

The Electoral College: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Electoral College?

Every four years, voters elect a group of electors whose only purpose is to elect the president and vice president. This group of electors is known as the Electoral College.

How was the Electoral College created?

The founding fathers established the Electoral College in Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution as a compromise between election of the President by a vote in Congress and election by a popular vote of the whole citizenry. It was designed to safeguard against undue influence by small groups and to ensure that states with larger populations did not overpower or overshadow states with smaller populations.

What is the makeup of the Electoral College?

The total number of electors is 538. Each state is assigned a number of electors equal to its two Senate seats plus the number of seats in the House of Representatives. Per the 23rd Amendment, the District of Columbia is allotted three electoral votes. Alabama, which has two senators and seven Congressional representatives, is allotted nine electoral votes.

How are the electors chosen?

Generally, the parties either nominate slates of potential electors at their state party conventions or they choose the electors by a vote of the party's central committee. Political parties often choose electors to recognize their service and dedication to that particular party. According to the Constitution, no member of Congress, or any person holding an office of trust or profit under the United States (such as members of the Cabinet) can serve as an elector. Electors may be state elected officials, state party leaders, or people in the state that have a personal or political affiliation with their party's presidential candidate.

Why are the names of the candidates on the ballot and not the names of the electors?

The names of the electors may or may not appear on the ballot, depending on the procedure in each state. In Alabama, the names of electors do not appear on the ballot.

How does a candidate win a state's electoral votes?

Voters in each state choose electors by casting a vote for the presidential candidate of their choice. The slate winning the most popular votes is the winner. Only two states, Nebraska and Maine, do not follow this winner-take-all method. In those states, electoral votes are proportionally allocated.

Can a candidate win the electoral vote, but lose the popular vote?

Yes. With most states following the winner-take-all approach, it is possible for a candidate to win the electoral vote, but lose the nation-wide popular vote. There have been four elections in which the person elected president won the electoral vote, but lost the popular vote (1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016).

What happens if no candidate wins a majority of electoral votes?

If no candidate receives a majority of electoral votes, the House of Representatives elects the President from the three candidates who received the most electoral votes. Each state delegation has one vote. The Senate elects the Vice President from the two vice presidential candidates with the most electoral votes. Each senator casts one vote. The House of Representatives has chosen the president twice, during the elections of 1800 and 1824. The Senate has chosen the vice president only once, during the election of 1836.

How many electoral votes are necessary to win the presidential election?

270. In order to become president, a candidate must win more than half of the votes in the Electoral College.

When does the Electoral College meet?

The meeting of the electors takes place on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December following the presidential election. The electors meet in their respective states, usually at the state capitol building. The electors individually cast their vote for president on one ballot and their vote for vice president on another. The votes of the electors are recorded on a "Certificate of Vote," which is then sent to the Congress and the National Archives as part of the official records of the presidential election.

Are the electors bound to vote the way they pledged?

No. There is no Constitutional provision or federal law that requires electors to vote according to the results of the popular votes in their respective states. However, there are twenty-nine states, including Alabama, which do have laws binding their electors to vote according to the popular vote results.

Has an elector ever voted for a candidate different from the one to whom they were pledged?

Yes. Despite legal oversight, there have been 167 electors who have not cast their votes for the candidates who they were designated to represent. However, no elector has ever changed the outcome of an election by changing or abstaining from their designated vote.

How are the votes of the Electoral College counted?

Each state's electoral votes are counted in a joint session of Congress on January 6th in the year following the meeting of the electors. Members of the House and Senate meet in the House chamber to conduct the official tally of electoral votes. The vice president, who serves as President of the Senate, presides over the count and announces the results of the vote.