

What is the Electoral College???

Santa Cruz County Elections Department

March 2000

Origins of the Electoral College

Members of the Constitutional Convention explored many possible methods of choosing a president. One suggestion was to have the Congress choose the president. A second suggestion was to have the State Legislatures select the president. A third suggestion was to elect the president by a direct popular vote. The first suggestion was voted down due to suspicion of corruption, fears of irrevocably dividing the Congress and concerns of upsetting the balance of power between the executive and the legislative branches. The second idea was voted down because the Framers felt that federal authority would be compromised in exchange for votes. And the third idea was rejected out of concern that the voters would only select candidates from their state without adequate information about candidates outside of the state. The prevailing suggestion was to have a College of Electors select a president through an indirect election. Originally, the purpose of the College of Electors was to have the most knowledgeable and informed individuals from each state of the Union cast their votes for the president assuming that they voted solely on the basis of merit.

Throughout its history, the Electoral College has gone through only two major changes. In the first design of the Electoral College:

- Each State's Electors numbered their two U.S. Senators (2) plus its number of U.S. Representatives.
- The State's selected the manner in which their Electors were chosen, however members of Congress and federal employees were prohibited from serving as Electors.
- Electors were required to meet in their state.
- Each elector was required to cast two votes for the president and at least one of those votes had to be for a candidate outside of their state.
- The candidate with the most electoral votes became president and the candidate who received the next greatest number of electoral votes became vice president.

This system was meant to work in a system without political parties and national campaigns and the introduction of which forced a couple features of the Electoral College to change.

The second design of the Electoral College came about in the presidential election of 1800 when the Electors of the Democratic-Republican Party gave Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr an equal number of electoral votes. The tie breaking decision was made in the House of Representatives resulting in the election of Thomas Jefferson. To prevent a tie from occurring again, the 12th Amendment was passed requiring each elector to cast only one vote for the office of president and another for the office of vice president. The 12th Amendment also states that if no one receives an absolute majority of electoral votes for president the House of Representatives will cast the deciding vote from the top three candidates.

Pro's and Con's of the Electoral College

In its over 200 year history, the electoral college has received its share of criticism and praise. The following is a list of the most frequently made comments of the Electoral College.

Pro's:

- Requires a distribution of popular support to be elected president- the winning candidate must demonstrate both a sufficient popular support to govern as well as a sufficient distribution of that support to govern
- Strengthens the status of minority groups- the votes of small minorities within a state may make the difference between winning all of a state's electoral votes or none of them.
- Enhances the political stability of the nation by promoting a two-party system- protects that presidency from impassioned but transitory third party movements and forces the major parties to absorb the interests of minorities.
- Maintains the federal system of government and representation

Con's:

- There is a possibility of electing a minority president- one way for this to happen would be if the country was so deeply divided politically that three or more presidential candidates split the vote and no one obtained a necessary majority
- There is a risk of having "faithless" Electors- Electors who won't be loyal to their party or candidate
- The Electoral College may depress voter turnout- because each state is only entitled to so many electoral votes regardless of voter turnout, there is no incentive for states to encourage voter participation
- Does not accurately reflect the national popular will because it does not elect a candidate by a direct popular vote

**How many electoral votes does each state have?
(Updated to reflect the 2010 census)**

AL: 9	GA: 16	MD: 10	NJ: 14	SC: 9
AK: 3	HI: 4	MA: 11	NM: 5	SD: 3
AZ: 11	ID: 4	MI: 16	NY: 29	TN: 11
AR: 6	IL: 20	MN: 10	NC: 15	TX: 38
CA: 55	IN: 11	MS: 6	ND: 3	UT: 6
CO: 9	IA: 6	MO: 10	OH: 18	VT: 3
CT: 7	KS: 6	MT: 3	OK: 7	VA: 13
DE: 3	KY: 8	NE: 5	OR: 7	WA: 12
DC: 3	LA: 8	NV: 6	PA: 20	WV: 5
FL: 29	ME: 4	NH: 4	RI: 4	WI: 10
				WY: 3

TOTAL: 538

The Electoral College Today

- Each state is allocated a number of Electors equal to the number of its U.S. Representatives plus its two senators.
- The political parties of each state submit a list of individuals pledged to their candidates for president that is equal in number to the number of electoral votes for the state to the State's chief election official. Each party determines its own way of choosing its electors.
- Members of the Congress or employees of the Federal government are prohibited from serving as Electors.
- After the parties hold their caucuses and the states hold their primaries, the major parties nominate their candidate for the Office of President. The names are then submitted to the state's chief election official (in CA, the Secretary of State) as they will appear on the general election ballot.
- On the Tuesday following the first Monday of the month of November, registered voters in each state cast their ballots for the Office of President and Vice President.
- Whichever presidential candidate gets the most popular votes in a State wins all of the Electors (known as "*winner takes all*") for that state except for the states of Maine and Nebraska which award electoral votes proportionately.
- On the Monday following the second Wednesday of December, each state's electors meet in their respective state and cast their electoral votes (one for President and one for Vice President).
- Each Elector must cast at least one of their two votes (see above) for a person outside of their state in order to prevent the election of a president and vice president from the same state (however, the presidential and vice presidential candidates choose each other as running-mates and are on the same ticket in the popular vote).
- The electoral votes are sealed and sent to the President of the U.S. Senate and are read aloud to both Houses of Congress on January 6.
- The candidate with the most electoral votes, provided there is an absolute majority (over one half of the total vote) is declared president.
- If no one candidate receives an absolute majority of electoral votes the U.S. House of Representatives selects the President from the top three vote-getters.
- On January 20, at noon, the elected president and vice president are sworn into office.