

The Electoral College

Every four years, the American voters cast their ballots for president. This is known as the popular vote. When the voters mark their ballots for the candidate of their choice, they are also selecting a group of people called electors. These electors are pledged to that candidate. It is the electors who pick the next president. This is known as the electoral vote. This process is set forth in Article 2, Section 1, Clause 2 and Clause 3 of the United States Constitution which states,

“Clause 2: Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be appointed an Elector.

Clause 3: The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves. And they shall make a List of all the Persons voted for, and of the Number of Votes for each; which List they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the Seat of the Government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall, in the Presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the Certificates, and the Votes shall then be counted. The Person having the greatest Number of Votes shall be the President...”

The writers of the Constitution chose this method for several reasons. One is they feared the direct election of the president by the people as there was a general distrust of the people being able to select a person best qualified for the job. Second, there were no structures in place, like political parties, which would limit the number of candidates from whom voters had to choose. And lastly, means of travel and communication were very slow at the time, so candidates would have a difficult time getting their message to all the voters which could result in the election of a regionally popular candidate who did not represent the views of the entire nation.

On election day, the candidate who wins the popular vote for a state wins the electoral votes for that state. The number of electoral votes a state has is equal to the number of congressmen it has. For example, Arizona has 11 congressmen, so it has 11 electoral votes. The electors are chosen by the state political parties they are members of and are pledged to vote for that party's candidate if he/she wins the popular vote. While we know the final results of the popular vote in November, the electors do not meet until the first Monday after the

second Wednesday in December. On that day, they meet in their state capitals and cast their votes. Their votes are sealed and sent to Congress in Washington, D.C. At a joint session of Congress, the votes are read, tallied, and a winner officially declared. To win, a candidate must have a majority (50% plus 1) of the electoral votes. If this does not occur, then the 12th Amendment states the House of Representatives will elect the president and the Senate will elect the vice-president. This happened in the Election of 1824. No candidate received a majority of the electoral votes, so the House of Representatives cast votes on who should be the next president. Although Andrew Jackson had won the popular vote, the House selected John Quincy Adams as president.

The Electoral College has created an interesting phenomena where candidates target certain states to win. These are states with a high number of electoral votes because they have a large number of congressmen. By just winning those states, a candidate can become president without winning the popular vote. What they have gotten is the majority of electoral votes. This has happened three times. The first was in 1876. Samuel Tilden won the popular vote, but Rutherford B. Hayes won the electoral vote by one vote and became president. In 1888, Grover Cleveland won the popular vote while Benjamin Harrison won the electoral. The 2000 Presidential Election was a hotly contested one. George W. Bush won the electoral vote and Al Gore won the popular vote. However, there was a question as to the accuracy of the vote in Florida. For Gore, winning Florida would give him the needed electoral votes to win. The Florida Secretary of State and the Florida Supreme Court both issued conflicting decisions on deadlines for a recount. The U.S. Supreme Court weighed in on the matter and declared a recount unconstitutional. The original results stood, and Bush became president. Critics of the electoral college system say these elections are proof the system needs to be reformed or abolished. Supporters point out these contested elections are rare, and the system has worked well for over 200 years. For now, this is how a president is elected. This method is known as indirect election.