



## The Electoral College: Getting to 270

### Overview

Every four years, we revisit debates about the Electoral College. While there is a lot of confusion about this “college,” it is central to our system of electing the President and Vice President of the United States.

### What is the Electoral College?

In short, the Electoral College is a group of “electors” who decide the President and Vice President for the following four years. When Americans go into the voting booth they are not really voting for a candidate but rather for these electors who are expected to vote for their party’s nominee.

Currently, there are 538 electors. The number of electors is based on the number of federal Representatives a state has, plus the two Senators each state gets. Under the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution, the District of Columbia gets 3 electors. Each state’s number of electors can change after the federal census that takes place every ten years – when the number of House members for an individual state can either increase or decrease.

The Electoral College never meets as a collective group. Rather, each state brings its slate of electors together after the election on the second Wednesday of December. Then, states send their votes to the President of the Senate who reads the results to both chambers on January 6th.

For a Presidential ticket to win, it must get at least 270 electoral votes. If that does not happen, then the House of Representatives votes for the President, and the Senate votes for the Vice President.

### Who are the electors?

Electors are those who are designated by their respective state political parties to vote for their party’s candidate should that candidate win the popular vote in their state. If the Democrat wins, for example, the Democratic electors for that state are expected to vote for that candidate. Almost anyone can be selected as an elector except federal Representatives and Senators and those considered to be in “Trust or Profit” offices under the Constitution (generally executive appointments). Typically, electors are party activists and elected state officials.

There is no constitutional obligation for an elector to vote for the nominated ticket once that ticket has won; however, many states have set punitive rules – ranging from monetary fines to criminal charges – for those who don’t. In reality, only a handful of electors have ever voted for a different candidate (called “faithless electors”).

Center Forward Basics  
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### Center Forward Basics

Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for-profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

In order to meet our challenges we need to put aside the partisan bickering that has gridlocked Washington and come together to find common sense solutions.

For more information, please visit [www.center-forward.org](http://www.center-forward.org)

### Key Facts

- There are 538 members of the Electoral College.
- A candidate for President must win 270 electoral votes to become President.
- It is possible to win the Electoral College and not win the popular vote.
- Electors meet in each state the second Wednesday of December to finalize their votes and sends them to the President of the Senate who reads the results for both chambers on January 6th.
- The states with the highest number of electors include:
  - California: 55
  - Texas: 38
  - Florida: 29

## Can Someone Lose the Popular Vote but Win the Electoral College?

Yes. It has happened 5 times, most recently between President Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016. Hillary Clinton won almost 3 million more popular votes but President Trump won 304 electoral college votes. Andrew Jackson (1824), Samuel Tilden (1876), Grover Cleveland (1888), and Al Gore (2000) also won the popular vote but lost the electoral vote. This can happen, in part, since a candidate can win the majority of voters in a state with a smaller number of electoral votes but barely win one with a larger allocation.

- New York: 29
- Illinois: 20
- Pennsylvania: 20
- Ohio: 18
- The following states only have 3 electors each:
  - Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming. The District of Columbia also has 3 electoral votes.

## Why This System?

Many historians say this system was a major compromise during the Constitutional Convention. Some wanted the House of Representatives to elect the President, others the state legislatures and still others a strict popular vote. In the end, the Founders compromised on a system where American voters select a slate of electors who then vote for the winning candidate, yet another example of how the Founders wanted a varied system of checks and balances.

## Criticisms

One of the obvious criticisms comes from those who think Americans should directly elect the person who will hold the highest political office. Others believe that larger states (California has 55 electoral votes) garner too much leverage in an election under this system.

The Electoral College is integral to our Presidential election system. Despite critics it is unlikely to change. To change or update the Electoral College takes an amendment to the Constitution, and there is currently no major movement in Congress or the states to do so.

## Links to Other Resources

- National Archives - [The Electoral College](#)
- 270 to Win - [2020 Presidential Election Interactive Map](#)
- History Channel - [Electoral College](#)