



How Does the Electoral College Work?

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As usual on election night, news reporters announced each state's vote totals as the polls closed and kept a running tally of electoral votes. Sen. Barack Obama, D-IL, won by 8,538,559 popular votes and earned 365 Electoral College votes. Sen. John McCain, R-AZ, won 173 electoral votes. A candidate needs 270 electoral votes to win the election.

But what's the point of having the Electoral College?

Our founders were afraid to permit the uninformed and uneducated public to elect the president and vice president, but didn't want to give that much power to Congress. The Electoral College was their compromise. The constitution allots each state the same number of electors as it has members of Congress – both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The District of Columbia has three members, just as it would if it was a state, so there are 538 total electors.

The college is still controversial. It seems to be outdated and unnecessary, since public education and the mass media have made us better informed than ever before. Yet it allows all of the states to play a part in the election. Without the college, candidates could focus only on the larger states with more population, and ignore the small states. This way, the candidates have to campaign throughout the country, address a larger variety of issues, and face more of the voters.

In most states, including Pennsylvania, the political parties choose their electors long before Election Day. They're usually party officials, state or local government officials, or influential party members. The party whose candidate wins the popular vote sends its electors to participate in the Electoral College. The electors chosen by the other parties do not participate. Pennsylvania has 21 electors. The electors from Allegheny County are John K. Fetterman, Franco Harris, Valerie McDonald-Roberts, and Jack Wagner.

The Electoral College will meet for the 56th time on December 15. The members meet in their respective state capitals, at noon on that day. The Constitution specifies the voting process. However, state laws have effectively changed the way the college works, without having to go through the difficult process of amending the constitution.

Forty-eight states require their Electoral College members to vote for the candidate who won the state's popular vote. That's called the "winner takes all" system. Maine and Nebraska have a "district system" in which two votes are given to the candidate who won the state's total vote, and the remaining votes are distributed among the candidate(s) who won each Congressional district. Sometimes, despite the law, electors vote for a different candidate. They are called "faithless electors" and can face a fine and lose their positions as electors. It rarely happens and has never affected an election.

The electors sign the voting certificates and send them to Washington, DC. The vice president, in his capacity as president of the senate, collects, opens, reads, tallies, and reports the results in a joint session of Congress. Vice President Dick Cheney will perform that duty in Washington on January 8, 2009. *Then* Barack Obama will officially be the president-elect.

It is possible for a candidate to win the popular vote and lose the election, depending on how the states vote. That happened four times in our history. They are: 1824 – John Quincy Adams; 1876 – Rutherford B. Hayes; 1888 – Benjamin Harrison; and 2000 – George W. Bush.

In 2000, the US Supreme Court ordered Florida state officials to stop counting the ballots, thereby awarding all of the state's electors to George W. Bush. It was not necessary, since the constitution also contains provisions for what happens when the election is not completed by Inauguration Day. There is no provision in the Constitution for the Court's act, and it is illegal.

If there is a tie in the Electoral College vote, then the U.S. House of Representatives votes to determine the next president. The constitution gives very specific detail for those procedures. That has happened twice, in 1801 for Thomas Jefferson and in 1825 for John Quincy Adams.

Of course, we can improve the Electoral College. However if we abolish it, we must find a way to make sure that we don't overlook the small states.

For more information, go to www.howstuffworks.com and www.usa.gov.

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