



The Electoral College

The Electoral College is a method of indirect popular election of the President of the United States. When voters cast a ballot for a presidential candidate, they are voting for a block of electors who are pledged to vote for that candidate. These electors, in turn, vote for the presidential candidate. Each state is assigned a number of electors equal to the total number of their United States Senators and Representatives with three additional electors assigned to the District of Columbia. For California, this means we have 55 electors—more than any other state.

The Electoral Vote

In December, these electors assemble in their state capitals, cast their ballots, and officially select the next President of the United States. The electors cast their votes for the candidate who receives the most popular votes in the state. Two votes are taken: one for president and one for vice president. The candidate who wins in a state is awarded all of that state's Electoral College votes, except in Maine and Nebraska where the electoral votes may be divided between the candidates.

The votes of the electors are then sent to Congress where the President of the Senate opens the certificates and counts the votes. This takes place on January 6, unless that date falls on a Sunday. In that case, the votes are counted on the next day. A majority is necessary to win the presidential and the vice presidential elections. With 538 electors, a candidate must receive at least 270 votes to be elected to the office of president or vice president.

If the Electoral College does not Declare a Winner

If no presidential candidate receives a majority, the House of Representatives determines who the next president will be. Each state may cast one vote and a majority is needed to win. Similarly, the Senate decides who the next Vice President will be if there is no majority after the Electoral College vote. Elections have been decided by Congress in the past. The House of Representatives elected Thomas Jefferson president in the election of 1800 when the Electoral College vote resulted in a tie. When the Electoral College vote was so split that none of the candidates received a majority in the election of 1824, the House elected John Quincy Adams president. Richard Johnson was elected vice president by the Senate when he failed to receive a majority of electoral votes in the election of 1836.

The Inauguration

The president-elect and vice president-elect take the oath of office and are inaugurated two weeks later, on January 20th.

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