

ELECTORAL COLLEGE 101

Don't understand the Electoral College? You're not alone. In plain English, here's how it works.

BY PATRICIA SMITH



What exactly is the Electoral College?

This college doesn't have fraternities, a football team, or even any classes: It's just 538 people called electors from all 50 states and Washington, D.C. According to the Constitution, they're responsible for electing the president and vice president. The winner needs a majority—at least 270—of the 538 electoral votes.

How did this system come about?

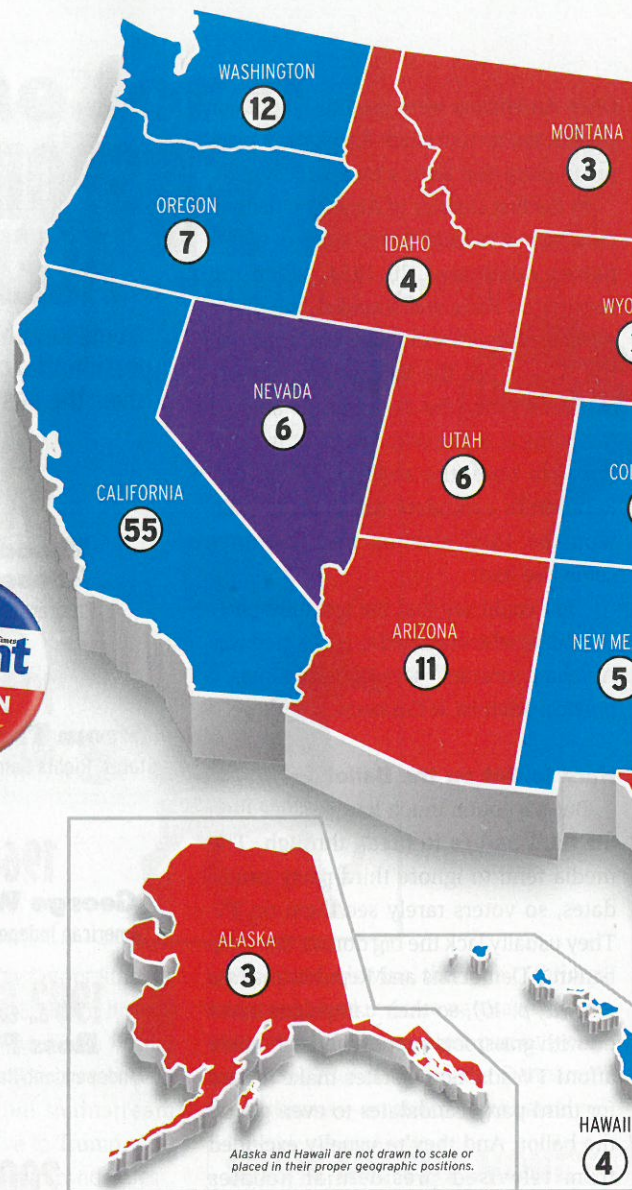
In 1787, when the Constitution was being drafted, the Framers didn't want the president and vice president to be chosen directly by the people or by Congress. They wanted to establish a role for the states in national elections—in line with the idea of a federalist system of government. And they sought to protect the country from what they saw as an ill-informed populace. The Electoral College was their answer.

The Framers envisioned it as an elite group of men (there wasn't a female elector until 1912) who could be trusted to choose the nation's leaders. The system was also supposed to ensure that a candidate with overwhelming support in only one part of the country—which might enable him to win a slim majority of the popular vote nationally—wouldn't be elected against the will of the rest of the nation. In some states, electors were chosen by the legislatures; in others, by popular vote.

Today each state's political parties nominate slates of electors who are pledged to support their party's candidates.

How many electoral votes does each state get?

The same number as its delegation in Congress: however many seats it has in the House of Representatives (which is based on population) and the Senate (always two). For example, Florida has 27 representatives and 2 senators, so it gets 29 electoral votes.



If these 538 electors choose the president, then what's Election Day about?

Technically, Americans won't be voting for Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine or Donald Trump and Mike Pence (even though their names appear on the ballot), but for a slate of Clinton/Kaine electors or Trump/Pence electors.

So how does a candidate win?

With two exceptions,* each state's electoral votes are awarded on a winner-take-all basis: The candidate with the most popular votes in a state—whether the margin of victory is three votes or 3 million votes—gets all of that state's electoral votes.

Do electors actually cast their votes?

It's usually a formality, but on December 19 the electors representing the candidate who won their state's popular vote

Watch a video on how the Electoral College works at upfrontmagazine.com

*In Maine and Nebraska, two votes go to the statewide winner and one vote goes to the winner in each of the state's congressional districts.