Extra Feature Story

Electoral College Turns Presidential Election into State-to-State Combat
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While voters might think they're voting for Barack Obama or John McCain on Election Day, they're not. They're voting for a member of the Electoral College — a uniquely American institution responsible for George W. Bush's win in 2000 despite his losing the popular vote to Al Gore, and the reason the campaigns have spent over $25 million on ads in Ohio and nothing in Utah.

Created in 1787 to balance power between small and large states, the Electoral College has had a profound effect on presidential elections, leading candidates to focus on so-called battleground states instead of winning over the most total voters.

When voters cast their ballots, they're actually selecting electors set up by each state who are pledged to one of the candidates selected in primaries or other contests.

In total, there are 538 Electoral College members: states are allotted a vote for each of their two senators, each House representative (depends on population), plus three votes for the District of Columbia. The electors never gather together – instead meeting in their respective state capitals on the "first Monday after the second Wednesday in December" to symbolically carry out the vote.

The most important number on Election Day is 270 -- the number of electoral votes needed to gain a majority and become president.

The popular vote is not important on the national level, but it is at the state level. In nearly every state, the candidate who gets the most votes wins all of that state's electors. (Maine and Nebraska use a tiered system and sometimes split their votes.)

Swing States, Battleground States

Each campaign divides the electoral map into states firmly Republican ("red"), firmly Democrat ("blue"), and swing states. These swings states can be further divided into "leaning" or "battleground" states, which are just too close to call.

This year, some of the hottest battleground states are Nevada, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. This list of states is updated day to day as states can easily shift from leaning to battleground and back again.

Both major party campaigns spend almost all of their time and money on battleground states.

Historical Reasoning

The idea of the Electoral College was formed during the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The delegates to the convention worried how to balance the power between the smaller states and larger states and between the state governments and the federal government. (Although we often forget it, the United States is still a union of states who all want to be adequately represented.)

Early on, each member of the Electoral College would cast two votes for president. The runner-up would win the vice presidency. In the case of a tie, the vote was sent to the Congress.

Things quickly got complicated in the election of 1796 when the president and vice president came from separate parties and platforms, and in 1800 when it was tie but both candidates were hated by their parties.

The 12th Amendment -- passed in 1804 -- added that the Electoral College must vote for one president and one vice president.

Critics

Critics of the system still argue that the system can privilege the voters of swing states as candidates will campaign harder for their votes.

The system is weighted to benefit smaller states. For example, Wyoming, the least-populated state, gets 3 votes, giving it one Electoral College vote per 172,000 people, while California, the largest state, has 55 votes, making it one vote per 655,000 people.

Other critics say that they system is inherently undemocratic as it is possible for a candidate to win the popular vote and still lose the election as happened in 1876, 1888, and 2000.

While many proposed constitutional amendments have been written to adopt a direct popular vote instead of the indirect Electoral College system, none have successfully made it through both houses of Congress.

-- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra