



The Taft Institute  
FOR GOVERNMENT & CIVIC EDUCATION

*Making Democracy Work*

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## THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE: *HOW AMERICAN PRESIDENTS ARE ACTUALLY CHOSEN*

By Professor Emeritus Michael Krasner, Co-Director

**What is it?** The Electoral College is the group of people designated by the Constitution to elect the president and vice president. There are 538 electors. A majority (270) elects the president and vice president.

**Background:** The writers of the Constitution did not put much faith in the judgement of ordinary citizens (See Hamilton, Federalist No. 68). Of the three elected offices in the national government, only one – that of Representative – was chosen directly by the people. Senators were elected by their respective state legislatures. A similar process was set up for electing the president. A special body – the Electoral College – was created. The original idea was that the people would choose the members of the Electoral College (the electors) who would exercise independent judgement. As the better educated, more responsible members of the community, they would choose the person they thought was best qualified to be president. They did this in the early days of the country, before political parties took over the process.

### **How Electors are Allotted and Chosen Today**

Electors are chosen from each state and from the District of Columbia (The 23<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution gave the District three electoral votes). The Constitution assigns each state a number of electors equal to the number of U.S. Senators (two from each state) and the number of members from that state in the House of Representatives, which varies by population. People run for the office of elector just as they run for state senator or city council. In all but two states the process is winner-take-all, statewide. Whichever candidate gets the most votes from the people gets all the state's electoral votes.

The difference is that instead of each person's running by herself from a district, the parties run slates of candidates on a statewide basis. Each party puts up a slate of candidates for the Electoral College positions from that state. However, the names of these people do not appear on the ballot. Instead, the names of their party's presidential candidate and vice-presidential candidate, to whom they are pledged, appear. This represents a large change from the days when electors made up their own minds about whom to vote for.

Two states, Nebraska and Maine, do it slightly differently. (Remember each state gets one electoral vote for each U.S. Senator, so that makes two, and then one for each member of the House, which varies by population) Maine and Nebraska assign one electoral vote to each of their Congressional districts. Whichever candidate gets the most votes in that district gets the electoral vote from that district. The remaining two electoral votes go to the candidate who wins statewide. So, there are actually **56 separate elections for president**, one for each state and one for each of the three Congressional districts in Nebraska and the two Congressional districts in Maine and one for the District of Columbia.

When a voter votes for a presidential candidate, she is actually voting for the slate of Electoral College candidates pledged to that presidential candidate. Say she votes for Trump in Vermont, which has three electoral votes. She is actually voting for a slate of three Electoral College candidates, chosen by the Vermont Republican party, but those names never appear on the ballot.

### **How can a candidate win in the Electoral College, but lose the popular vote?**

Whichever candidate gets a **plurality** (more than anyone else) of the votes cast in a state gets all the state's electoral votes (except for Maine and Nebraska). This is called the "winner-take-all" principle. In the year 2016, it enabled Donald J. Trump to win the presidency even though he lost the popular (people's vote) by almost three million votes.

Trump won the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio, which have a lot of electoral votes, by narrow margins. For example, he won Michigan by about 10,000 votes. He lost states such as California and New York by much wider margins – California by 3.3 million votes, for example. The overall result was a victory in the Electoral College but a defeat in the popular vote. Similar results occurred in the elections of 2000, 1888, 1876, and 1824.