ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Today, many democratic nations elect their executives by direct popular vote. But in the United States, we don't. Instead, we use a system known as the "Electoral College." How does it work?

At present, the Electoral College is made up of 538 electors drawn from the states and the District of Columbia. Under Article II of the Constitution, the states are given a number of electors equal to their congressional delegation. (So, if your state has two members in the U.S. House and two U.S. senators, you get four electoral votes in the Electoral College.)

Today, the American people vote for president and vice president on Election Day in November. But, technically speaking, these votes don't directly determine the outcome of the election. Technically, these popular votes determine which electors will be appointed to the Electoral College from each state. The electors eventually meet in December to cast their votes for president and vice president. If a candidate receives a majority of these votes in the Electoral College, she wins—even if she loses the popular vote.

If no candidate secures a majority in the Electoral College, then the election is sent to Congress (as happened in the election of 1824). The U.S. House of Representatives—voting as states, not individuals—selects the president and the Senate selects the vice president.

At the Constitutional Convention, the delegates staked out a range of positions on how to elect a president, including by a popular vote (James Wilson's preference), by state governors (Elbridge Gerry's idea), by Congress (a popular view held by many of the delegates), or by the Electoral College (a compromise).

For much of the Convention, the election of the president seemed like an unsolvable problem. Each idea had its own strengths and weaknesses.

- Election by the legislature had the advantage of placing the decision in the hands of the nation's most knowledgeable leaders. However, the concern was, as Gouverneur Morris warned, that the result would eventually be the **"work of intrigue, of cabal, and of faction,"** producing a pliable president who would become the willing tool of his supporters in Congress.

- Election by popular vote had the advantage of rooting the presidency in popular sovereignty. But many delegates were concerned that the size of the country would make it difficult for the average voter to know anything about an out-of-stater's record.

- The third—and final—idea on the table was the Electoral College. The key advantage of this proposal was that it would keep the president independent of the legislature. He would have his own independent base of support that would dissolve after the election. Key disadvantages were the logistics of getting the electors to meet and the related expenses. Some framers like Hugh Williamson from North Carolina feared whether the electors would "be men of the 1st or even the 2d grade in the States."

Late in the Convention, the delegates settled on the Electoral College as a compromise between those who supported congressional election of the president and those who supported a role for the American people in selecting a president. The Constitution left the method for selecting electors to the states. Over time, the Electoral College has remained in place, but within this system (and beginning in our nation's earliest years), the American people have played a key role in presidential elections.