

Background on the Debate

On a presidential election day in November, voters technically do not directly select a President, but rather choose a slate of presidential electors for their State. The number of electors chosen in each State is equal to the total number of representatives the State has in Congress. Each State's representation in Congress is, in turn, based on the State's population as determined every 10 years by the U.S. Census Bureau. For example, in 2004, California (The largest electoral state)

possessed 55 electoral votes since it had 53 representatives in the House of Representatives and like all States, two U.S. Senators. By contrast, Alaska had 3 electoral votes (the least a State can have) because it had a single

representative in the House and two in the Senate. The entire electoral college consists of 538 electors, which is the sum of the number of representatives in the House (435), the total number of Senators (100), and three electoral votes awarded to the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.) through the 23rd Amendment. A presidential candidate must receive a majority of all electoral college votes—at least 270—to win the election. If no candidate receives a majority, the House of

Question for Debate
Should the electoral college be replaced by direct popular election of the President?

Representatives chooses the President and the Senate chooses the Vice President. On election day in 2004, a voter in California voting for John Kerry was actually selecting 55 electors who had pledged to support the Kerry-Edwards ticket. A voter choosing George W. Bush was really selecting a different 55 electors who were pledged to support the Republican ticket. Since Kerry obtained a plurality of all popular votes cast in California, he received all of California 55 electoral votes. Bush won the popular vote in Alaska, thereby gaining that states 3 electoral votes. This is known as the winner-take-all feature.

In the 2004 election, George W. Bush won 286 electoral votes and John Kerry won 252. The popular vote for the election were 62,040,606 (51 percent) for Bush and 59,028,109 (48 percent) for Kerry. The ticket with the greatest number of popular

votes also won the most votes in the electoral college.

Critics of the electoral college system point out that the college may someday cause a constitutional crisis because of the winner-take-all feature and because nothing in the Constitution requires electors to cast their votes for the candidate receiving the most popular votes. Many critics favor abolishing the electoral college in favor of a direct popular election.

Supporting Arguments

A The electoral college is undemocratic because it is possible for one candidate to win a majority of the national popular vote, but still lose the presidency. This was the case in 1824, 1876, 1888, and most recently in 2000. The electoral college exaggerates the importance of votes in States with many electoral votes and diminishes the influence of votes in States with a small number of electoral votes. In addition, if no one candidate received 270 electoral votes, the

Opposing Arguments

The proposed reforms of the electoral college create more problems that they resolve. Why tamper with the college which has been a proven, workable system over the years? For example, presidential elections within each State are now democratic under the electoral college system. To allow for direct popular election would undermine the American system of Federalism, in that the presidential election would become more national by

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House of Representatives, not the people of the United States, would select the President from among the top three candidates. Why should such an irrational voting system be used in a democracy where popular choice is valued so highly?

B The factors that originally caused the Framers of the Constitution to create the electoral college are no longer relevant. In 1787, most people in the United States were illiterate and communications were poor. The Framers envisioned that the electors would be drawn from among the wisest and most distinguished men in each State, and that they would be better qualified and informed to objectively choose the nation's chief executive. Voters today get information about candidates through the media

C There is nothing in the Constitution that requires electors to cast their votes for the candidate receiving the most popular votes. Historically, some electors have switched their allegiance, as one elector did in 1988. If one candidate received 270 electoral votes and another received 268, one elector switching his or her vote could cause the election to result in a tie, thereby passing the election to the House and the Senate.

D The best reform would be to abolish the electoral college and substitute a direct popular election system. The candidate receiving the most (at least 40 percent of the total popular votes would be elected)

electoral college debate

removing the impact of the individual States from the electoral process. Furthermore, the probability of a presidential candidate receiving a majority of the popular vote but losing in the electoral college is relatively remote and has only happened 4 times out of 55 elections (7% of the time) and we went over 100 years in between the most recent two. (1888-2000)

Another disadvantage of popular election exists. Presidential candidates would have to campaign even more strenuously than they do now, in every part of the nation, because all votes would become equally important. In the electoral college system, a candidate can concentrate on those large States or smaller swing States where there is a chance of attaining in-state pluralities. The extra cost will keep only the wealthy, elite from being able to become president

The "faithless elector," an elector who does not vote for the candidate he expressed support for, may be a problem but it is a minor one at best. Over 17,000 electoral votes have been cast since 1789, with only 10 of those votes being considered breaches of faith. None of these "faithless electors" has ever changed an election outcome. A House election of the President has not occurred in over 150 years.

Direct popular election could complicate and delay the presidential selection process. The requirement that a runoff election be held if no candidate receives at least 40 percent of the popular vote is expensive and needlessly complex. By contrast, the electoral college immediately reveals who the winner is, without the necessity of holding a runoff election.