Does my vote count? Understanding the electoral college

BY DAVID WALBERT

No, the electoral college is not the worst team in the ACC. It's the group of people who actually elect the president of the United States. How the electoral college works is one of the more complicated parts of the American electoral process — or can be, at least, when things don't go smoothly. This guide will explain how the electoral college works; discuss the origins and development of the electoral college as some controversial elections; and examine how much your vote actually "weighs" in an election.

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How the electoral college works

The people of the United States elect a president every four years, but not directly. Here's how it works.

1. In November of a presidential election year, each state holds an election for president in which all eligible citizens may vote. Citizens vote for a "ticket" of candidates that includes a candidate for president and a candidate for vice president.
2. The outcome of the vote in each state determines a slate of *electors* who then, in turn, make the actual choice of president and vice president. Each state has as many electors as it has senators and members of the House of Representatives, for a total of 538. (The District of Columbia gets three electors even though it has no representation in Congress.)

3. In December, the electors meet in their respective state capitols to cast their ballots for president and vice president. States may or may not require their electors to vote with the popular majority, and they may or may not give all of their electors to the winner of the statewide popular vote. (See "A Work in Progress[6]," below.)
4. These ballots are opened, counted, and certified by a joint session of Congress in January.
5. If no candidate wins a majority of the electoral votes or if the top two candidates are tied, the House of Representatives selects a president from among the three candidates with the most votes. Each state's delegation has a single vote. The Senate selects a vice president by the same process. (This hasn't happened since 1876, but it almost happened in 2000.)

What does this mean in practice? It means, as everyone learned or was reminded in 2000, that the candidate who receives the most votes nationwide does not necessarily become president. There is no national election for president, only separate state elections. For a candidate to become president, he or she must win enough state elections to garner a majority of electoral votes. presidential campaigns, therefore, focus on winning states, not on winning a national majority.

It also means that — at least in theory — electors can thwart the popular will and vote for a candidate not supported by the voters of their state. In practice, however, electors are pledged to cast their votes in accordance with the popular vote, and "faithless electors" who go against the popular vote are extremely rare. Had there been a faithless elector in 2000, however, Al Gore might have become president! (See the historical perspective[7] below for more about this.)

FURTHER READING AND ASSIGNMENT

A number of websites provide more detailed information about the electoral process.

- The National Archives[8] provides a great deal of additional information about the electoral process, including data from the 2000 election and answers to Frequently Asked Questions. For a full explanation of the process, please read how electors vote[9] and the answers to frequently asked questions[10]
- Project Vote Smart[11] offers a detailed but less formal explanation of the electoral process, with dates for the 2004 election. If the National Archives' website seems a bit stuffy to you, try Project Vote Smart first.
- The ultimate source, of course, is the U.S. Constitution itself. See Article 2, Section 1[12] and Amendment XII[13] for the legal text.

When you're finished, put away all of your reading material (including this handout) and write a one-paragraph summary, in your own words, of how the electoral college works. Really write it out — don't just think about it! You may find, when you try to write it down, that you don't understand it as well as you thought you did. If that happens, go back and re-read the materials. Because it's organized by Frequently Asked Questions, the National Archives' website may be most helpful for this.

Why not a popular vote? (an historial perspective)

When we're debating whether some aspect of the Constitution makes sense, it's useful sometimes to think of the Constitution as an experiment — as a work in progress. Some of its original framers referred to it that way, as a Great Experiment in democracy. In 1787, no republic like the United States existed anywhere in the world. The "founding fathers" were making things up as they went along, looking at history, philosophy, and what they did and didn't like about existing governments in Europe and America. And not all of them agreed — in fact, many of them disagreed completely, even on important issues such as how much power the people should have.

The electoral college was a compromise on two important issues. The first was *how much power the people should have*, and the second was *how much power small and large states should have*.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE?

In 1787, it wasn't at all clear whether democracy would work. In fact "democracy" was a bit of a dirty word in some people's minds: it raised fears of mob rule, as in fact had happened in a few places during and after the Revolution. The United States was intended as a *republic*, in which the people would govern themselves only through elected representatives.

Because the role of the president was so important, most of the framers thought that the people couldn't be trusted to elect the president directly. Instead, they should elect *electors*, who would convene as a "college of electors" to consider the available candidates and pick the best man for the job.

POWER TO THE STATES!

Before the Revolution, the British colonists didn't have much consciousness of being *Americans*. They may have identified themselves instead with the British Empire and with their own colonies. Even after the Revolution, loyalty to one's state often still came first. The Constitution was intended to unite the states under a single national government — but not entirely. Small states like New Jersey feared that if they formed a union with the other twelve states, they'd be swallowed up under the influence of more populous states like Virginia and New York. Virginia and New York, of course, thought that they should have the most influence. That's why the states have equal representation in the Senate but representation by population in the House of Representatives: it's a compromise that allowed large states to get their due but still allowed small states to keep their identities and fight for their interests.

When it came to voting for president, the framers of the Constitution decided that the *states* should do the voting, not the people. Remember, there was no consciousness of the United States as a single nation; it was, literally, a union of separate states. So voting for president was to take place by state, so that each state could have its say. The compromise between big and small states was extended to the electoral college, so that each state has as many electors as it has senators and members of the House of Representatives combined.

Big states still have the most influence, but small states aren't completely lost in the national vote.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

It was up to the states to decide how they ought to vote for their electors — and to a great extent still is, in fact. There is no national election for president, but rather fifty-one separate elections, one in each state and one in the District of Columbia. In the beginning, state legislatures voted for electors, who in turn voted for the president and vice president. Electors were free to vote for the candidate of their choice, but over time they were increasingly elected because they supported a particular candidate. By 1832, every state but South Carolina held direct elections for president, and electors were effectively bound to vote for a particular candidate. (South Carolina held out until 1864.)

Today, of course, every state allows citizens to vote directly for electors — as represented on the ballot by the candidates with which they are associated — but the electors are still not legally bound to vote for any particular candidate. An elector could, in theory, throw his or her vote to any candidate! Since each candidate has his or her own slate of electors, however, and since the electors are chosen not only for their loyalty but because they take their responsibility seriously, this almost never happens. (It last happened in 1988, when it had no impact on the outcome of the election.) Some states have laws requiring electors to cast their votes according to the popular vote.

In addition, a state doesn't have to throw all of its electors behind the candidate that receives the most popular votes in that state. Two states, Maine and Nebraska, assign one elector to the winner of each Congressional district and the remaining two electors to the candidate with the most votes statewide. After the 2000 election, there was some debate about whether that system would be more fair than the winner-take-all system used by the other 48 states and the District of Columbia.

The original Constitution also didn't take into account the development of political parties. Electors were to vote for *two* candidates for president. The man with the highest number of votes that was a majority became president, and the man with the second highest number of votes became vice president. In 1800, however, the Democratic-Republican Party nominated Thomas Jefferson for president and Aaron Burr for vice president, and because there was no separate voting for the two offices, the two men tied in the electoral college. The House of Representatives had to decide the issue. Afterwards, the 12th Amendment to the Constitution was passed, changing the system to the one described in part I[14], above.

FURTHER READING AND ASSIGNMENT

In the *Federalist* No. 68[15], Alexander Hamilton, who drafted the compromise electoral process that was included in the Constitution, explains why the president should be elected indirectly, rather than directly by the people.

- **Reading for the main idea.** Read Hamilton's argument carefully. If you're having trouble reading Hamilton's writing, that's understandable. Reading political writing two hundred years ago was not like watching *The O'Reilly Factor*! The arguments are laid out very carefully and thoroughly, and the writing is much more formal than we'd

expect today. Read it slowly, and make notes about the main idea of each paragraph. Try reading some of the more convoluted sentences out loud. Look for answers to these questions:

1. Why should the electors meet separately, in their own states? (paragraph 4)
2. What does Hamilton mean when he warns that untrustworthy men might "prostitute their votes" (paragraph 5)? (Use your imagination, but not too much.)
3. Does Hamilton argue that this method of electing the president would, or would not, enact the will of the people?

Finally, summarize Hamilton's arguments in two or three sentences of your own words. Again, *really write it out* to make sure you understand it.

- **Applying what you've learned.** Is Hamilton's argument convincing? Perhaps more importantly, does it still apply to today's politics? Can you think of examples or arguments that would refute his argument? If you're not sure, read section 3, "The people vs. the electors," and then try again to answer these questions.

The people vs. the electors (more historical perspectives)

As everyone learned or was reminded of in the election of 2000, the Constitution doesn't say that the candidate with the most popular support has any claim on the Presidency. It says that the candidate with the most electoral votes will become president. So George W. Bush won the election fair and square, by the rules set forth in the Constitution.

Actually, the last president to be elected by a majority of the voters was George H. W. Bush in 1988. In 1992 and 1996, Bill Clinton won with a *plurality* — more than any other candidate, but less than half of the total vote — because there were three major candidates. Because the third candidate, H. Ross Perot, failed to win a majority anywhere, he didn't win any electoral votes, and Clinton was able to win a majority of the electoral votes without winning a majority of the popular vote.

George W. Bush wasn't the first candidate to become president despite losing the popular vote, either. It also happened in 1824, 1876, and 1888, and each time, a debate ensued about whether the outcome was fair or right.

- In 1824, Andrew Jackson won the most popular votes (at least in states where popular elections were held), but no candidate won a majority of the electoral votes. The House of Representatives selected John Quincy Adams as president. (Jackson won the election four years later.)
- In 1876, Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden narrowly won the popular vote over Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes, but twenty contested electoral votes prevented either man from winning a majority of electors. In a compromise that ended the federal occupation of the South that had begun after the Civil War, Congress certified all twenty contested votes as having been cast for Hayes.
- In 1888, Republican Benjamin Harrison easily won a majority of the electoral vote despite losing the popular vote to his opponent, Democrat Grover Cleveland. Cleveland's support was largely regional: he won large majorities in several southern

states, which raised his popular vote totals but won him few electoral votes. Harrison won narrow majorities in most other states, however, and won the electoral vote 233 to 168.

- And in 2000, Democrat Al Gore won a narrow plurality of the popular vote but lost the electoral vote to Republican George W. Bush, 271 to 266. The vote was so close that Gore, thinking he had lost, conceded, then retracted his concession as more votes were counted. Because the vote in Florida, a decisive state, was so close, multiple recounts were held, and the Supreme Court had to settle a lawsuit over whether recounts should continue.

In the further reading[16] section below you'll find some good articles about those elections with arguments about whether the outcome was fair and why the electoral college should or should not be blamed.

FURTHER READING

These websites provide background information about the controversial elections of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.

- The Center for Voting and Democracy[17] provides a good summary of the events of seven controversial elections, including those of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.
- Use the National Archives' Historical Election Results[18] and votes by state to check on the votes in 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.

As you read, ask yourself whether the outcome in each case was fair — and ask yourself what is really "fair." Should the candidate with the most votes nationwide always become president? Or should we be concerned about the power of a few states to swing a popular vote to a candidate that doesn't really have national support? There's no one right answer, and you'll be asked to explore these issues in more depth later on.

Does my vote count?

Yes, your vote counts. Some people have complained since 2000 that if the winner of the popular vote doesn't become president, their vote doesn't really count, so why vote at all? But every vote does count; it just counts in a more complicated way. When you vote for president, remember that you're voting in a *state election*, not a national election. So your vote counts just as much as anyone else's in your state — but it may count more or less than that of someone living in another state!

WHAT'S A VOTE WORTH?

Why does the actual weight of your vote vary by state? Remember that every state gets a number of electors that is the total of all of its representatives in Congress, both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The House of Representatives is divided approximately by population — big states have the most representatives, small states have the fewest — but every state has exactly two senators, regardless of size. That means that

while big states have more electors than small states, they don't have as many more as they would based on population alone.

Consider three states: California (the state with the biggest population), North Carolina (a medium-sized state), and Alaska (with one of the smallest populations). This table shows their population and number of electoral votes in 2000. The fourth column shows the number of residents per elector (population divided by electoral votes), and the last column shows the *weight of an individual vote* in the given state — that is, how the number of residents per elector compares to the national average.

State	Population	Electoral votes	Residents per elector	Weight of vote
California	33,871,648	54	627,253	0.83
North Carolina	8,049,313	14	574,951	0.91
Alaska	626,932	3	208,977	2.50
United States	281,421,906	538	523,089	1.00

As you can see, Alaska, a very small state, has far fewer residents per electoral vote than the national average, so individual votes cast in Alaska count more than the national average — twice as much, in fact! A voter in California has a little less influence than the average American, about 83% as much. A voter in North Carolina has about 91% the influence of the average American. (You can calculate *weight of vote* in a given state by dividing the national average of residents per elector by that state's residents per elector. Since we're comparing each state to the national average, the weight of vote for the entire United States is exactly 1. Don't get it? Read more about the math[19].)

A PARADOX

While every American's vote counts, then, your vote counts more if you live in a small state like Alaska than it does if you live in a big state like California. This seems like a paradox, because clearly a big state *as a whole* has more influence than a small state. If you're running for president, you are more concerned about winning California, with its 54 electoral votes, than you are about winning Alaska with its 3 electoral votes. As a matter of strategy, you'd probably spend more time and money campaigning in the big states than in smaller states. As a result, residents of big states tend to get more attention in presidential elections than residents of small states, and so small-staters may feel left out and unimportant. Yet in reality, each individual voter has less influence in a big state than in a small state.

BUT IS IT FAIR?

Ah, that's the question! It certainly doesn't seem fair that a voter in Alaska effectively has more say about who becomes president than a voter in California. But Alaska is a perfect

example of why the electoral college was created. Because it's such a big state geographically, and because it is so far from the 48 contiguous states, Alaska has unique interests that, many would argue, deserve representation equal to the interests of New York or California. Other big western states with small populations, such as Montana and North Dakota, would make similar arguments. Of course, it's hard to argue that Delaware, which had 3 electors and only 783,600 residents in 2000 (for a weight of vote of 2.00), really has unique interests that deserve special consideration. The fairness of the electoral system has been debated for more than 200 years, and it doesn't appear that the debate is going to die down anytime soon.

Notes

THE MATH BEHIND THE "WEIGHT OF VOTE" CALCULATIONS

Let's look at a single state, North Carolina, which in 2000 had a population of 8,049,313 and 14 electoral votes. By dividing population by electoral votes, we get 8,049,313 ÷ 14 = 574,951 residents per elector.

I could have done the math the other way, and listed *electors per resident*. For North Carolina, that would be 14 ÷ 8,049,313 = .00000174, or 1.74×10^{-6} in scientific notation — less than one-five-thousandth of an elector. I didn't do it that way because I find it easier to think about whole numbers of residents per elector than to think about tiny fractions of an elector per resident. The meaning is the same, either way; the only difference is in how we represent the data.

To calculate how much a single citizen's vote is worth in the big picture, we have to calculate its *weight*. In mathematical terms, its weight is its value compared to some standard — in this case, the national average. In North Carolina, the value of a single vote is .00000174 of an elector. Nationwide, there were 281,421,906 people in 2000, and 538 total electoral votes. So the national average value of a single citizen's vote is .00000191 (or 1.91×10^{-6}) of an elector. The weight of a North Carolinian's vote as compared to the national average, then, is .00000174 ÷ .00000191 = 0.91. (The national average weight of vote, of course, is 1 — the standard.)

Since the number of residents per elector (which I used in my table above) is the inverse of the number of electors per resident — that is, one divided by the number of electors per resident — the weight of a North Carolinian's vote is also equal to the national average of residents per elector divided by North Carolina's residents per elector, or 523,089 ÷ 574,951 = 0.91. (I'll leave you to convince yourself that this is true.)

Note: There might be a small problem with my calculations: the number of *residents* of a state isn't the same as the number of voters. You could argue that the weight of your vote should be based on the number of voters, not the number of residents. But would you base the weight of vote on the number of eligible voters (all citizens age 18 and over), the number of registered voters, or the number of people who actually voted in 2000? I decided that it was easier simply to use total population (and perhaps more fair, since *all* residents, not only those over 18, deserve representation.)

On the web

Does my vote count? Teaching the electoral college

http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3468

Students will learn about the electoral process and its history through reading, research, and discussion. They will then convene a constitutional convention to debate altering this process.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Constitution, United States, civics, elections, electoral college, government, history, and presidency.

Notes

1. See #1.
2. See #2.
3. See #3.
4. See #4.
5. See #7.
6. See #2c.
7. See #2c.
8. See http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/index.html.
9. See http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/certificates.html.
10. See http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/faq.html.
11. See http://www.vote-smart.org/election_president_what_is_electoral_college.php.
12. See http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.
13. See http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_amendments_11-27.html.
14. See #1.
15. See http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4466.
16. See #3a.
17. See http://www.fairvote.org/e_college/controversial.htm.
18. See http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/historical.html.
19. See #5a.

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