

How We Elect a President: What Is the Electoral College?

When you vote for the president of the United States of America you are in fact voting for somebody to cast your vote in your place. That person is called an “elector” and even though you voted for the next president on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, 538 electors from across America will make the vote that counts on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December. If all of this seems confusing maybe the following will help to make it more understandable.

The process of choosing an elector to vote for the president instead of you choosing the next president through your own vote is part of a system called “The Electoral College.” The Electoral College was established in Article II of the United States Constitution. In this Article it explains that every state will get one vote for president for every representative that they send to the United States Congress. For example, Hawaii sends two senators and two representatives to Congress. Therefore, because they have four congressmen they get to choose four electors to vote for president. These electors pledge to vote the way that the people in their state voted. For example, if most of the people in Hawaii voted for the Republican Party candidate then all of the electors have promised to vote for the Republican Party candidate when they vote for the president in December. Nearly every state has this “Winner-Take-All” system (with the exceptions of Maine and Nebraska). If a presidential candidate wins by even one vote in California they get all 55 of California’s electoral votes. Currently, it takes 270 of the possible 538 electoral votes to win the election.

This system may seem strange since most of the elections that people are familiar with are “popular” elections. A popular election is an election in which the candidate who gets the most people to vote for him or her wins the race. However, because of the Electoral College system this is not always the case. In fact, several times in our country’s history the person who won the election had fewer popular votes than the person who lost the election. The first test of the Electoral College system was the election of 1800 when both Thomas Jefferson and his running mate, Aaron Burr, received 73 electoral votes, which according to Article II of the Constitution, left the decision up to the House of Representatives. The result of the 1800 election was the Twelfth Amendment, which was written to prevent that problem by stating that electors must cast a vote for president *and* vice president. In the presidential election of 1824 John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and two other candidates split the electoral votes

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so that none of the four had a majority. Again, the House of Representatives was required to choose the winner, who turned out to be John Quincy Adams even though Andrew Jackson had finished the election with a lead in both popular and electoral votes. The 1876 election was decided by a congressional commission that awarded the election to Rutherford B. Hayes by one electoral vote over Samuel Tilden despite the fact that Tilden had obviously won the popular vote. Again in 1888, Benjamin Harrison lost the popular vote to Grover Cleveland, but carried the Electoral College. Most recently, in 2000, President George W. Bush had 500,000 fewer popular votes than his opponent Al Gore. Yet Mr. Bush was declared the new president because he had 271 electoral votes to Mr. Gore's 266.

Despite its problems, there are several reasons that prompted the founders of our country to create the Electoral College. First, it gave states the power to help choose the president. The framers of the Constitution reasoned that this is a power that the states would have lost in a popular election for president. With the Electoral College, small population states could affect the outcome of an election. For example, in 2012 more than 13,000,000 people of voting age live in New York and that state gets 29 electoral votes for president. Compare that to ten of the smallest states by population in America; with only 6,000,000 voters combined, they get 32 electoral votes for president. So although these states have less than half the eligible voters New York has, they get more electoral votes than does the higher population state. Small states saw the Electoral College as a way to have a say about who would be president without being dominated by the big states. Second, transportation and technology at the time of the writing of the Constitution made it nearly impossible to hold a popular election for president. It would have taken months to gather all of the votes from across the country, count them, and send the results to the nation's capital because the fastest form of communication was a letter carried by a rider on a horse. Of course now technology has made this issue obsolete. In fact, many people are calling for an end to the Electoral College. They think that a popular vote for president would encourage more people to vote. However, others think that the Electoral College has done a very good job of electing our nation's leader and should be kept as it is now and has been in the past.