

FURTHER REVIEW

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

It's that time again — which you already know if you read newspapers, watch television or indulge in social media: Next week, citizens of our United States will go to the polls to select a new president.

But do we really? No. In fact, we cast our votes — “the popular vote” — as a way of instructing our duly appointed state electors of who to vote for when they cast their votes on Dec. 17.

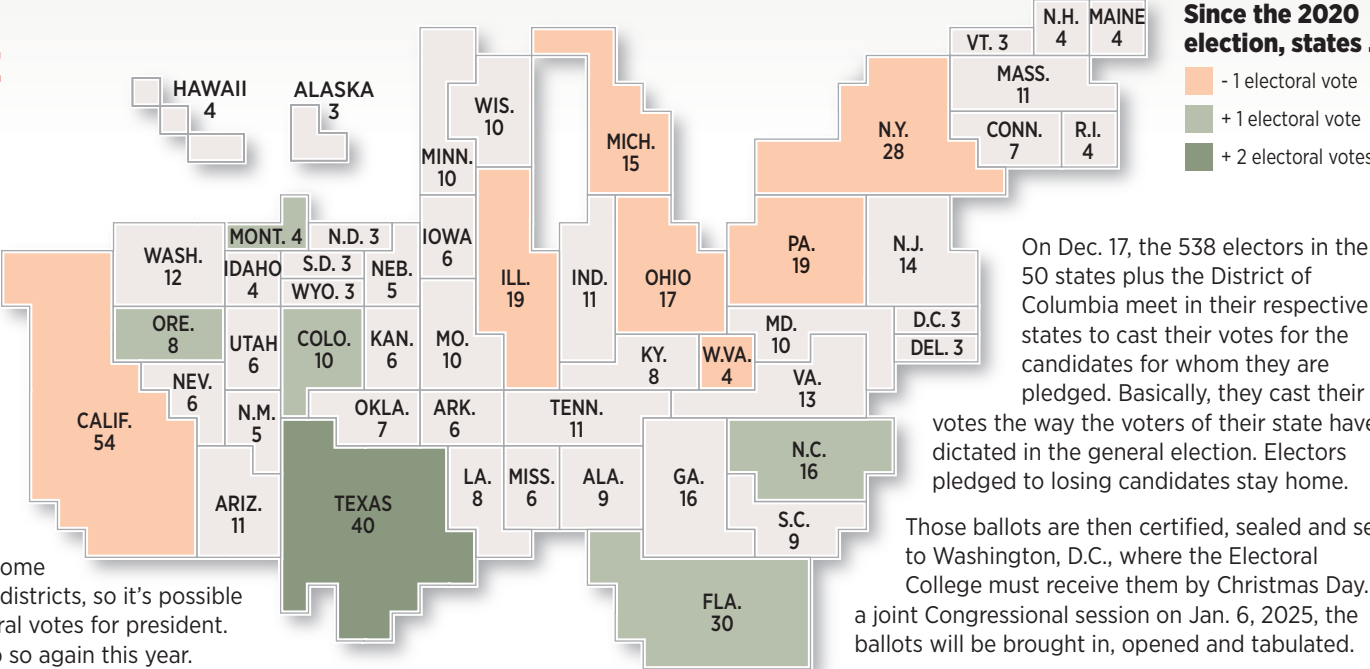
It's all part of a seemingly crazy compromise of a system that was cobbled together 237 years ago and is apparently too much of a hassle to fix now: The Electoral College.

HOW DOES THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE WORK?

Thanks to a system set up by the Founding Fathers in 1787, we Americans have a fairly complex way of electing our presidents. The votes we cast on Election Day are not *direct* votes for president — rather, our votes empower electors to cast their votes *for* us.

The number of electors each state gets is equal to the number of senators (two) plus the number of representatives that state sends to the House.

The candidate who wins a state gets *all* that state's electoral votes ... with two exceptions: Maine and Nebraska award some of their electoral votes by congressional districts, so it's possible for those states to split their total electoral votes for president. Both did in 2020 and are expected to do so again this year.



Despite the impression you might get watching Election Night TV, the counting of votes may go on for days, as absentee ballots and military ballots from overseas trickle in. Two key “swing” states — Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — do not allow absentee ballots to be opened and counted until Election Day.

All votes must be tabulated and disputes settled by Dec. 11 — what the Electoral College calls its “safe harbor” deadline.



Senate pages carry the mahogany boxes containing Electoral College ballots before a joint session of Congress to count the votes on Jan. 8, 2009.



Joe Biden — who was vice president at the time — presents Electoral College ballots to be certified during the official count on Jan. 6, 2017.

There are a total of 538 electoral votes cast in a presidential election, so it takes 270 electoral votes to become president.

If there happened to be a 269-269 tie, then the newly elected House of Representatives would vote for president — but as state delegations, not as individuals. Each state would get one vote. The Senate would then vote for vice president — but as individuals, not as state delegations.

HOW THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE HAS EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS

The Constitution specified that each state will direct electors which will cast the electoral votes for president. It was left to each state to determine how electors would be appointed, but the total number for each state would equal the number of Senators or Representatives that state has in Congress.

In 1804, the 12th Amendment changed this process to specify that each state would tally and certify their votes for president and vice president and would then send those tallies to the Capitol. It then said the President of the Senate would open the certificates to be counted.

In 1933, the process was modified slightly to note that the terms of the president and vice president expire at noon on Jan. 20. This was a change from previous election years, when a new president would take office on March 6.

In 1960, the 23rd Amendment granted three electors to the District of Columbia, bringing the total number of Electoral votes to 538.

Since then, the only changes have been to the number of members of Congress each state has — and, therefore, the number of electoral votes each state is granted — determined by the census taken every 10 years.

NUMBER OF ELECTORAL VOTES EACH STATE HAS HAD

	1972 1976 1980	1984 1988	1992 1996 2000	2004 2008	2012 2016 2020	2024 2028
Alabama	9	9	9	9	9	9
Alaska	3	3	3	3	3	3
Arizona	6	7	8	10	11	11
Arkansas	6	6	6	6	6	6
California	45	47	54	55	55	54
Colorado	7	8	8	9	9	10
Connecticut	8	8	8	7	7	7
D.C.	3	3	3	3	3	3
Delaware	3	3	3	3	3	3
Florida	17	21	25	27	29	30
Georgia	12	12	13	15	16	16
Hawaii	4	4	4	4	4	4
Idaho	4	4	4	4	4	4
Illinois	26	24	22	21	20	19
Indiana	13	12	12	11	11	11
Iowa	8	8	7	7	6	6
Kansas	7	7	6	6	6	6
Kentucky	9	9	8	8	8	8
Louisiana	10	10	9	9	8	8
Maine	4	4	4	4	4	4
Maryland	10	10	10	10	10	10
Massachusetts	14	13	12	12	11	11
Michigan	21	20	18	17	16	15
Minnesota	10	10	10	10	10	10
Mississippi	7	7	7	6	6	6
Missouri	12	11	11	11	10	10
Montana	4	4	3	3	3	4
Nebraska	5	5	5	5	5	5
Nevada	3	4	4	5	6	6
New Hampshire	4	4	4	4	4	4
New Jersey	17	16	15	15	14	14
New Mexico	4	5	5	5	5	5
New York	41	36	33	31	29	28
North Carolina	13	13	14	15	15	16
North Dakota	3	3	3	3	3	3
Ohio	25	23	21	20	18	17
Oklahoma	8	8	8	7	7	7
Oregon	6	7	7	7	7	8
Pennsylvania	27	25	23	21	20	19
Rhode Island	4	4	4	4	4	4
South Carolina	8	8	8	8	9	9
South Dakota	4	3	3	3	3	3
Tennessee	10	11	11	11	11	11
Texas	26	29	32	34	38	40
Utah	4	5	5	5	6	6
Vermont	3	3	3	3	3	3
Virginia	12	12	13	13	13	13
Washington	9	10	11	11	12	12
West Virginia	6	6	5	5	5	4
Wisconsin	11	11	11	10	10	10
Wyoming	3	3	3	3	3	3

WHY DO WE HAVE SUCH A CONFUSING WAY OF ELECTING OUR PRESIDENT?

Some of those participating in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 wanted Congress to elect the president. Others wanted a more decentralized approach, in which the president elected by a popular vote of qualified citizens — keeping in mind today, nearly two and a half centuries later, that “qualified” excluded women, slaves and, often, citizens who didn’t own land.

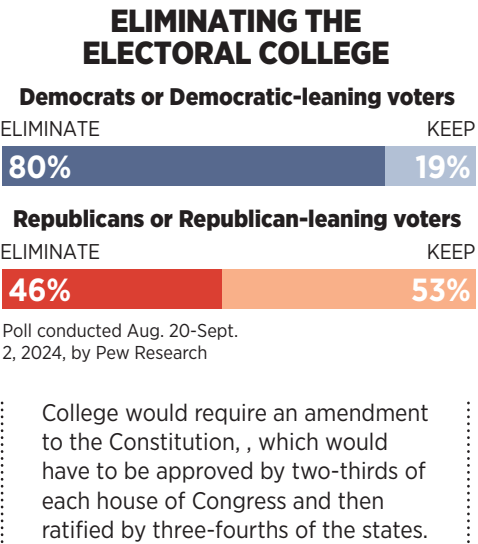
The system the Convention eventually put together was a compromise, much like the “Great Compromise” that directed two representatives from each state would be elected to the Senate but the number of

members of the House would be determined by population.

In addition, political scientist Edward Foley writes, there was a fatigue factor: Exhausted, delegates voted for an imperfect system because “everyone knew that George Washington was going to be chosen as president no matter what the electoral system.”

The Electoral College has resulted in political campaigns placing more emphasis — appearances, advertising buys, rallies and so on — on those states that are known to be capable of voting either way: Swing states.

Changing or eliminating the Electoral



The National Archives reports that more than 700 proposals have been introduced in Congress to reform or eliminate the Electoral College. There have been more proposals for Constitutional amendments on changing the Electoral College than on any other subject.

The American Bar Association is on record as saying that 69% of its members favor abolishing the Electoral College. Public opinion polls have typically shown Americans favor getting rid of it: 81% said so in a 1968 poll. A poll conducted last month shows opinion is divided along partisan lines.

Sources: “Presidential Elections and Majority Rule: The Rise, Demise and Potential Restoration of the Jeffersonian Electoral College” by Edward B. Foley, “Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States” by Edward B. Foley, “Why the Electoral College is Bad for America” by George C. Edwards III, “American Government 101: A Crash Course” by Kathleen Sears, Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, U.S. Senate, the Brookings Institute, Bipartisan Policy Center, National Constitution Center, the New York Times, the Washington Post, NPR, NBC News, Reuters, Pew Research