

Does My Vote Count? Understanding the Electoral College

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No, the electoral college is not the worst team in the ACC. It's the group of people who actually elect the president of the United States. How the electoral college works is one of the more complicated parts of the American electoral process — or can be, at least, when things don't go smoothly. This guide will explain how the electoral college works; discuss the origins and development of the electoral college as some controversial elections; and examine how much your vote actually "weighs" in an election.

I. How the electoral college works

The people of the United States elect a president every four years, but not directly. Here's how it works.

1. In November of a presidential election year, each state holds an election for president in which all eligible citizens may vote. Citizens vote for a "ticket" of candidates that includes a candidate for president and a candidate for vice president.
2. The outcome of the vote in each state determines a slate of *electors* who then, in turn, make the actual choice of president and vice president. Each state has as many electors as it has senators and members of the House of Representatives, for a total of 538. (The District of Columbia gets three electors even though it has no representation in Congress.)
3. In December, the electors meet in their respective state capitols to cast their ballots for president and vice president. States may or may not require their electors to vote with the popular majority, and they may or may not give all of their electors to the winner of the statewide popular vote.
4. These ballots are opened, counted, and certified by a joint session of Congress in January.

If no candidate wins a majority of the electoral votes or if the top two candidates are tied, the House of Representatives selects a president from among the five candidates with the most votes. Each state's delegation has a single vote. The Senate selects a vice president by the same process. (This hasn't happened since 1876, but it almost happened in 2000.)

What does this mean in practice? It means, as everyone learned or was reminded in 2000, that the candidate who receives the most votes nationwide does not necessarily become president. There is no national election for president, only separate state elections. For a candidate to become president, he or she must win enough state elections to garner a majority of electoral votes. Presidential campaigns, therefore, focus on winning states, not on winning a national majority.

It also means that — at least in theory — electors can thwart the popular will and vote for a candidate not supported by the voters of their state. In practice, however, electors are pledged to cast their votes in accordance with the popular vote, and "faithless electors" who go against the popular vote are extremely rare. Had there been a faithless elector in 2000, however, Al Gore might have become president! (See the historical perspective below for more about this.)

II. Why not a popular vote?

When we're debating whether some aspect of the Constitution makes sense, it's useful sometimes to think of the Constitution as an experiment — as a work in progress. Some of its original framers referred to it that way, as a Great Experiment in democracy. In 1787, no republic like the United States existed anywhere in the world. The "founding fathers" were making things up as they went along, looking at history, philosophy, and what they did and didn't like about existing governments in Europe and America. And not all of them agreed — in fact, many of them disagreed completely, even on important issues such as how much power the people should have.

The electoral college was a compromise on two important issues. The first was how much power the people should have, and the second was *how much power small and large states should have*.

Power to the people?

In 1787, it wasn't at all clear whether democracy would work. In fact "democracy" was a bit of a dirty word in some people's minds: it raised fears of mob rule, as in fact had happened in a few places during and after the Revolution. The United States was intended as a *republic*, in which the people would govern themselves only through elected representatives.

Because the role of the president was so important, most of the framers thought that the people couldn't be trusted to elect the president directly. Instead, they should elect *electors*, who would convene as a "college of electors" to consider the available candidates and pick the best man for the job.

Power to the states!

Before the Revolution, the British colonists didn't have much consciousness of being *Americans*. They may have identified themselves instead with the British Empire and with their own colonies. Even after the Revolution, loyalty to one's state often still came first. The Constitution was intended to unite the states under a single national government — but not entirely. Small states like New Jersey feared that if they formed a union with the other twelve states, they'd be swallowed up under the influence of more populous states like Virginia and New York. Virginia and New York, of course, thought that they should have the most influence. That's why the states have equal representation in the Senate but representation by population in the House of Representatives: it's a compromise that allowed large states to get their due but still allowed small states to keep their identities and fight for their interests.

When it came to voting for president, the framers of the Constitution decided that the states should do the voting, not the people. Remember, there was no consciousness of the United States as a single nation; it was, literally, a union of separate states. So voting for president was to take place by state, so that each state could have its say. The compromise between big and small states was extended to the Electoral College, so that each state has as many electors as it has senators and members of the House of Representatives combined. Big states still have the most influence, but small states aren't completely lost in the national vote.

A work in progress

It was up to the states to decide how they ought to vote for their electors — and to a great extent still is, in fact. There is no national election for president, but rather fifty-one separate elections, one in each state and one in the District of Columbia. In the beginning, state legislatures voted for electors, who in turn voted for the president and vice president. Electors were free to vote for the candidate of their choice, but over time they were increasingly elected because they supported a particular candidate. By 1832, every state but South Carolina held direct elections for president, and electors were effectively bound to vote for a particular candidate. (South Carolina held out until 1864.)

Today, of course, every state allows citizens to vote directly for electors — as represented on the ballot by the candidates with which they are associated — but the electors are still not legally bound to vote for any particular candidate. An elector could, in theory, throw his or her vote to any candidate! Since each candidate has his or her own slate of electors, however, and since the electors are chosen not only for their loyalty but because they take their responsibility seriously, this almost never happens. (It last happened in 1988, when it had no impact on the outcome of the election.) Some states have laws requiring electors to cast their votes according to the popular vote.

In addition, a state doesn't have to throw all of its electors behind the candidate that receives the most popular votes in that state. Two states, Maine and Nebraska, assign one elector to the winner of each Congressional district and the remaining two electors to the candidate with the most votes statewide. After the 2000 election, there was some debate about whether that system would be more fair than the winner-take-all system used by the other 48 states and the District of Columbia.

The original Constitution also didn't take into account the development of political parties. Electors were to vote for two candidates for president. The man with the highest number of votes that was a majority became president, and the man with the second highest number of votes became vice president. In 1800, however, the Democratic-Republican Party nominated Thomas Jefferson for president and Aaron Burr for vice president, and because there was no separate voting for the two offices, the two men tied in the Electoral College. The House of Representatives had to decide the issue. Afterwards, the 12th Amendment to the Constitution was passed, changing the system to the one described in [part I](#), above.

III. The people vs. the electors (more historical perspectives)

As everyone learned or was reminded of in the election of 2000, the Constitution doesn't say that the candidate with the most popular support has any claim on the Presidency. It says that the candidate with the most electoral votes will become president. So George W. Bush won the election fair and square, by the rules set forth in the Constitution. Actually, the last president to be elected by a majority of the voters was George H. W. Bush in 1988. In 1992 and 1996, Bill Clinton won with a plurality — more than any other candidate, but less than half of the total vote — because there were three major candidates. Because the third candidate, H. Ross Perot, failed to win a majority anywhere, he didn't win

any electoral votes, and Clinton was able to win a majority of the electoral votes without winning a majority of the popular vote.

George W. Bush wasn't the first candidate to become president despite losing the popular vote, either. It also happened in 1824, 1876, and 1888, and each time, a debate ensued about whether the outcome was fair or right.

- In 1824, Andrew Jackson won the most popular votes (at least in states where popular elections were held), but no candidate won a majority of the electoral votes. The House of Representatives selected John Quincy Adams as president. (Jackson won the election four years later.)
- In 1876, Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden narrowly won the popular vote over Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes, but twenty contested electoral votes prevented either man from winning a majority of electors. In a compromise that ended the federal occupation of the South that had begun after the Civil War, Congress certified all twenty contested votes as having been cast for Hayes.
- In 1888, Republican Benjamin Harrison easily won a majority of the electoral vote despite losing the popular vote to his opponent, Democrat Grover Cleveland. Cleveland's support was largely regional: he won large majorities in several southern states, which raised his popular vote totals but won him few electoral votes. Harrison won narrow majorities in most other states, however, and won the electoral vote 233 to 168.
- And in 2000, Democrat Al Gore won a narrow plurality of the popular vote but lost the electoral vote to Republican George W. Bush, 271 to 266. The vote was so close that Gore, thinking he had lost, conceded, then retracted his concession as more votes were counted. Because the vote in Florida, a decisive state, was so close, multiple recounts were held, and the Supreme Court had to settle a lawsuit over whether recounts should continue.

IV. Does my vote count?

Yes, your vote counts. Some people have complained since 2000 that if the winner of the popular vote doesn't become president, their vote doesn't really count, so why vote at all? But every vote does count; it just counts in a more complicated way. When you vote for president, remember that you're voting in a state election, not a national election. So your vote counts just as much as anyone else's in your state — but it may count more or less than that of someone living in another state!

What's a vote worth?

Why does the actual weight of your vote vary by state? Remember that every state gets a number of electors that is the total of all of its representatives in Congress, both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The House of Representatives is divided approximately by population — big states have the most representatives, small states have the fewest — but every state has exactly two senators, regardless of size. That means that while big states have more electors than small states, they don't have as many more as they would based on population alone.

Consider three states: California (the state with the biggest population), North Carolina (a medium-sized state), and Alaska (with one of the smallest populations). This table shows their population and number of electoral votes in 2010. The fourth column shows the number of residents per elector (population divided by electoral votes), and the last column shows the weight of an individual vote in the given state — that is, how the number of residents per elector compares to the national average.

	Population	Electoral votes	Residents per elector	Weight of vote
California	37,253,956	55	677,344	0.84
North Carolina	9,535,483	15	635,698	0.90
Alaska	710,231	3	236,743	2.42
United States	308,745,538	538	573,876	1.00

As you can see, Alaska, a very small state, has far fewer residents per electoral vote than the national average, so individual votes cast in Alaska count more than the national average — twice as much, in fact! A voter in California has a little less influence than the average American, about 84% as much. A voter in North Carolina has about 90% the influence of the average American. (You can calculate *weight of vote* in a given state by dividing the national average of residents per elector by that state's residents per elector. Since we're comparing each state to the national average, the weight of vote for the entire United States is exactly 1.)

Please Read the article titled, “Does My Vote Count?” and answer the following questions.

Part I – How the electoral college works

Read the section and answer the following questions.

1. What are the **THREE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES** in the section? Copy them word for word below... (if the sentence you picked runs on, then you can use dots to sum up your idea as long as the main point is included. For example...)

a.

b.

c.

2. After reading Part I, please summarize in your own words the important ideas of the section. Your summary should be between 30-50 words.

Part II– Why not a popular vote?

Read the section and answer the following questions.

3. What are the **TWO MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES** in the section? Copy them word for word below.

a.

b.

4. After reading Part II, please summarize in your own words the important ideas of the section. Your summary should be between 35-55 words.

Part III– The people vs. the electors (more historical perspectives)?

Read the section and answer the following questions.

5. What are the TWO MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES in the section? Copy them word for word below.

a.

b.

6. After reading Part II, please summarize in your own words the important ideas of the section. Your summary should be between 35-55 words.

Part IV– Does my Vote Count?

Read the section and answer the following questions.

7. What are the TWO MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCES in the section? Copy them word for word below.

a.

b.

8. After reading Part IV, please summarize in your own words the important ideas of the section. Your summary should be between 35-55 words.

What is the Electoral College???

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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.

Please read the article titled, “What is the Electoral College?” and answer the following questions.

1. How do they decide how many electors each state gets?

2. What are the states that have the most electors? List them below
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
3. What are the states that have the least number of electors? List them below
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
4. After reading the Pros and Cons, please list an idea that you think makes the most sense for EACH category and WHY. You can summarize the Pro/Con and do not have to copy every word, but please elaborate on why it makes the most sense.
 - a. PRO that makes the most sense -

Why?

- b. CON that makes the most sense -

Why?

5. Using the documents from this week, do you think that the Electoral College should be abandoned in favor of popular vote? Explain and cite one piece of evidence from the readings. (Please underline evidence)