

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The Electoral College is the body of representatives which formally elects the President and Vice President of the United States.

Rather than directly voting for the President and Vice President, U.S. citizens cast votes for electoral college representatives, known as electors. While electors are theoretically free to vote for the candidate of their choice, in practice they pledge to vote for specific candidates. Thus, voters indirectly vote for Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates by voting for correspondingly pledged electors. Because all of the electors from a state will generally vote for the Presidential candidate that receives the most votes in that state, U.S. Presidential campaigns concentrate on winning the popular vote in a combination of states that choose a majority of the electors, rather than campaigning to win the most votes nationally.

Currently, the Electoral College is composed of 538 electors. Each state has a number of electors equal to the number of its Senators and Representatives in the United States Congress. Additionally, the District of Columbia is given a number of electors equal to the number held by the smallest states. U.S. territories are not represented in the Electoral College.

Each elector casts two votes: one for President and one for Vice President. In order to be elected, a candidate must have a majority (currently 270) of the Electoral Votes. Should no candidate for President win a majority of the electoral votes, the choice is given to the House of Representatives. Should no candidate for Vice President possess a majority of the electoral votes, the choice is given to the Senate.

The Constitution allows each state legislature to designate a method of choosing electors. Although not originally the case in a majority of states, at present, 48 states and the District of Columbia have adopted a winner-takes-all popular vote rule— voters choose between statewide slates of electors pledged to vote for a specific Presidential and Vice Presidential candidate. The candidate that wins the most votes in the state wins the support of all of that state's electors. Two other states, Maine and Nebraska, use a tiered system where a single elector is chosen within each Congressional district and two electors are chosen by statewide popular vote. Because the vast majority of electors are chosen by a statewide vote, U.S. Presidential elections are effectively an amalgamation of 51 separate and simultaneous first past the post elections, rather than a single national election.

Candidates with less than a plurality of the nationwide popular vote can win a Presidential election. This has happened on several occasions in American history. Critics argue the Electoral College is inherently undemocratic and gives certain swing states disproportionate clout in selecting the President and Vice President. Adherents argue that the Electoral College is an important and distinguishing feature of the federal system, and protects the rights of smaller states. Numerous constitutional amendments have been submitted seeking a replacement of the Electoral College with a direct popular vote. However, due to the difficulty of amending the Constitution, no submission has ever successfully passed both Houses of Congress.