

# **The United States Presidential Elections**

## **Learn Government and History through the Elections**

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## **1. How Americans Choose Their President**

The American Founding Fathers wrote in the Constitution that the President and Vice President are elected through the Electoral College. The Electoral College is an institution, or process. States are given a certain number of “electors,” people who vote for a President and Vice President. The number of electors allotted to each state is equal to the number of representatives each state has in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The electors were initially directed by their state legislators how to vote and each elector had two votes. The candidate with more than 50% of the total electoral vote becomes the President, and the candidate with the second most votes becomes the Vice President. The Founding Fathers wanted proven leaders to decide who should be president, because they thought professional politicians would best understand who should lead the country. They did not want the people to directly vote for the President and Vice President. Founding Fathers also needed the lesser-populated states to adopt the Constitution, and these “smaller” states would not if the President were to be chosen purely democratically. Smaller states wanted more power in order to unite with the larger states and form one country. In the Electoral College, smaller states have more power, as their percentage of overall electors is greater than if the President would be elected by direct vote.

### **Choosing a U.S. President in History**

In the first two Presidential elections (1789 and 1792), George Washington won the unanimous vote of all electors. Once Washington left office, political parties became more important and initially this caused problems for the Electoral College. In the election of 1796, electors chose a President and Vice President from opposing parties. Federalist Party candidate John Adams became President, but Republican Party candidate Thomas Jefferson became the Vice President. This would be like Donald Trump becoming President and Joseph Biden becoming Vice-President in 2024.

In the 1800 elections, the electors wanted Jefferson as President and his running mate Aaron Burr to become Vice President. However, electors cast the same number of ballots for Jefferson and for Burr. Because the electors didn’t write which one they wanted for President, there was a tie vote and the decision went to the House of Representatives. They chose Jefferson. In 1804, the states passed the Twelfth Amendment which forced electors to cast two separate ballots – one for President and one for Vice President. Electors today still vote in this same manner.

### **Choosing Electors**

Before 1824, state legislators decided who they wanted to be President and Vice President and they chose and directed the electors how to vote. American politicians, especially Andrew Jackson, thought that all American citizens should choose the electors. Because of Jackson and others, over time state leaders allowed the people to direct the electors who to vote for as President and Vice President. Today, each state holds a popular election and allows its citizens to choose how the electors should vote. Most electors are not bound by state law to vote exactly how their state citizens voted. Still, there has not been an election decided against the will of the people. Electors vote how their state citizens want them to.

## **A History of Presidential Primaries and Caucuses**

Presidential Primaries and caucuses are elections in each state that choose the representative for each political party. There is nothing in the Constitution about this process, and it has developed over time, with some differences, in each state. Because of this historical development, sometimes the primary season appears confusing. Beginning with the 1796 election, Presidential candidates were chosen by politicians from each party's state political party. In 1831, the Anti-Masonic Party held the first national party convention to choose their Presidential candidate. From this time through the early 1900s, candidates for President and Vice President were chosen at national party conventions, where powerful party leaders decided who the candidates would be.

In the early 1900s, Americans wanted to take the power away from political party leaders and give to citizens the power to choose presidential candidates. Beginning with Florida, Wisconsin, and Oregon, states held primary elections or caucuses to choose delegates to the party conventions. These delegates would then choose the candidate. In most cases, party delegates are bound to vote for the person who won in their state, but in some states, they are not. Soon, all states went to the popularly elected primaries to choose the candidates for each party.

There are two types of elections where state citizens choose their candidate for political party: a primary and a caucus. In a primary, citizens vote in a traditional election with a secret ballot. In a caucus, people gather for a meeting, express their views, and vote either secretly or in the open.

### **Questions**

1. In which document is it written how the U.S. President and Vice President are chosen?
2. What is the U.S. institution that decides who will be President and Vice President?
3. What does the U.S. Constitution say about primaries and political parties?
4. Before the 1900s, who was most responsible for choosing the candidates of each major political party?
5. Who do you think is going to become the Presidential candidate for the Democrats and Republicans? Why do you think this?

## **2. The Electoral College and the Election of Donald Trump in 2016**

On November 8, 2016, Americans voted Donald Trump as their 45th President. President-Elect Trump captured 306 electoral votes to Secretary Clinton's 232. Clinton won the popular vote by over 3,000,000 votes, however, Trump won 30 states and Clinton won 20. Because of Trump's performance in a majority of states, he captured the Presidency. Clinton was more popular in highly-populated urban areas, but Trump carried 60% of the states.

### **The U.S. Constitution and the Electoral College**

The American Framers of the Constitution wrote that the President and Vice President are elected through the Electoral College. The Electoral College is an institution, or process. States are given a certain number of "electors," people who vote for a President and Vice President. The number of electors given to each state depends on how many representatives each state has in Congress. The electors are directed by their state legislators how to vote.

Before 1824, state legislators decided how electors would vote. However, American politicians in the 1820s and 1830s, especially Andrew Jackson, thought that all American citizens should choose the electors. Because of Jackson and others, in many states, the people became the main voice in choosing electors, not the politicians. However, Americans still vote by state through the Electoral College.

### **Why did the Framers Create the Electoral College? Why Didn't the Framers Establish Direct Democracy to Choose a President?**

There are at least two reasons why the Framers created the Electoral College.

1. They wanted proven leaders to decide who should be president, because they thought professional politicians would best understand who should lead the country.
2. They wanted all 13 states to join the United States of America, because the new country could probably not have survived if one or two states did not join. After the Framers wrote the Constitution, it had to be approved by the states to become the law of the land. Many less-populated states would not have approved the Constitution if the President would be elected by popular vote. These less-populated states were afraid the larger-populated states would dictate policies of the country if the President were chosen by popular vote.

Allowing for a representative body, elected by the citizens, to choose a president, was a completely novel and radical idea. The Framers were taking an incredible risk in establishing a republic, and most world leaders thought the United States of America would fail. Never before, in the history of man, had there been a republic established as the United States of America. The Framers wanted the President to be chosen by professional, proven leaders, who had been chosen by the citizens of each state. So, American citizens have always played at least an indirect role in electing the President. Many Founding Fathers thought, "Who could make better decisions about leaders than leaders themselves?" When the leaders were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, etc., it is easy to understand this logic.

The Framers established the Electoral College also to ensure the states that were lightly populated, or rural, would not be bullied by the more populous states. The less-populated states of Vermont or Rhode Island would not have joined the Union if the President were to be democratically chosen. In a democratically chosen election, the interests of the people of Virginia would have dominated the young country, much like the citizens of California and New York would today. The Electoral College ensures a President that is approved over a large and diverse geographical area, not just over one particular kind of people.

### **How Could America's Electoral College Change?**

There are at least two ways how Americans could change the electoral process.

1. One way is for each state to change how their electors are granted.
2. The other way is for a Constitutional amendment.

For a state to change, it could decide to reward the politician with the percentage of electors that would coincide with the percentage of votes received. For example, in California in 2016, Hillary Clinton won 61.5%, Donald Trump won 33.2%, Gary Johnson won 3.2%, Jill Stein won 1.7%, and others won .4% of the vote. California, like most states, currently rewards the winner with all of its electoral votes, which is 55. If the California legislature wanted to, it could reward the electoral votes as a percentage of votes cast. However, the California legislators are happy with this way of rewarding electors, so California will probably not change how it rewards the winner of the vote in its state. In 2016, California's legislators were Democrats. If they had decided to split their electoral votes, then Trump would have captured 1/3 of California's electoral votes. No Democrat wanted that.

The second way to change the electoral process is through a Constitutional Amendment, which is detailed in Article V of the Constitution. However, to do this, a large number of states would have to agree to the change, and it is highly unlikely that state legislators, or citizens of 2/3 of each state, would ever agree to this, as it would diminish a state's power in the Electoral College.

### **The Electoral College: An Institution of Stability**

The United States of America is the world's oldest Constitutional Republic, and the Electoral College is one of the reasons for its longevity. Only once in America's history has a Presidential election been a catalyst for war, which was the Civil War, 1861-1865. It can be strongly argued that it wasn't the election of Lincoln that caused the war, but the issue of slavery. The Electoral College ensures that lesser-populated states are important and not dominated by heavier-populated states. It allows for states to have freedom in deciding how electors are chosen. And it ensures that the United States of America does not become divided by geography or by urban or rural differences.

**Interesting Questions You Can Ask Your Students:**

1. Who won the popular vote and the electoral vote in the 2016 Presidential election?
2. What is the Electoral College?
3. Why did the Framers create the Electoral College?
4. How could Americans change the Electoral College?
5. What is good about the Electoral College?
6. What is undemocratic about the Electoral College?
6. What is your opinion of the Electoral College?

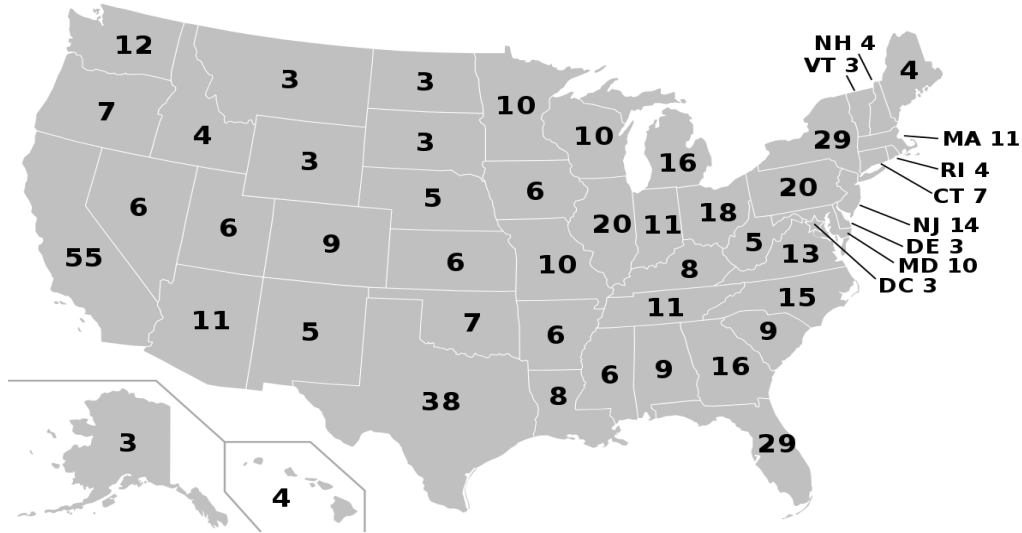
### **3. The History of the Elephant and the Donkey**

In 2020, Americans will choose Presidential candidates and in November, we will eventually vote for the U.S. President. Wherever the Democrat or Republican Parties are shown as images, their symbols are presented as a donkey and an elephant. These images are both easy to see and comical. The history behind these party animals is little-known, though not a secret.

In the 1828 election, advocates for President John Q. Adams called Andrew Jackson the pejorative term for donkey, jackass. Adams wanted Americans to think of Jackson as a foolish, stupid and stubborn person, a blockhead, and an idiot who drank too much whiskey. Instead, Andrew Jackson took this insult and turned it into a compliment to mean strong-headed and perhaps able to hold his liquor. He used the image of a donkey on his campaign posters and took the mantle of a strong-willed candidate. For decades after, the donkey was, at times, associated with the Democrat Party.

In 1874, cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a donkey in a lion's costume scaring away all the animals. Only the elephant was shown as being not afraid. Nast wrote "The Republican Vote" on the elephant. From that moment on, the elephant has symbolized the Republican Party.

Today, Democrats may argue that the donkey is tough, while Republican may say the elephant is strong.



**Electoral Map of the United States of America – 270 Needed to Win**

**2016 Electoral Map**

