

U.S. Presidential Elections

U.S. presidential elections have been a source of contention among political scholars and voters alike. The United States is the only country to have an electoral system with both a popular and electoral election. In the popular election, citizens vote for state electors pledged to one of the presidential tickets. The electoral election occurs afterwards, when electors in each state meet and cast their votes that will determine the president elect. Recent debate about the U.S.'s electoral system has led many scholars and voters to the opinion that the Electoral College has become obsolete.¹

The 1787 Constitutional Convention sought to create an election system that would circumvent the potential flaws of a direct election like voter manipulation. The framers believed that uneducated voters would be vulnerable to persuasion by charismatic politicians, and that geographic isolation from political candidates and campaigns would prevent them from casting an informed vote.² The Electoral College solved this problem by allowing citizens to vote for electors whose job was to make politically informed choices about candidates. Each state receives the number of electors equal to the state's representation in Congress. When it comes to the popular election, voters choose the electors (in their state) that are pledged to vote for the presidential candidate the voters have chosen. Because the "names of electors do not appear on most state ballots [it] looks like [voters] are voting for the president."³

Since the 18th century, the Electoral College has evolved into the radically different system that we know it to be today. The original electoral system removed bias and misinformation from presidential elections by placing the responsibility on an apolitical body of educated individuals. Now, modern influences have made the formerly unbiased, independent Electoral College subject to the influence of the two-party system. As seen in recent years, political party conventions nominate presidential (and vice presidential) candidates and select "loyal followers" that "promise to vote for their party's nominee" as electors.⁴

In the country, 48 out of 50 states (including Pennsylvania), implement a "winner-takes-all-system" where "a candidate who wins 51% or more of the popular vote [in the state] gets every single electoral vote for that state."⁵ In the other two states (Maine and Nebraska), each presidential candidate receives a proportion of the electoral votes equal to the results of the state's popular vote.

While opponents of the Electoral College argue that the evolved system contradicts the "one-person, one vote idea [and] distorts campaigns by giving candidates a reason to ignore most states,"⁶ advocates insist that the system is far from irrelevant as it "gives a voice to voters in rural areas and smaller states," determines a clear winner, and supports our modern two-party

¹ Robert M. Alexander, *Representation and the Electoral College* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 59-60.

² Alexander Keyssar, *Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 21-22.

³ Margaret King, *The Electoral College* (California: Teacher Created Materials, 2019), 18.

⁴ King, *The Electoral College*, 18.

⁵ King, *The Electoral College*, 22, 24.

⁶ King, *The Electoral College*, 33.

system.⁷ These scholars also recognize that reform to the current electoral system would severely decrease “the strength of the two major parties.”⁸

On the other hand, one of the biggest concerns of the existing system is the peaceful transfer of power, particularly because many citizens distrust the electoral system. Tensions between the results of the popular and electoral elections create voter distrust, and have led to electoral lobbying, where some “citizens do not give up after the November election [and] consider the Electoral College as an additional access point to influence the election.”⁹ Because of these concerns, many scholars believe the Electoral College is due to be reevaluated.

With the popular election complete, the Electoral College will pick up where voters left off. On December 16th, electors within each state will meet to cast their votes, and on January 6th Congress will meet to count them.

⁷ King, *The Electoral College*, 30.

⁸ Alexander, *Representation and the Electoral College*, 60.

⁹ Alexander, *Representation and the Electoral College*, 160.