

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 first Tuesday 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 this will help to make it more understandable.

This process of choosing an elector to vote for the president instead of you getting to choose the next president personally 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 Independent Party candidate then all of the electors have promised to vote for the Independent party candidate when they vote for the president in December. Nearly every state has this “Winner-Take-All” system. If a presidential candidate wins by even one vote in California they get all 55 of California’s electoral votes. It now takes 270 of the possible 538 electoral votes to win the election.

This system may seem strange since most elections 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 election. However, because of the Electoral College system this is not always the case. In fact, four times in our country’s history the president who won the election had fewer popular votes than the person who lost the election. Most recently in 2000 President George W. Bush had more than 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. Then why was the Electoral College established in the first place if someone can win an election without getting the most popular votes?

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. This is a power that they would have lost in a popular election for president. With the Electoral

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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; with only 6,000,000 voters combined, they get 32 electoral votes for president. So although these states together have less than half the population that could vote for president they get three more electoral votes than New York. 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 Washington DC 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.