

The Electoral College

What is the Electoral College?

Originally conceived as a hedge against "popular passion", the founders of the Constitution, in 1787, provided that the president be chosen indirectly through the "electoral college" rather than directly by the voters.

Under the Constitution each state chooses "electors" for the president and the vice president of the United States. Presidential elections are won by electoral votes, not popular votes. The number of electors is always the same as the combined number of U.S. Senators and Representatives allotted to each state. With one hundred senators and 435 representatives in the House plus three electors from the District of Columbia, provided by the Twenty-third Amendment, the total electoral college vote is 538. The make up and operation of the electoral college are tightly defined by the Constitution but the method of choosing electors is left to the states.

How are the Electors Chosen?

Electors are chosen by popular vote in every state. When voters vote for the President, they are actually voting for the electors pledged to their presidential candidate. Electors are named by the state party organizations. These political parties arrange slates of electors, all pledged to support the candidate nominated by the party.

Election of President and Vice-President

The Twelfth Amendment, in 1804, required electors to cast two separate ballots, one for the president and the other for vice-president. This is the only constitutional change that has been made in the electoral college, other than to add three electoral votes for the District of Columbia in 1961.

Presidential and vice-presidential candidates of a party run as a team. In some states, candidates appear on the ballot; in other states, both candidates and electors are identified. The victor in each state is determined by counting the votes for each slate of electors; the slate receiving the most votes (the plurality, not necessarily the majority of the votes cast) is declared the winner.

In Case of No Majority

If no presidential candidate receives an absolute majority of the electoral votes, the House of Representatives picks the winner from the top three candidates, with each state delegation casting only one vote, regardless of its size. Only two U.S. elections have been decided this way (1800 and 1824).

If no vice-presidential candidate receives an absolute majority, the Senate picks the winner from the top two candidates. Each senator has one vote. The Senate has not made the choice since 1836.

Winner-Take-All Method

To be elected to the presidency, a candidate must receive an absolute majority (270) of the electoral votes. A candidate that wins most of the popular votes (the plurality vote winner) in a particular state, gets all of the electoral votes in that state, and the loser gets none. Thus a candidate who fails to carry a particular state, even if the loss is by a slim margin of popular votes, receives not a single electoral vote in that state. It is the electoral vote tally that determines the winner of the election in November.

Return to
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Fact Sheet

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