

How the Electoral College works

(CNN) -- The 2000 election was the fourth time the Electoral College selected a candidate other than the one who won the popular vote.

ELECTORAL COLLEGE TRIVIA

- One candidate won a plurality of the popular vote and the Electoral College but lost the election - Andrew Jackson. The House selected John Quincy Adams in 1824.
- The last third-party candidate to receive an Electoral College vote was George Wallace in 1968. Wallace, who had 46 electoral votes, won five Southern states and received one vote from North Carolina.
- John F. Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by about 120,000 popular votes in 1960 but won the Electoral College 303-219, taking New York and 22 other states.
- Ronald Reagan received the most Electoral College votes in history, with 525 in 1984.

So do we the people really elect the president and vice president? Technically, we don't. Presidents are elected by the states and the District of Columbia, not by a national tally of voters. When you vote, you cast your ballot for electors who will vote for a candidate they are politically aligned with.

Most of the time, that means the candidate who wins the popular vote also wins the Electoral College vote.

There are 538 Electoral College voters, one per senator and representative from each state. The District of Columbia, which has no congressional representation, has three votes - the minimum.

California has 55 votes, while Texas (34) and New York (31) have the second and third most, respectively. Besides D.C., seven states have three votes.

The colleges of electors from each state meet on the same date - this year, December 13 - and vote for a president and vice president. There is no central location that the voters meet - in this case, college refers to a body of electors, not a building. Most of the 51 slates of electors meet at their respective state capitols.

There are measures to replace an original elector who cannot make it to the vote.

On January 6, the new Congress will meet in joint session to tally and announce the vote. If no candidate has a majority of the electoral votes, the House of Representatives picks the president and the Senate chooses the vice president.

The House of Representatives has not voted on a president since 1824, when Andrew Jackson won a plurality - but not majority - in the Electoral College. The House voted for John Quincy Adams, who became the sixth president.

Generally speaking, a candidate who has the most popular votes in a state also receives all of its electoral votes. Two states, however, can split their electoral college. Maine and Nebraska apportion their votes between congressional district and two at-large votes. Yet neither state has ever split its electoral vote.

Changes to the 2004 Electoral College

Because the apportionment of Electoral College voters is based indirectly on the Census, several states have gained or lost votes for the 2004 and 2008 elections. Florida, a key state in 2000, cast 25 electoral votes that year; this year it will have 27.

Other states with more votes: Arizona (+2), California (+1), Colorado (+1), Florida (+2), Georgia (+2), Nevada (+1), North Carolina (+1) and Texas (+2).

States with fewer votes: Connecticut (-1), Illinois (-1), Indiana (-1), Michigan (-1), Mississippi (-1), New York (-2), Ohio (-1), Oklahoma (-1), Pennsylvania (-2) and Wisconsin (-1).

On Election Day, Coloradoans will vote on whether to change immediately the winner-takes-all-votes approach to one tied to the state's overall popular vote. Colorado has nine electoral votes.

In 2000, President Bush won the state; under the proposed format, he would have won only five of its electoral votes and would have lost the election.

When and why the college was created

The Electoral College was established in 1787. The men who drafted the Constitution debated several formats for electing the president and vice president -- having Congress vote, having the state legislatures choose, using a direct popular vote -- before deciding on the Electoral College format.

In the Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton wrote: "A small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations."

Under the initial system, each elector had two votes. The candidate with the most votes was elected president; whoever won the second-highest number of votes was elected vice president. That was changed by the 12th Amendment, ratified in 1804.

Several early elections had problems, primarily because of the number of political parties in the new country and the difficulty of winning a majority of votes. After the contentious election of 1824, there were a few problems with the vote-counting process, but not with the Electoral College process.

What if things go wrong?

The magic number of Electoral College votes is 270. If none of the presidential candidates receives a majority of votes November 2, the newly elected House of Representatives will pick the president from the top three Electoral College vote-getters. In that case, each state's delegation would pick a candidate as a bloc. The winner would require at least 26 votes to be elected.

Under the same scenario, the Senate would choose the vice president - from the top two Electoral College vote-getters for that office -- with each senator casting one vote. That leaves open the possibility that the president and vice president could be from different parties.

There is also the chance that an Electoral College voter could cast a ballot for a different candidate. Most of the time that is not a problem because of the great measures the parties go through to select the electors.

The two most common ways to choose the nominees to the college are by state party convention (36 states use this method) or by state party committee (10 states and the District of Columbia use this method).

There have been times when a so-called "faithless elector" bucked the system.

In 2000, one of the District of Columbia voters turned in a blank ballot. Barbara Lett-Simmons told The Washington Post "it is an opportunity for us to make blatantly clear our colonial status and the fact that we've been under an oligarchy."

Lett-Simmons was required by D.C. law to vote for the candidate who received the most popular votes. Twenty-six states have similar laws. In 24 states, electors may vote for any candidate.

On a few occasions, a "faithless elector" has voted for another candidate. In 1988, a voter from West Virginia cast a ballot for Lloyd Bentsen instead of Michael Dukakis. In 1976, an elector from Washington voted for Ronald Reagan instead of Gerald Ford.

Although some states threaten "faithless electors" with penalties, no one has ever been prosecuted.