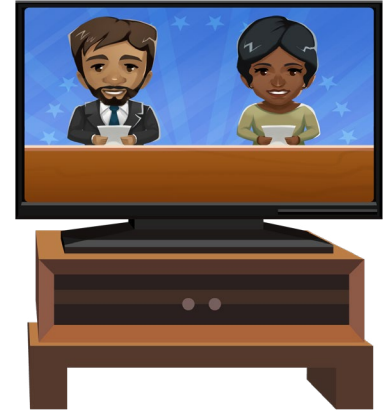


Total Isn't Electoral

It's election night. You're anxiously watching the results pour in. Which candidate for president will have the most votes and win the election? Wait a minute! You're noticing that the news anchors aren't reporting the results in terms of total votes. They're counting "electoral votes" instead. You begin to see that all that matters is if someone "wins a state", not if they're winning the most votes overall. You keep hearing about "electoral votes". This whole thing is really confusing! What are electoral votes, and what does this have to do with who wins the presidency?



What is the Electoral College?

GET YOUR DATES STRAIGHT!

Citizens vote for president in November, but electors meet on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December to cast their votes. The President of the Senate counts the votes on January 6 (or the day after if the 6th falls on a Sunday).



Electoral votes are votes electors from each state in the Electoral College cast. The **Electoral College** is the process the Founding Fathers established to choose the president. The process consists of selecting or determining electors (the people who vote) from each state, having electors meet in their respective states to vote for president and vice president, and then counting the electoral votes (which is a job Congress does) to see who wins. Even though citizens vote for the president in November in what is called the **popular vote**—the number of votes a candidate receives overall—it's really the **electoral vote**—the votes received by state through the Electoral College—that matters in the vote for president.

How Many Votes Does Each State Get?

There are 538 total electoral votes. To win the presidential election, a candidate must receive at least 270 of

them. The number of electoral votes that each state has is the sum of its number of senators (two) and its number of representatives (determined by the state's population) in Congress. In addition, the 23rd Amendment gives Washington, D.C. three electoral votes.

Because electoral votes are based on representation in Congress, the number of electoral votes each state has is different. States with small populations who have just one representative in the House of Representatives have the minimum number of votes—three. But states with larger populations have many electoral votes. California has 55!

The number of electoral votes a state has doesn't change very often, but it isn't necessarily set in stone either. Every ten years, the U.S. conducts a census count of the population. Significant increases or decreases in population could lead to a state gaining or losing electors based on how the distribution of representatives in Congress changes.

HOW MANY VOTES DOES MY STATE HAVE?

Do the math! Find out how many representatives your state has in the House and then add two senators to that number.

My State: _____

_____ Representatives
+ 2 Senators

_____ = _____ Electoral Votes

Why the Electoral College?

When the Founders decided to write the Constitution, “electing” an executive was relatively new and revolutionary. All their executives up until this point had been kings and queens born into the position. And on top of that, some of the Founders didn’t trust that everyday citizens were informed and experienced enough to pick someone for a job as important as president. They feared factions, or groups of citizens united by a shared interest, that might band together without the best interest of the country in mind. The Founders considered having Congress select the president. But eventually, they landed on a compromise. Instead of Congress deciding or the people electing the president directly, the Electoral College was formed.



Because electoral votes followed congressional representation, they were assigned to states according to an earlier compromise. The **Three-Fifths Compromise** included three-fifths of a state’s enslaved population to determine a state’s representation in Congress and taxes. Even though enslaved Africans weren’t allowed to vote in an election, they were added to states’ total population counts for determining electoral votes. The Three-Fifths Compromise ensured that slaveholding states would ratify the Constitution. It also gave them a boost in electors and by default protected slavery in the South.

How Do Electors Vote?

HOW RARE IS IT?

Eight faithless electors were recorded from 1900–2012. That’s a pretty small number. But in the 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, seven electors disregarded their state’s popular vote when casting their ballots.



Electors usually cast their votes to represent who won the popular vote in their state. There’s no national law or constitutional clause requiring an elector to vote according to their state’s popular vote, but some state laws and political party procedures do require it. It’s very rare for an elector to ignore his or her state’s popular vote when casting their ballot, but in the event that they do, that person is known as a **faithless elector**. In the past, 99% of electors have voted for the candidate winning the majority of their state’s popular vote.

But wait, there’s more! Except for Maine and Nebraska, 48 states and Washington, D.C. use a **“winner-take-all” system** when it comes to electoral votes. This means having the electors cast all electoral votes for whoever wins the popular vote in that state. Under this system, even if a candidate wins by a very slim margin (like just 32 votes), they get all of the electoral votes for that state. Instead, Maine and Nebraska have a **congressional district system** for splitting its electoral votes according to which candidate wins the popular vote in each of its congressional districts. Both states also award two electoral votes to whichever candidate wins the state’s popular vote overall.

In the event of an electoral tie?

It rarely happens, but what if there’s a tie for president or if neither candidate receives 270 electoral votes? When this happens, the House of Representatives votes to decide who the president will be. Instead of each House member having a vote, each state casts a single vote instead. The candidate with the most votes—at least 26—wins the presidency. States can only vote for one of the top three candidates. Senators decide the vice president. They choose from the top two candidates. Each Senator gets a vote. The candidate with the majority—at least 51—wins.



In 2016, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton received 2.9 million more national votes than fellow candidate Donald Trump. But...



What About the National Popular Vote?

Electoral College votes won't always tell you who won the popular vote nationwide. If you're wondering what that means or why it might be confusing, here's why: A candidate who the majority of Americans did not vote for can win the presidency. *How?* By winning enough states—adding up to at least 270 electoral votes. It doesn't really matter if one candidate is more "popular" among Americans overall. What matters is if enough Americans in the right combination of states

vote for that candidate. Five times, the presidency has been awarded to a candidate who did not win the national popular vote (1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016). In the end, it's electoral votes and not total votes that matter.

...Donald Trump won 30 states—a total of 306 electoral votes—and claimed the presidency.

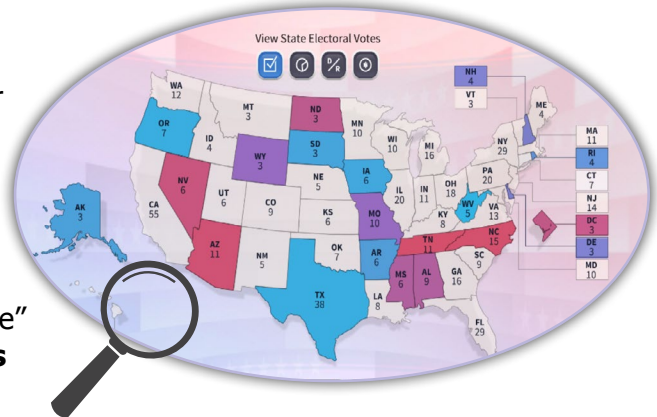


What About My Vote?

Because most states have a winner-take-all system for awarding electoral votes, sometimes voters can feel frustrated with the outcome of elections. If your candidate didn't win the majority of votes in your state, you might feel like your vote didn't matter, but it's important to remember that elections can be very close and have been decided by very slim margins. In the 2016 election, the state of New Hampshire was decided by just 2,000 votes! If just a few voters in each community had stayed home, the state's outcome might have been different.

Coloring the Campaign

Some states tend to more consistently vote with one party or the other, and because electoral votes matter most that can determine how a candidate chooses to campaign. If a state tends to vote Republican, it is considered a "red" state. A "blue" state is one that tends to vote for the Democratic party. Some states are also known for having pretty close outcomes and may go "red" or "blue". Those states are called "purple" (because red and blue make purple) or **swing states** (because they could be won by either party).



Ultimately, it's up to the candidate and their campaign team to decide which states to target and how. But working to win enough electoral votes definitely influences a candidate's strategy with voters. On one hand, a candidate could campaign in a variety of states; on the other, they could choose to only target those states with the largest populations and most electoral votes. Swing states may get a lot of attention, and states that are considered safe may get more than others or none at all.

Should the System Change?

Because the nationwide popular vote doesn't always mirror the outcome of the Electoral College, some people would like to see the system change. There have been efforts in states to move towards changing rules around the Electoral College and even some discussions about amending the Constitution to have the popular vote determine who wins the presidency. Now that you know how the system works, *what do you think should happen?*