



Electoral and Popular Votes

More than 100 million voters will likely cast ballots in nationwide U.S. elections on November 6, 2012. But only 538 men and women will elect the next president of the United States, and those elections will take place in 50 state capitals and in Washington, D.C., on December 17.

This indirect election system, called the Electoral College and devised in 1787 by the framers of the Constitution, reflects the federal governing system of allocating powers to a national government representing not only the people but also the states.

The Electoral College requires a presidential candidate to have national stature as well as broad appeal to different regions. “One consequence of the Electoral College has been to make it hard for third parties, regional factions, or lesser figures to gain the presidency,” said John C. Fortier, author of *After the People Vote*.

The presidential electors nearly always vote the same way in December as the voters in their state did in November. The Electoral College winner nearly always captures the most popular votes nationwide. But because all but two states have winner-take-all rules, occasionally the

Electoral College winner trails another candidate in nationwide popular votes, as happened in 2000.

An election strategy flows from the Electoral College system. Presidential candidates pay less attention to reliably Democratic and Republican states in the campaign. Instead they focus workers and money on a relatively few narrowly divided states — Florida and Ohio are well-known examples — that decide the elections.



The Constitution

In 1787 the framers of the U.S. Constitution achieved a grand compromise creating a two-chamber Congress with a House of Representatives, where each state's seats is based on population, and a Senate, where each state gets two seats.

Then the framers sought to ensure that the president would have sufficient powers and stature to be independent of

Congress. The framers believed in a separation of powers.

Similarly, the framers did not allow the states to choose the president directly. Instead, they devised a system — the Electoral College — in which electors would be appointed from each state. The state legislatures would decide how the electors were chosen; by the 1830s all electors were chosen by popular election.

One other feature of the electors bears noting. The electors from each state meet to cast their votes for president, but all the state electors never meet together as one single national body.

Each state is allocated a number of electors equal to the sum of its two U.S. senators and the number of its U.S. representatives, which is based on a population census conducted every 10 years. In 2012, the populous state of California has 55 electors while states such as Alaska and Delaware each have three.

The Electoral College now comprises 538 electors, one for each of the 435 members of the House of Representatives and the 100 senators plus three for the national capital, Washington, D.C. A majority of 270 electoral votes is required to elect the president and vice president.

Top: New Jersey's 15 presidential electors are sworn in December 15, 2008, before casting their ballots for Barack Obama. Center: The same day, elector Owen Morgan hands in his ballot for Obama at the Indiana state capital.

