

How Do We Elect the President? Understanding the Electoral College

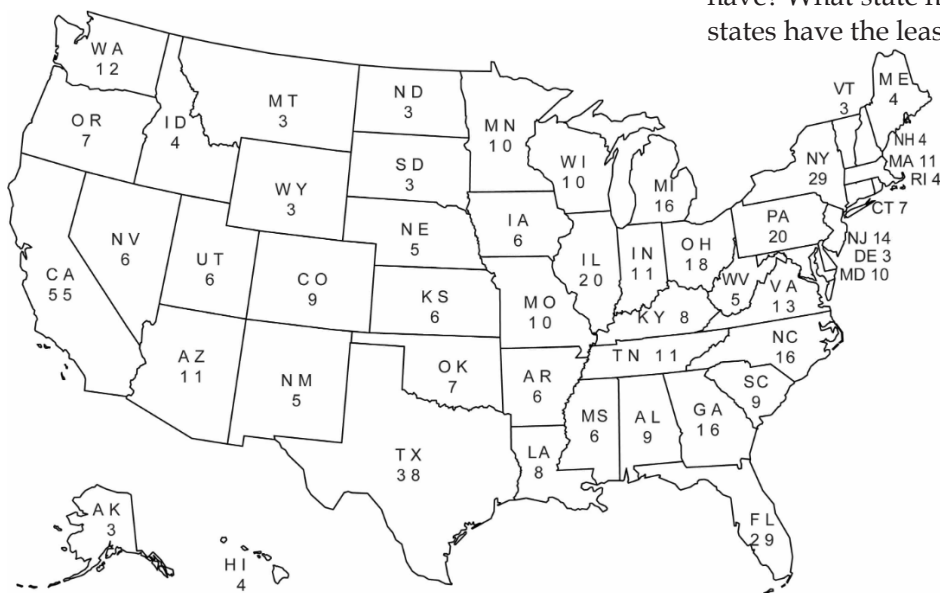
Cara Anaam

In 2000, Al Gore got half a million more votes than George Bush. But George Bush became president because he got five more votes in the Electoral College. In 2016, Hillary Clinton got three million more votes than Donald Trump. But Donald Trump became president because he got 77 more votes in the Electoral College. The Electoral College is a system of voting that is used only in elections for the president and vice president.

What is the Electoral College?

The 12th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlines the process for electing the president. We call this process the Electoral College system. It is a method of *indirect* popular election.

When voters cast their ballots in the presidential election, their votes actually select a group of electors who pledge to vote for a specific candidate when the Electoral College meets in December.



Map showing electoral votes in 2016.

How does it Work?

The candidate who wins the popular vote in any given state (except for Maine and Nebraska) receives *all* of the state's Electoral College votes. In Maine and Nebraska, the electoral votes are assigned *in proportion* to the popular vote.

In the end, the winner of the race is the candidate who receives a majority (270) of the 538 Electoral College votes. The results of any presidential election aren't official until the president of the Senate counts the votes out loud at a special joint session of Congress held after the election.

Find your state on the map showing how many electoral votes each state had in the 2016 election. How many electoral votes does your state have? What state has the most? Which states have the least?



Why do We Do it this Way?

As they drafted a Constitution, the founders of our country had a difficult problem to solve in deciding how a president should be elected. In 1776, there was no Internet, no television or radio networks, and no newspapers. Communication between states and among people in a state took a long time. Also our nation in the beginning was composed

of 13 large and small states. The founders needed to find a way of giving each state some power in the election of a president, not just the larger ones. They rejected the idea that the president should be elected by popular vote because they feared that people would know only about candidates from their own states. This would give all the power to the larger states.

Is it the Best System for Today? What Do You Think?

Those in favor of it argue:

- ♦ It contributes to the cohesiveness of the country by requiring that popular support for a presidential candidate be found throughout the entire country.
- ♦ It gives power to smaller states.
- ♦ It contributes to political stability by encouraging a two-party system.

Opponents argue that:

- ♦ It makes it possible to elect a president who doesn't get the majority of people's votes.
- ♦ It creates a risk that an elector may not vote according to the will of the voters who elected him.
- ♦ It makes it very difficult for support for a third-party candidate to get recognized thus keeping out new ideas.

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What is a Swing State?

Wendy Quinones

Candidates use polls and voting history to try to predict which way a state will vote. In some states, it is very easy to predict which candidate will get the majority of the votes. In Massachusetts, for example, the majority consistently votes for the Democratic presidential candidate. Texas voters have consistently picked a Republican candidate. In some states, however, it is not clear which way the voters will “swing.” In these so-called “swing states,” it is hard to predict who will win. If the state has a lot of electoral votes, the candidates will spend a lot of time campaigning there. If they win—even if they win by only a slim margin—they will get all the electoral votes.



A Thought Puzzle: How is it possible to win the majority of the popular vote but lose the election?

	A	B	C	D	E	
VOTERS	XOO XXO XXX	XOO XXO XXX	XOO XXO XXX	OOO OOO XOO	OOO OOO XOO	X=20 O=25
ELECTORAL COLLEGE	X	X	X	O	O	

This graphic shows how the winner of the popular vote can lose the Electoral College. States A, B, and C each have a majority of “x” voters, so “x” wins 3 electoral votes even though there are fewer “x” voters.