

The Electoral College – Top 3 Pros and Cons

Last updated on: 12/9/2021 | Author: [ProCon.org](#) | [MORE HEADLINES](#)



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The debate over the continued use of the [Electoral College](#) resurfaced during the [2016 presidential election](#), when [Donald Trump](#) lost the general election to Hillary Clinton by over 2.8 million votes and won the Electoral College by 74 votes. The official general election results indicate that Trump received 304 Electoral College votes and 46.09% of the popular vote (62,984,825 votes), and [Hillary Clinton](#) received 227 Electoral College votes and 48.18% of the popular vote (65,853,516 votes). [\[1\]](#)

Prior to the 2016 election, there were four times in US history when a candidate won the presidency despite losing the popular vote: 1824 ([John Quincy Adams](#) over [Andrew Jackson](#)), 1876 ([Rutherford B. Hayes](#) over [Samuel Tilden](#)), 1888 ([Benjamin Harrison](#) over [Grover Cleveland](#)), and 2000 ([George W. Bush](#) over [Al Gore](#)). [\[2\]](#)

The Electoral College was established in 1788 by Article II of the [US Constitution](#), which also established the executive branch of the US government, and was revised by the [Twelfth Amendment](#) (ratified June 15, 1804), the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) (ratified July 1868), and the [Twenty-Third Amendment](#) (ratified Mar. 29, 1961). Because the procedure for electing the president is part of the Constitution, a Constitutional Amendment (which requires two-thirds approval in both houses of Congress plus approval by 38 states) would be required to abolish the Electoral College. [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#)

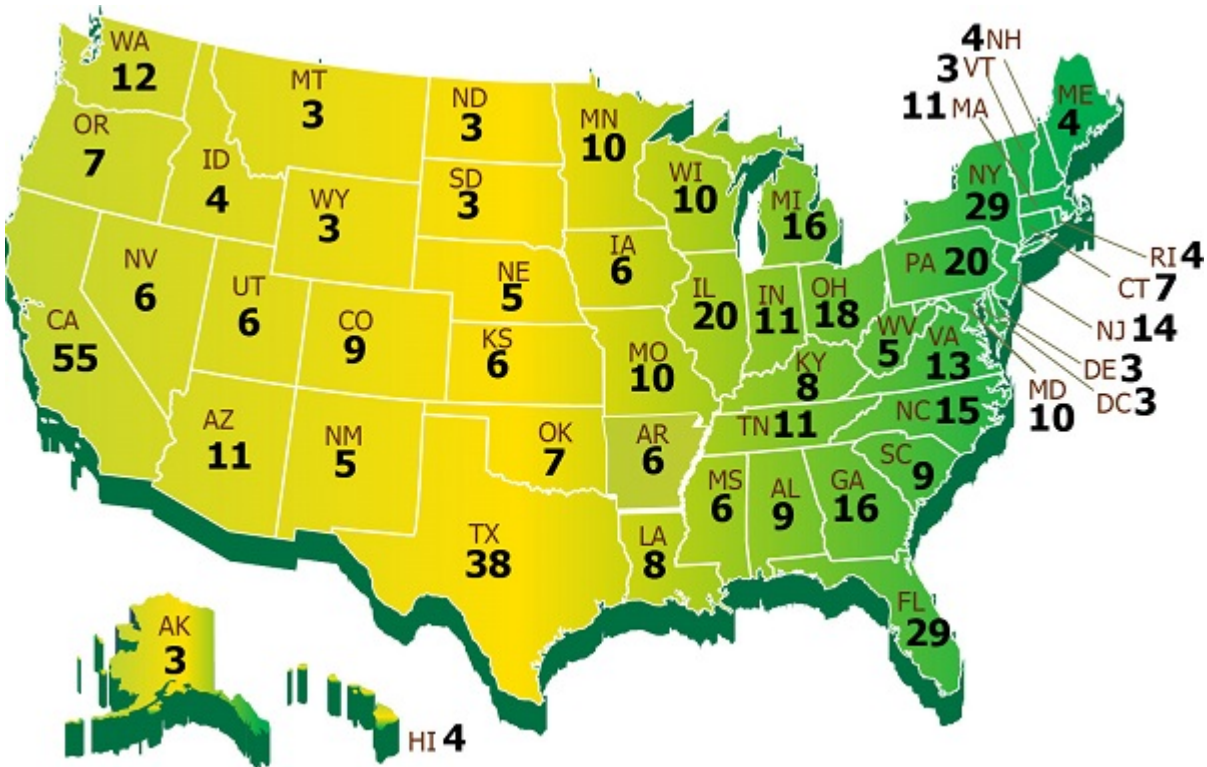
The Founding Fathers created the Electoral College as a compromise between electing the president via a vote in Congress only or via a popular vote only. The Electoral College comprises 538 electors; each state is allowed one elector for each Representative and Senator (DC is allowed 3 electors as established by the Twenty-Third Amendment). [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#)

In each state, a group of electors is chosen by each political party. On election day, voters choosing a presidential candidate are actually casting a vote for an elector. Most states use the “winner-take-all” method, in which all electoral votes are awarded to the winner of the popular vote in that state. In Nebraska and Maine, the candidate that wins the state’s overall popular vote receives two electors, and one elector from each congressional district is apportioned to the popular vote winner in that district. For a candidate to win the presidency, he or she must win at least 270 Electoral College votes. [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#)

At least 700 amendments have been proposed to modify or abolish the Electoral College. [\[25\]](#)

On Monday Dec. 19, 2016, the electors in each state met to vote for President and Vice President of the United States. Of the 538 Electoral College votes available, Donald J. Trump received 304 votes, Hillary Clinton received 227 votes, and seven votes went to others: three for Colin Powell, one for Faith Spotted Eagle, one for John Kasich, one for Ron Paul, and one for Bernie Sanders). On Dec. 22, 2016, the results were certified in all 50 states. On Jan. 6, 2017, a joint session of the US Congress met to certify the election results and Vice President Joe Biden, presiding as President of the Senate, read the certified vote tally. [\[21\]](#) [\[22\]](#)

A Sep. 2020 Gallup poll found 61% of Americans were in favor of abolishing the Electoral College, up 12 points from 2016. [\[24\]](#)



Number of electoral votes allocated to each state.
Source: USA.gov, “Presidential Election Process,” usa.gov (accessed Nov. 18, 2016)

For the 2020 election, electors voted on Dec. 14, and delivered the results on Dec. 23. On Jan. 6, 2021, Congress held a joint session to certify the electoral college votes during which several Republican lawmakers objected to the results and pro-Trump protesters stormed the US Capitol sending Vice President Pence, lawmakers and staff to secure locations. The votes were certified in the early hours of Jan. 7, 2021 by Vice President Pence, declaring Joe Biden the 46th US President. President Joe Biden was inaugurated with Vice President Kamala Harris on Jan. 20, 2021. [\[23\]](#) [\[26\]](#)

Should the United States Use the Electoral College in Presidential Elections?

Pro 1

The Electoral College ensures that that all parts of the country are involved in selecting the President of the United States.

If the election depended solely on the popular vote, then candidates could limit campaigning to heavily-populated areas or specific regions. To win the election, presidential candidates need electoral votes from multiple regions and therefore they build campaign platforms with a national focus, meaning that the winner will actually be serving the needs of the entire country.

Without the electoral college, groups such as Iowa farmers and Ohio factory workers would be ignored in favor of pandering to metropolitan areas with higher population densities, leaving rural areas and small towns marginalized. [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

Tina Mulally, South Dakota Representative, stated that the Electoral College protects small state and minority interests and that a national popular vote would be “like two wolves and a sheep deciding what’s for dinner.” Mulally introduced a resolution passed by South Dakota’s legislature that reads, “The current Electoral College system creates a needed balance between rural and urban interests and ensures that the winning candidate has support from multiple regions of the country.” [\[32\]](#)

Con 1

The Electoral College gives too much power to swing states and allows the presidential election to be decided by a handful of states.

The two main political parties can count on winning the electoral votes in certain states, such as California for the Democratic Party and Indiana for the Republican Party, without worrying about the actual popular vote totals. Because of the Electoral College, presidential candidates only need to pay attention to a limited number of states that can swing one way or the other. [\[18\]](#)

A Nov. 6, 2016 episode of *PBS NewsHour* revealed that “Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have made more than 90% of their campaign stops in just 11 so-called battleground states. Of those visits, nearly two-thirds took place in the four battlegrounds with the most electoral votes — Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina.” [\[19\]](#)

Gautam Mukunda, political scientist at Harvard University , explained that states are given electors based on its representation in the House and Senate, so small states get extra votes. Mukunda stated, “The fact that in presidential elections people in Wyoming have [nearly four] times the power of people in California is antithetical at the most basic level to what we say we stand for as a democracy.” [\[33\]](#)

Pro 2

The Electoral College was created to protect the voices of the minority from being overwhelmed by the will of the majority.

The Founding Fathers wanted to balance the will of the populace against the risk of “tyranny of the majority,” in which the voices of the masses can drown out minority interests. [\[10\]](#)

Using electors instead of the popular vote was intended to safeguard the presidential election against uninformed or uneducated voters by putting the final decision in the hands of electors who were most likely to possess the information necessary to make the best decision in a time when news was not widely disseminated. [\[7\]](#) [\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#)

The Electoral College was also intended to prevent states with larger populations from having undue influence, and to compromise between electing the president by popular vote and letting Congress choose the president. [\[7\]](#) [\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#)

According to Alexander Hamilton, the Electoral College is if “not perfect, it is at least excellent,” because it ensured “that the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications.” [\[7\]](#)

Democratic Nevada Governor Steve Sisolak vetoed a measure in 2019 that would add the state to the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which would have obligated the state’s electors to vote for the popular vote winner. Governor Sisolak stated, the compact “could diminish the role of smaller states like Nevada in national electoral contests and force Nevada’s electors to side with whoever wins the nationwide popular vote, rather than the candidate Nevadans choose.” [\[31\]](#)

Hans von Spakovsky, Senior Legal Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a former commissioner for the FEC, explained, “The Framers’ fears of a ‘tyranny of the majority’ is still very relevant today. One can see its importance in the fact that despite Hillary Clinton’s national popular vote total, she won only about a sixth of the counties nationwide, with her support limited mostly to urban areas on both coasts.” [\[34\]](#)

Con 2

The Electoral College is rooted in slavery and racism.

The “minority” interests the Founding Fathers intended the Electoral College to protect were those of slaveowners and states with legal slavery. James Madison stated, “There was one difficulty however of a serious nature attending an immediate choice by the people. The right of suffrage was much more diffusive in the Northern than the Southern States; and the latter could have no influence in the election on the score of the Negroes. The substitution of electors obviated this difficulty and seemed on the whole to be liable to fewest objections.” [\[29\]](#)

As Wilfred Wilfred Codrington III, Assistant Professor at Brooklyn Law School and a fellow at the Brennan Center, explained, “Behind Madison’s statement were the stark facts: The populations in the North and South were approximately equal, but roughly one-third of those living in the South were held in bondage. Because of its considerable, nonvoting slave population, that region would have less clout under a popular-vote system. The ultimate solution was an indirect method of choosing the president... With about 93 percent of the country’s slaves toiling in just five southern states, that region was the undoubted beneficiary of the compromise, increasing the size of the South’s congressional delegation by 42 percent. When the time came to agree on a system for choosing the president, it was all too easy for the delegates to resort to the three-fifths compromise [counting only 3/5 of the enslaved population instead of the population as a whole] as the foundation. The peculiar system that emerged was the Electoral College.” [\[29\]](#)

The racism at the root of the Electoral College persists, suppressing the votes of people of color in favor of voters from largely homogenously white states. [\[29\]](#) [\[30\]](#)

Pro 3

The Electoral College can preclude calls for recounts or demands for run-off elections, giving certainty to presidential elections.

If the election were based on popular vote, it would be possible for a candidate to receive the highest number of popular votes without actually obtaining a majority. [\[11\]](#)

This happened with President Nixon in 1968 and President Clinton in 1992, when both men won the most electoral votes while receiving just 43% of the popular vote. The existence of the Electoral College precluded calls for recounts or demands for run-off elections. [\[11\]](#)

Richard A. Posner, judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit and a senior lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, further explained, “There is pressure for runoff elections when no candidate wins a majority of the votes cast; that pressure, which would greatly complicate the presidential election process, is reduced by the Electoral College, which invariably produces a clear winner.” [\[11\]](#)

The electoral process can also create a larger mandate to give the president more credibility; for example, President Obama received 51.3% of the popular vote in 2012 but 61.7% of the electoral votes. [\[2\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

In 227 years, the winner of the popular vote has lost the electoral vote only six times. This proves the system is working. [\[2\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

Con 3

Democracy should function on the will of the people, allowing one vote per adult.

There are over an estimated 332 million people in the United States, with population estimates predicting almost 342 million by 2024, the next presidential election. But just 538 people decide who will be president; that’s about 0.000156% of the population deciding the president. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by more than one million votes, yet still lost the election on electoral votes. [\[14\]](#) [\[35\]](#) [\[36\]](#)

Robert Nemanich, math teacher and former elector from Colorado Springs, stated, “Do we really want 538 Bob Nemanichs electing our president? ...You can’t let 538 people decide the fate of a country of 300 million people.” [\[28\]](#)

Even President Donald Trump, who benefitted from the Electoral College system, stated after the 2016 election that he believes presidents should be chosen by popular vote: “I would rather see it where you went with simple votes. You know, you get 100 million votes and somebody else gets 90 million votes and you win.” Just as in 2000 when George W. Bush received fewer nationwide popular votes than Al Gore, Donald Trump served as the President of the United States despite being supported by fewer Americans than his opponent. [\[2\]](#) [\[20\]](#)

Jesse Wegman, author of *Let the People Pick the President*, stated, “If anything, representative democracy in the 21st century is about political equality. It’s about one person, one vote — everybody’s vote counting equally. You’re not going to convince a majority of Americans that that’s not how you should do it.” [\[33\]](#)

John Koza, Chairman of National Popular Vote, warned, “At this point I think changing the system to something better is going to determine whether there’s a dictator in this country.” [\[27\]](#)

Discussion Questions

1. Should the Electoral College be abolished? Why or why not?
2. Should the Electoral College be modified? How and why? Or why not?
3. What other voting reforms would you make? Rank choice voting? Voter ID laws? Make a list and offer support for each reform. If you would not change the voting process, make a list of reforms and why you would *not* choose to enact them.

Take Action

1. Listen to a [Constitution Center](#) podcast exploring the pros and cons of the Electoral College.
2. Explore the Electoral College via the [US National Archives](#).
3. Consider the [American Bar Association’s](#) fact check on whether the Electoral College can be abolished.

4. Consider how you felt about the issue before reading this article. After reading the pros and cons on this topic, has your thinking changed? If so, how? List two to three ways. If your thoughts have not changed, list two to three ways your better understanding of the “other side of the issue” now helps you better argue your position.
5. Push for the position and policies you support by writing US national [senators](#) and [representatives](#).

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[Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to 16?](#)– Proponents say teens are knowledgeable enough to vote. Opponents say kids aren’t mature enough to vote.

[Should Election Day Be Made a National Holiday?](#) – Proponents say an election day holiday will increase voter turnout. Opponents say would disadvantage low-income and blue collar workers.

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OddManOut

5 November, 2020

All votes should be weighted equally.

The electoral college creates favorability of certain citizens based on the arbitrary distinction of which

state they reside in. It is not favorability based on their qualifications as a participant in democracy, nor is it favorability based on disenfranchiseme...**See more**

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Cocheeese BTeam

8 November, 2020

A Popular vote would have to address Pro #3. The Electoral College almost always gives you a clear winner because you get 50% of the votes (plus the added advantage of wide ranging support across the entire populace, not just big cities). Will your Popular vote President require a majority vote?...**See more**

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DA Mag

5 November, 2020

I am pretty apathetic on which system we use. However this belief that the popular vote being the opposite of the electoral vote means the "will of the people" is not being met is a bit presumptuous. I know a lot of Democrats in Louisiana and and Republicans in California that just don't vote in ...**See more**

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Bill Snebold

13 January, 2022

Regardless of whether we could predict how having a truly democratic system would turn out, one person, one vote is the fairest system there is. If Trump actually won via the popular vote at least we would have truly gotten what we deserved rather than been victims of a flawed system that doesn't r...**See more**

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Austin Grogin

5 November, 2020

I think that if we've learned anything this year, its that the Electoral College is CONFUSING!

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D Dapper

8 November, 2020

I see both the pros and cons of both sides, with their weighted leanings. I believe the founding fathers where on the right path to becoming fair. The reasoning at the time, this method was used because some voters where not knowledgeable which allow them to vote differently then the General Voter ...**See more**

Reply · 12 4 · Share

Tanner Lau

5 November, 2020

I don't agree with "Con 1" which states, "The reasons the Founding Fathers created the Electoral College are no longer relevant.

Modern technology and political parties allows voters to get necessary information to make informed decisions."

It's true that we now have the technology available to stay...**See more**

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o OddManOut

5 November, 2020

This doesn't consider that US residents now have equal public access to K-12 education. An increase in education is statistically evident in the fact the IQ scores of traditionally undereducated demographics such as rural folk and racial minorities have skyrocketed as a result of this availability....**See more** *(Edited)*

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J james12345

16 December, 2020

This is almost correct. When the founding fathers made the electoral college, newspapers did exist. However, the time to deliver them took really long (remember, the fastest form of transit back then was by horseback.) This meant that the candidates beliefs what happened in DC and peoples opinions ...**See more**

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Dora Tran

4 November, 2020

1. Because the procedure for electing the president is part of the Constitution, a Constitutional Amendment (which requires two-thirds approval in both houses of Congress plus approval by 38 states) would be required to abolish the Electoral College.

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1 reply

Q Question

9 November, 2020

How about abolishing the "winner take all" or "state' wide" form of counting, allowing those districts in each state to be individually tallied?

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Vanessa

7 October, 2021

Why are people so smart on here when I'm just trying to understand the first sentence 🤔

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Keith Stahl

6 November, 2020

Would EC advocates allow smaller counties, cities or towns in their states to hold greater voting power than the larger ones if they think it's such a better system? Doubt it.
It's only because it gives them an advantage nationally.

Reply · 7 9 · Share

Greg Ladd

28 November, 2020

Some of the arguments against the electoral college above are lacking. For one thing, quoting what someone says about a topic is not a substitute for making an argument. The Presidential election, like the election of Representatives and Senators is not just one election. It is 50 elections in e...**See more**

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u ugboy21

14 December, 2020

You are wrong on many levels. California produces 2 times the food than the second largest producer (Iowa). Votes are not collective, they are individual, so each citizen, no matter where they live, gets one vote. Citizens are "born free and equal," so no citizen deserves more voting power than ano...**See more**

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