

Electoral College

Americans do not elect their president directly. The names of the presidential candidates are on the ballot. But when Americans vote for a candidate, they are really voting for an elector.

An elector is a delegate who is pledged to a candidate. The electors actually pick the president. As a group, the electors are known as the electoral college. Each state has as many electors as it has members in the U.S. Congress. There is one elector for each of the 435 members of the House of Representatives. And there is one for each of the 100 senators. The electoral college thus has 535 electors from the states. Another 3 electors represent the District of Columbia, for a total of 538. To win, a candidate needs a majority of the electoral votes. That is half of the total plus one, or 270.

How the Electoral College Works

Each political party chooses a slate (list) of electors in each state. These electors pledge to support the party's nominees for president and vice president. In some states, electors are legally required to vote for their candidate.

In many states the names of electors do not even appear on the ballot. Voters see only the candidates' names. On Election Day, in November, voters cast their ballots for the candidates. This is the popular vote. Nevertheless, the votes actually go to the electors pledged to the candidates.

The winner of a state's popular vote usually wins all that state's electoral votes. In Maine and Nebraska, the electoral votes can be split. They may be divided based on the candidates' share of the popular vote.

In most presidential elections, the winner is known soon after polls close. But the results are not official for weeks. The winning electors meet in their state capitals on the Monday after the second Wednesday in December. There they vote for president and vice president. They send the sealed results to Washington, D.C. On January 6, the results are read in Congress and become official. Then, on January 20, the president is sworn in.

Problems of the Electoral System

Many people dislike the electoral college system. They think it is wrong for the winner in a state to get all the electoral votes. This allows a candidate to lose the popular vote nationwide but still win the presidency. All that is needed is to win several large states by a small margin. John Quincy Adams was elected this way in 1828. So were Rutherford B. Hayes (1876) and Benjamin Harrison (1888). And so was George W. Bush (2000).

Critics also say that the winner-take-all system affects the campaign process. Candidates know that even a narrow win will get all of a state's electoral votes. They focus on states where the vote

is likely to be close. They pay little attention to "safe" states that seem sure to vote for one candidate. As a result, fewer voters may vote in those states.

Over the years, people have proposed changes to the system. One proposal is to replace the electoral college with a direct popular vote. This would require an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. A second is to divide each state's electoral vote based on its popular vote. A third is to change the way electors are chosen. Voters would choose individual electors in each congressional district. They would choose two electors at large in each state.

The present system gives greater weight to small states. (It was intended to do so.) These states would need to approve any constitutional change. So it seems unlikely that the electoral college will be abolished.

History

The writers of the Constitution set up the electoral college. They did not want citizens to elect the president directly. They were afraid that ordinary citizens would not choose wisely. People would simply back candidates they knew from their own state.

Originally the electors voted for presidential candidates only. The candidate with the most electoral votes became president. The one with the second most votes became vice president. The 12th Amendment to the Constitution (approved in 1804) changed that. Electors now vote for one person for president. They cast a second vote for vice president.

The writers of the Constitution thought that electors should vote as they pleased. That changed as political parties grew stronger. The parties nominated candidates for president and vice president. Then they picked electors who were pledged to vote for their party's choice.

Electors seldom go back on their pledges. But, rarely, an elector withholds or changes his or her vote. This happened in 2000. An elector from Washington, D.C., did not vote. The "faithless elector" was protesting the District's lack of representation in Congress.

"Electoral College." Scholastic Grolier Online, go.scholastic.com/content/schgo/D/article/100/016/10001680.html. Accessed 23 Oct. 2017.

“The Electoral College: Keep It or Leave It?” from *Odyssey*

MANY VOTERS HAVE STRONG OPINIONS about whether we should keep the Electoral College or not. Here are just a few of the arguments made on both sides of the issue:

PROS +

- + The Electoral College Fairly Balances Voting Power -- States with large urban populations have more voters than smaller states. Thus, candidates often cater to those states during their campaigns. The Electoral College makes sure that states with smaller populations still have a say in the election.
- + The Electoral College Promotes Federalism -- The Electoral College recognizes the importance of individual states by maintaining a formal federal structure of government, while preserving political power within the states.

CONS -

- The Electoral College Is Outdated -- Voters do not need electors to pick their president for them. With modern technology improving communications and travel, candidates can organize nationwide campaigns. As a result, voters can easily learn about issues and make their own informed choices.
- The Winner-Take-All System Seems Unfair -- Almost all states award all their electoral votes to whoever wins the popular vote. So, the rest of the votes in those states become meaningless.

The Electoral college: Keep It or Leave It? *Odyssey*. Oct2012, Vol. 21 Issue 8, p14-14. 1p. Abstract: The article presents the advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College in the U.S. Reading Level (Lexile): 1000. (AN: 82180923)