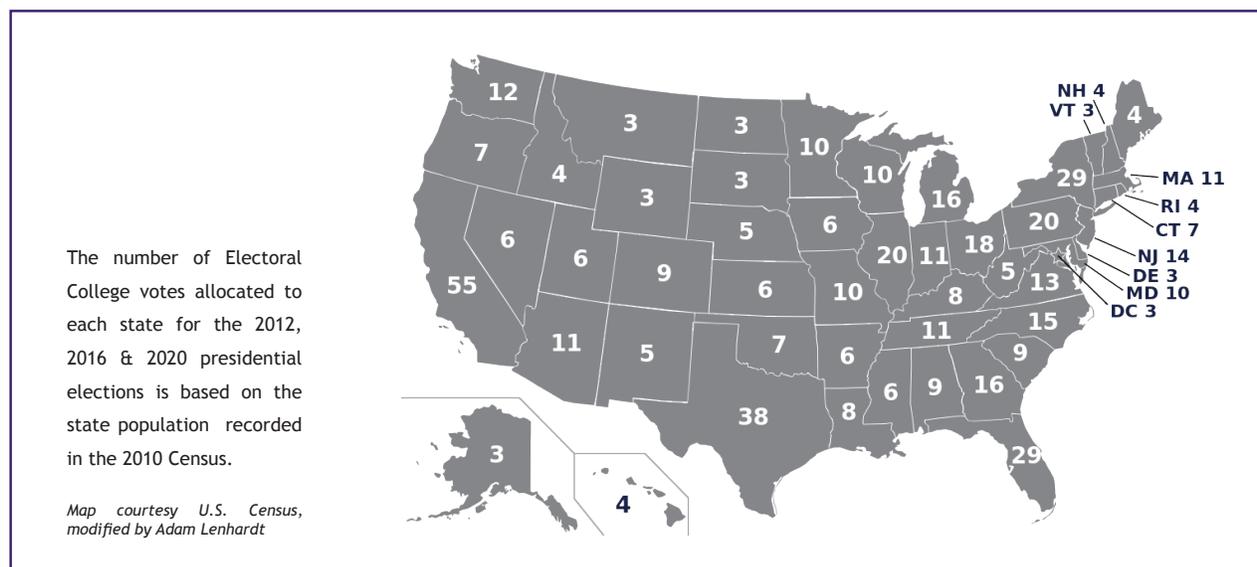
win in California with a margin of just one percent or less, yet she takes all fifty-five of California’s electoral votes, while her opponent would receive no electoral votes from California. Though the Constitution does not state that an elector must vote according to the results of the popular vote, about half of the states do have laws that require the electors to cast votes for their specified candidate, and not for anyone else.

Why does the United States have the Electoral College system?

It emerged as a compromise between Constitutional Framers who wanted the president elected directly by the people and those who feared that such an approach would leave the office vulnerable to the whims of the masses. There have been hundreds of proposals to reform or eliminate the Electoral College (which would require a Constitutional amendment), and in recent decades surveys indicate that the majority of Americans would like to see it abolished. Complaints against the system include that it is not entirely democratic, as the Electoral College has in several instances elected a president who did not win the popular vote (in 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000). Also, third party candidates fare poorly under this system, as these candidates rarely carry an entire state and therefore do not collect electoral votes. The Electoral College has withstood the test of time, however, and will continue into the foreseeable future to define the outcome of the presidential election.

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Electoral College Vote Allocation Map



The Electoral College vs. The Popular Vote

In the 2000 election, the presidential candidate who won the popular vote - Al Gore - did not become president because he did not win the majority of Electoral College votes; George W. Bush did. Some wonder whether Gore would have been president in the absence of the Electoral College system. It is impossible to know that answer,

however, for candidates understand the strategies necessary to amass the most electoral votes and Bush, like all candidates, undoubtedly campaigned accordingly. Given the Electoral College system, candidates and their advisors carefully plan their campaign tours and advertising to maximize their electoral success.

What the Framers Said

James Madison promoted a form of governance that was reflected in the Electoral College system: "... to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."

Source: *The Federalist*, No. 10

According to Alexander Hamilton, "It was desirable that the sense of the people should operate in the choice" of the president. "It was equally desirable that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station...A small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to so complicated an investigation."

Source: *The Federalist*, No. 68

Links

Helpful websites for learning more about the Electoral College:

National Archives

Multiple questions and answers about all aspects of the Electoral College system, historical election results, a student activity, and other helpful resources. <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/>

The League of Women Voters

A clear and succinct essay on the Electoral College System. <http://lwv.org/content/who-will-elect-president-electoral-college-system>

History Channel

A brief film on how the Electoral College operates. <http://www.history.com/topics/electoral-college>

Graphics

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Courtesy of the Library of Congress

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/npcc.03506>

Electoral College Vote Allocation Map

Courtesy of U. S. Census, modified by Adam Lenhardt

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Electoral_College_2016.svg

Teach the Election

About *Teach the Election*

Teach the Election puts the 2016 Election in its historical context with classroom-ready explanations of the electoral process, relevant issues, and suggestions to incorporate the election cycle into the regular curriculum. *Teach the Election* also helps students engage with informational text and primary sources to help them make the evidence-based arguments required by California's Standards.

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