

DIGGING DEEPER

The country is in the midst of yet another election cycle. That means it is only a matter of time before we are all bombarded with campaign ad after campaign ad, outlining why one candidate is going to save the country and the other will drive it to wreck and ruin. Everyone from local town and state officials to Congressmen and Senators will be trying to convince us of their merits. They'll be one group of candidates who we will likely see more than any other. That group of candidates will be running for the highest office in the land, the presidency of the United States. But, did you know, that the president of the United States is not popularly elected? The president is actually chosen by a group of electors known as the Electoral College. So why do we have this system? And why do candidates even bother campaigning to the public if it is just these electors that matter?

The Electoral College is outlined in Article II, Section 1 of the United States Constitution. The system was tinkered with in the Twelfth and Twenty-Third Amendments which changed how the vice president is chosen and gave the District of Columbia as many electors as the least populous state respectively. Each state is assigned a number of electors based on the combined number of seats in the Senate and House of Representatives they have, which in turn is based on their population. This ranges from 3 in small states like South Dakota and Wyoming, to 55 in California and 38 in Texas, for a total of 538 for the country.

Each state is tasked with setting up a method for selecting these electors and determining how they'll vote. In the majority of states, it is a winner takes all system. The two major parties are allowed to elect the number of electors the state is allotted. Whichever candidate wins the popular election in that state, the electors of that party cast their ballots in the national election.

However, in two states the method is different.

In Maine and Nebraska, the electors are divided up by congressional district. Whichever candidate receives the majority of votes in the individual congressional districts is awarded a vote for that district and whoever wins the majority of the state is awarded the two votes. These votes are for the senate seats, which are "at-large" districts, meaning they cover the entire state.

No matter the system, this means that a candidate can lose the popular election, but still win the presidency. This has only happened rarely, but does happen. The most recent occurrence of this was in the 2000 presidential election, where George W. Bush won the presidency with a majority of the electoral votes, but a minority of popular votes.

There is also no law that forces an elector to vote for the candidate he has pledged to vote for. In other words, a delegate chosen by the Democratic Party could, if he or she so chose, vote for a candidate other than the Democratic candidate, or vice versa. This has very rarely occurred, but it is possible.

So why did the framers choose such a complex system for electing the president of the United States? Stayed tuned to Think the Vote to find out!