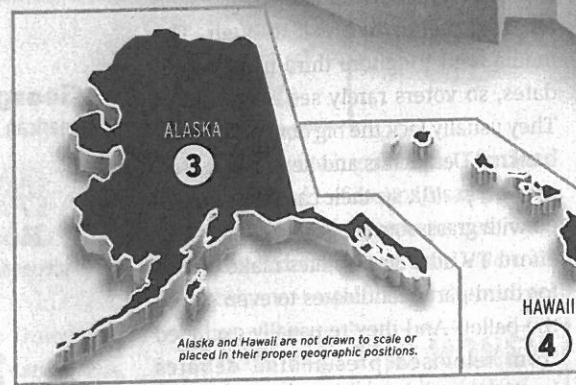
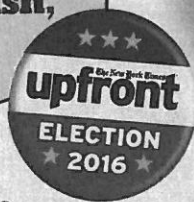


NATIONAL

# 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.

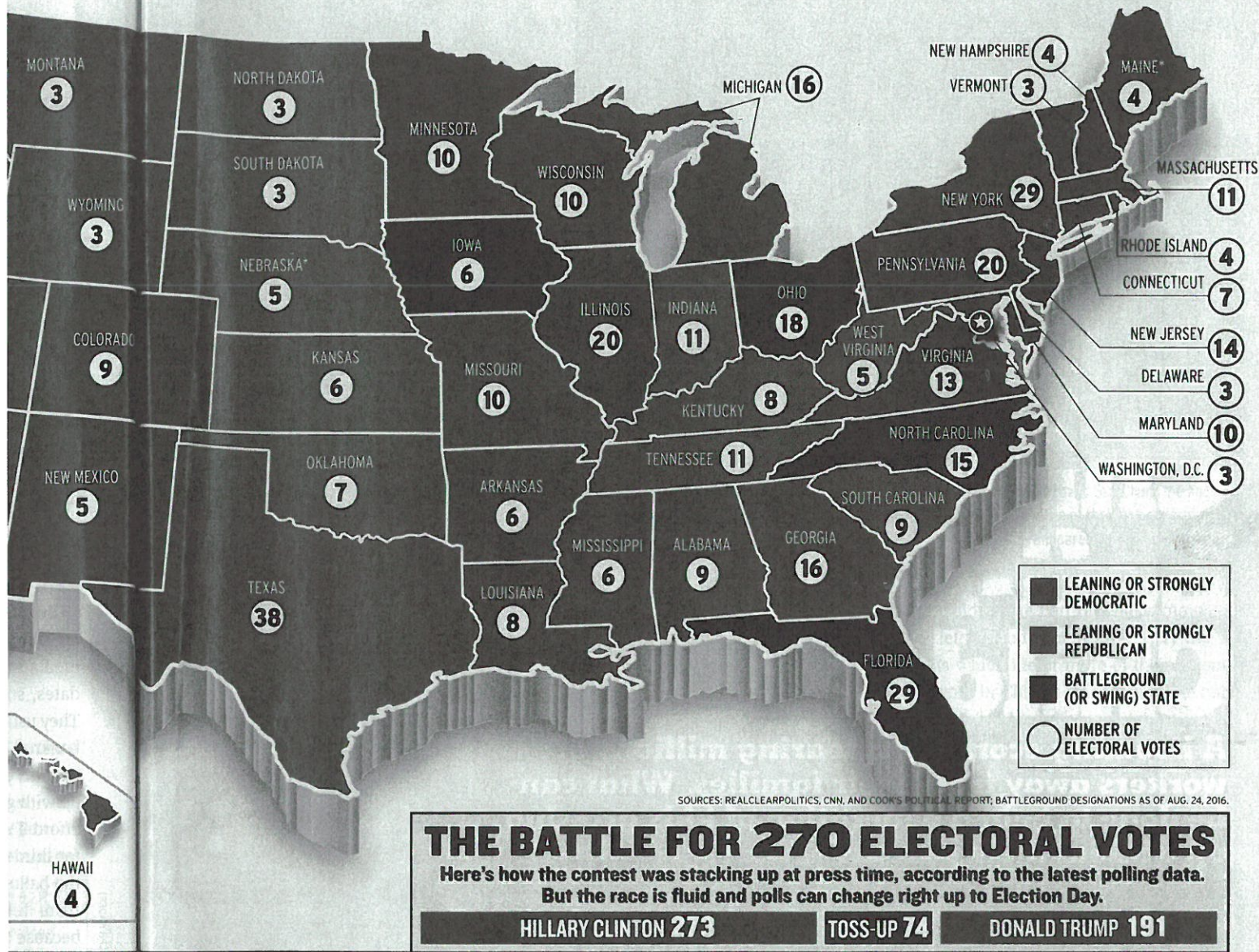
## Do electors actually cast their votes?

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](http://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.





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meet in their state capital and cast their votes. The results of the national election become official when the states' electoral ballots are counted before a joint session of Congress on January 6. The winners are sworn in on Inauguration Day (always January 20).

**What if no candidate gets a 270-vote majority?**

In that case, the House elects the president, with each state getting one vote, and the Senate elects the vice president, with each senator getting one vote.

**Can one candidate win the popular vote and another win the electoral vote?**

Yes, and the electoral vote determines who will be president. It happened most recently in 2000, when Democrat Al Gore won the popular vote but Republican George W. Bush narrowly won the electoral vote—and the White House (see story, p. 10). It's happened three other times: in 1824, 1876, and 1888.

**It sounds like a complicated system.**

It is, and some critics argue that electing a president by popular vote would be fairer and simpler. Others applaud the Electoral College system because it forces candidates to address the concerns of voters around the nation; they must think of the election not as a single contest but as 51 separate elections—and figure out how to win enough of those contests to rack up 270 electoral votes.

**How is this playing out in 2016?**

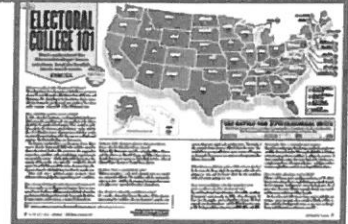
Clinton and Trump aren't spending much time, or TV ad dollars, in states where they're way behind or way ahead. Instead, they're targeting "battleground" states that look close. As of press time, five states (shown in purple above) were considered by many analysts as still up for grabs.

So if you live in California or Texas, you're probably not seeing as many campaign ads as people in Florida or Ohio. In those and other battleground states, it may seem as though Trump and Clinton have taken over your TV. •



**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

For use with the article on p. 12 of the magazine



**ELECTORAL COLLEGE 101**  
**Analyze the Article**

1. Why do we have the Electoral College system?
2. What determines the number of electoral votes each state gets?
3. How does the Electoral College system force candidates to think of the presidential race as 51 separate elections?
4. Do you think the Electoral College still makes sense or should we elect the president by popular vote?

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