
THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Santa Cruz County Clerk/Elections

November 2004

Members of the Constitutional Convention explored many possible methods of choosing a president: 1) have the Congress choose the president; 2) have the State Legislatures select the president; 3) elect the president by a direct popular vote. The prevailing suggestion was to have a College of Electors select a president through an indirect election.

The Electoral College Today

- Each state is allocated a number of Electors equal to the number of its U.S. Representatives plus its two senators (in CA the total electoral votes is 54).
- The political parties of each state submit a list of individuals pledged to their candidates for president (that is equal to the number of electoral votes for the state) to the State's chief election official (in CA it is the Secretary of State). Each party determines its own way of choosing its electors.
- Congressmembers and employees of the Federal government are prohibited from serving as Electors.
- After the parties hold their caucuses and the states hold their primaries, the major parties nominate their candidate for the Office of President. The names are then submitted to the state's chief election official (in CA, the Secretary of State) as they will appear on the general election ballot.
- On November 2, registered voters in each state cast their ballots for the Office of President and Vice President.
- Whichever presidential candidate gets the most popular votes in a State wins all of the Electors for that state except for the states of Maine and Nebraska which award electoral votes proportionately.
- On Monday, December 13, 2004, each state's electors meet in their respective state and cast their electoral votes (one for President and one for Vice President).
- Each Elector must cast at least one of their two votes (see above) for a person outside of their state in order to prevent the election of a president and vice president from the same state (however, the presidential and vice presidential candidates choose each other as running-mates and are on the same ticket in the popular vote).
- The electoral votes are sealed and sent to the President of the U.S. Senate and are read aloud to both Houses of Congress on January 6, 2005.
- The candidate with the most electoral votes – 270 or more – (over one half of the total vote of 538) is declared president.
- If no one candidate receives an absolute majority of electoral votes the U.S. House of Representatives selects the President from the top three vote-getters.
- On January 20, 2005, at noon, the elected president and vice president are sworn into office.

Pro's and Con's of the Electoral College

In its over 200-year history, the electoral college has received its share of criticism and praise. The following is a list of some comments made by supporters and opponents of the Electoral College. These comments are not the opinion of the Santa Cruz County Clerk/Elections Department; the department is simply providing them as information.

Pro's:

- ◆ Requires a distribution of popular support to be elected president – the winning candidate must demonstrate both a sufficient popular support to govern as well as a sufficient distribution of that support to govern.
- ◆ Strengthens the status of minority groups – the votes of small minorities within a state may make the difference between winning all of a state's electoral votes or none of them.
- ◆ Enhances the political stability of the nation by promoting a two-party system – protects that presidency from impassioned but transitory third-party movements and forces the major parties to absorb the interests of minorities.
- ◆ Maintains the federal system of government and representation.

Con's:

- ◆ There is a possibility of electing a president who does not have a majority of the support.
- ◆ There is a risk of having "faithless" Electors – Electors who won't be loyal to their party or candidate.
- ◆ The Electoral College may depress voter turnout – because each state is only entitled to just so many electoral votes regardless of voter turnout, there is no incentive for states to encourage voter participation.
- ◆ Does not accurately reflect the national popular will because it does not elect a candidate by a direct popular vote.

In the past 125 years, there have been three occasions when a presidential candidate won the popular vote, but lost the election: in 1876, Samuel J. Tilden won the popular vote, but Rutherford B. Hayes won the electoral vote, and, therefore, the election; and in 1888, Grover Cleveland won the popular vote, but Benjamin Harrison won the election. Most recently, in 2000 Al Gore won the popular vote, but George Bush was elected President.

How many electoral votes does each state have?

AL: 9, AK: 3, AZ: 10, AR: 6, CA: 55, CO: 9, CT: 7, DE: 9, DC: 3, FL: 27, GA: 15, HI: 4, ID: 4, IL: 21, IN: 11, IA: 7, KS: 6, KY: 8, LA: 9, ME: 4, MD: 10, MA: 12, MI: 17, MN: 10, MS: 6, MO: 11, MT: 3, NE: 5, NV: 5, NH: 4, NJ: 15, NM: 5, NY: 31, NC: 15, ND: 3, OH: 20, OK: 7, OR: 7, PA: 21, RI: 4, SC: 8, SD: 9, TN: 11, TX: 34, UT: 5, VT: 3, VA: 13, WA: 11, WV: 5, WI: 10, WY: 3 **TOTAL: 538**