

Opinion: Explaining the ins and outs of the U.S. Electoral College

By Elizabeth Drew, Project Syndicate, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.11.16

Word Count **911**



Members of Washington state's Electoral College are instructed on the paperwork in casting their votes Dec. 17, 2012, in Olympia, Washington. Photo: AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Anyone watching the United States' presidential race needs to understand the national opinion polls. They do not provide an accurate picture of how the election might turn out. Thanks to America's Electoral College, it's not who wins the most votes nationwide that matters in the end, but who wins in which states.

Each state is awarded a certain number of votes in the Electoral College, depending on the size of its population. The candidate who crosses the threshold of 270 electoral votes wins the presidency.

In almost every state, a candidate who wins 50.1 percent of the popular vote is awarded 100 percent of its electoral votes. (Only Maine and Nebraska don't follow the winner-take-all rule; they divide the Electoral College vote by congressional district.) As a result, the votes of millions of people who cast their ballot end up not counting. If you're a Republican

in New York or California, which are dominated by the Democrats, you can forget about your vote for president mattering. The same is true for a Democrat in Wyoming or Mississippi, which are reliably Republican.

The Electoral College Explained

One peculiar result of this peculiar system is that a candidate can win a majority of the national popular vote but lose in the Electoral College, by losing narrowly in highly populated states and winning in some smaller states. It doesn't happen often. Whenever it does, the U.S. goes through a fit over this seemingly undemocratic process. In the most recent case, Al Gore won a majority of the popular vote in 2000, but George W. Bush won the presidency.

Due to the Electoral College, voters cast their ballots not for a candidate but for a slate of electors – party activists, including friends and allies of the contender – who will support their choice. The role of the electors is a brief formality. They meet in their state capitol and cast the vote. But we already know how it's going to turn out, because the presidential election results are reported at the time in terms of who won each state.

At this point, the national vote count is meaningless. Congress convenes and “counts” the electoral votes; but this, too, is a mere formality. The Bush-Gore contest was unusual in that it wasn't settled until December 12, more than a month after the election, when the Supreme Court, in a highly controversial decision along party lines, voted 5-4 to end the recount in Florida, handing the presidency to Bush.

One Vote For Each State

Now, here's where it can get convoluted, and possibilities for mischief arise. If no one wins 270 Electoral College votes, the election goes to the House of Representatives. Each state delegation casts a single vote, regardless of how many voters the delegation represents. Wyoming (population 585,000) and California (population 39,000,000) each get one vote. And the delegations aren't bound to vote for the candidate who won the most votes in their state.

Then, after the House elects the president, the Senate picks the vice president, with each senator getting one vote. It's theoretically possible that Congress could elect a president and vice president from different parties.

This convoluted system for choosing the president reflects the doubt America's founders had about popular democracy. They were suspicious of the public having its way on the basis of misinformation or a lack of understanding of the issues. The United Kingdom's vote in June to leave the European Union – against the advice of experts and allies – appears to validate this concern.

Founding Fathers Didn't Trust The Public

From the outset, America's founders were aware of the dangers of government by plebiscite. Alexander Hamilton worried about giving power to the people because "they seldom judge or determine right." Fearing "an excess of democracy," they interposed institutional cushions between the popular will and government decisions. Until 1913, senators were chosen by the state governments, not directly elected by the voters. And they gave us the Electoral College.

This system has an enormous impact on the actual campaign for the presidency, because it determines where the candidates spend their time and money. Only about 10 states are considered "swing" states that could go for either party; the rest are considered "safe" states for one party or the other.

Swing States Matter The Most

Of course, sometimes the political wisdom can be wrong and a state bounces out of its party. But these 10 "battleground" states are the ones to watch for clues as to how the election will turn out. They are much more indicative of the final result than national polls.

For example, California and New York are so routinely Democratic that the only reason candidates turn up in either one is to raise money. By contrast, Ohio – the jewel in the crown of swing states, because tradition has it that no Republican can win the presidency without winning there – is well trodden by the candidates. The other states considered most important to victory for either side are Florida and Pennsylvania.

Because such highly populated states, along with a handful of others, routinely go Democratic, the Democrats have a built-in advantage in the Electoral College. So Donald Trump is widely believed to have more limited options for accumulating 270 votes.

Maybe the Electoral College isn't such a peculiar idea, after all.

Elizabeth Drew is a regular contributor to The New York Review of Books and the author, most recently, of "Washington Journal: Reporting Watergate and Richard Nixon's Downfall."

Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST supports the idea that the Electoral College determines who will be president?
 - (A) The candidate who crosses the threshold of 270 electoral votes wins the presidency.
 - (B) As a result, the votes of millions of people who cast their ballot end up not counting.
 - (C) Only about 10 states are considered “swing” states that could go for either party; the rest are considered “safe” states for one party or the other.
 - (D) Because such highly populated states, along with a handful of others, routinely go Democratic, the Democrats have a built-in advantage in the Electoral College.

- 2 Which section of the article highlights the idea that presidential candidates need to concentrate more on specific states?
 - (A) "The Electoral College Explained"
 - (B) "One Vote For Each State"
 - (C) "Founding Fathers Didn't Trust The Public"
 - (D) "Swing States Matter The Most"

- 3 Why does the author include the section "Founding Fathers Didn't Trust The Public" in the article?
 - (A) to show that the country's voting system is evolving
 - (B) to argue that historical practices should not always be followed
 - (C) to describe how the founding fathers created the government
 - (D) to explain why the Electoral College was created

4 Why does the author include the following sentence in the section "One Vote For Each State"?

The United Kingdom's vote in June to leave the European Union – against the advice of experts and allies – appears to validate this concern.

- (A) to give an example that suggests leaving the European Union was a mistake
- (B) to give an example that suggests the Electoral College voting system has benefits
- (C) to give an example that suggests the United Kingdom and United States have similar voting procedures
- (D) to give an example that suggests the Electoral College should be eliminated

Answer Key

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- (B) "One Vote For Each State"
- (C) "Founding Fathers Didn't Trust The Public"
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