

Choosing a president

Why is there an electoral college?

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US citizens do not directly choose the president. Instead, the task is reserved for the electoral college. Every four years, in the December following an election, its members - politicians and largely unknown party loyalists - meet in all 50 states on the same day and cast their votes for president. Then they essentially disappear.

In recent years there has been growing criticism of the electoral college, accelerated by the fact that two Republican presidents - George W Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016 - have been elected while losing the popular vote. But there's no sign that US elections will change any time soon.

What is the electoral college?

Article II of the US constitution lays out the process by which a president is elected.

Each state has a number of electors equal to the total number of representatives and senators it has in Congress. Washington DC gets three electoral votes. There are 538 electors. A candidate needs the votes of 270 of them to win.

The constitution says that state legislatures can choose how they award their electors. All but two have long chosen a winner-takes-all system - the winner of the popular vote in their state gets all of the electoral votes. Maine and Nebraska award theirs differently. In both states, two electoral college votes are allocated to the statewide winner. Each state then awards its remaining electors to the winner in each congressional district.

Why does the US have an electoral college?

When the founding fathers gathered in Philadelphia to draft the US constitution in 1787, they initially proposed a plan that would have Congress choose the president, but that led to concerns that the executive branch, designed to be independent from Congress, would be subject to it.

A contingent also favoured a direct popular vote. But the idea was shut down repeatedly. There were a number of reasons it was not popular. First, the convention had adopted the racist three-fifths compromise in which enslaved people were counted as three-fifths of a person. A popular vote would have disadvantaged southern states, in which enslaved people made up a sizable chunk of the

Each state has a certain number of electoral votes allocated partly according to population

Electoral votes are a sum of Senate and House seats for each state

Each state has 2 senate seats

California's large population gives it 52 House seats
So California has 54 Electoral votes

Alaska's much smaller population gives it 1 House seat

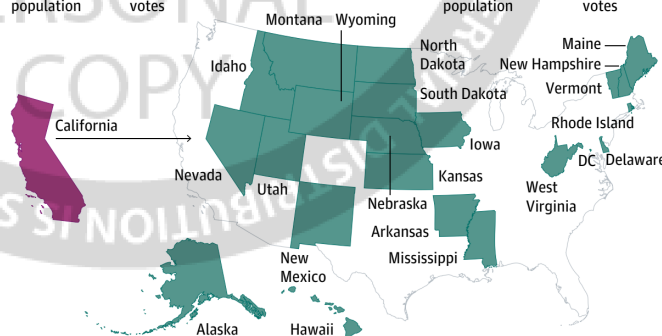
So Alaska has 3 Electoral votes

Source: Federal Election Commission. Note: in 2020 Republicans won one of the four electoral votes in Maine

The 22 least-populous states combined have a smaller population than California, but many more electoral votes

California 39 million population 54 votes

22 states 38.4 million population 95 votes

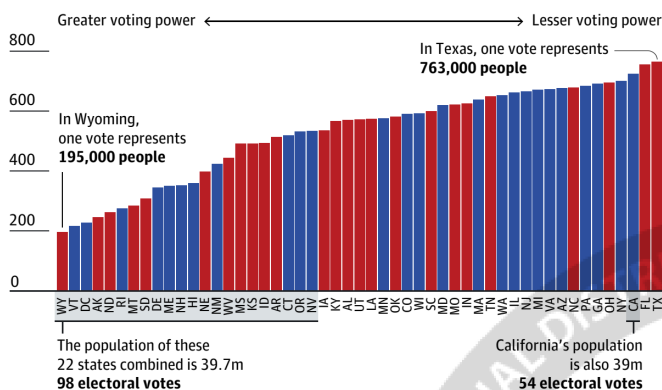


Source: Federal Election Commission, Electoral Vote Distribution. US Census Bureau, July 2023

States with the largest populations are under-represented in the electoral college

Population per electoral vote ('000s)

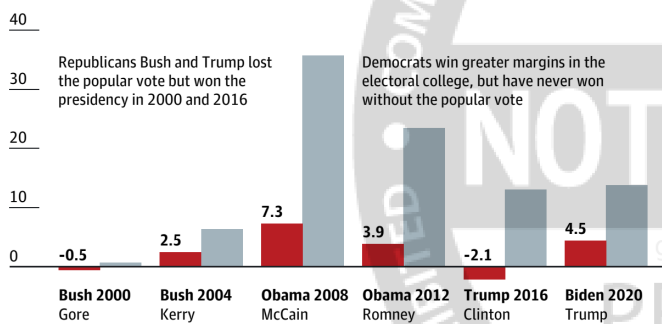
■ 2020 Republican win ■ 2020 Democratic win



Source: US Census 2023 populations estimates, US Census 2020 apportionment population and number of representatives by state.

Two of the last six elections were won by the candidate with fewer votes

Winning margins, percentage points ■ Popular vote ■ Electoral vote



population, because they had fewer people who could vote. There were also concerns about giving too much power to larger states, and that voters would not learn about candidates from different states.

Towards the end of the convention, a committee was appointed to deal with unresolved matters. They proposed a version of what we have now come to understand as the electoral college.

Does the electoral college allow for minority rule?

There have been five elections in US history - in 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000 and 2016 - in which the candidate who became the president did not win the popular vote. This has led to wider recognition of imbalances in the system and a push from some to abolish the electoral college.

The loudest criticism is that it dilutes the influence of a presidential vote depending on where one lives. An elector in California represents more than 726,000 people. In Wyoming, an elector represents about 194,000.

Another critique is that the system allows a tiny number of Americans to determine the outcome of the election. In 2020, about 44,000 votes between Wisconsin, Georgia and Arizona allowed Biden to win the electoral college. Such a slim margin is extraordinary in an election in which 154.6 million people voted.

In 2016, about 80,000 combined votes gave Trump his winning margins in key swing states.

How has the electoral college remained in place for so long?

Since almost immediately after the electoral college was enacted, there have been efforts to change it.

After the civil war, African Americans were legally entitled to vote, but southern states continued to suppress them. A national popular vote would have diminished these states' influence, so they continued to support the electoral college system.

The country did get close to abolishing the electoral college once. In 1968, George Wallace, a southern segregationist governor, almost threw the system into chaos by nearly getting enough votes to deny any candidate a majority in the electoral college. The US House passed the proposed amendment 339 to 70. But the measure stalled in the Senate, where senators from southern states filibustered.

Is there any chance of getting rid of the electoral college now?

The most prominent effort today is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. The idea is that states agree to award their electors to the winner of the national popular vote, regardless of the outcome in their state. The compact would take effect when states with a total of 270 electoral votes join.

So far 17 states and Washington DC - a total of 209 electoral votes - have joined the effort. But the path ahead is uncertain. Nearly all of the states that have not joined have either a Republican governor or legislature. And legal observers have questioned whether such an arrangement is constitutional.