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Definition: **electoral college** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Body, elected by the states, which casts the votes to elect the US president and vice president. The number of electors from each state equals the number of its representatives in both Houses of Congress. In each state, people vote for a list of electors, each list representing a particular party. Therefore, a party wins all or none of a state's electoral votes.

Summary Article: **electoral college**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

in U.S. government, the body of electors that chooses the president and vice president. The Constitution, in Article 2, Section 1, provides: "Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress." However, no senator, representative, or officer of the U.S. government may be an elector. The electors are directed by the Constitution to vote in their respective states, and Congress is authorized to count their votes.

To win, a presidential candidate must have a majority in the electoral college. Before adoption of the Twelfth Amendment (1804), in the event that no candidate had a majority, the House of Representatives (voting by states, with one vote for each state) was to choose the president from among the five candidates highest on the electoral list. Then, "after the choice of the President, the Person having the greatest Number of Votes of the Electors shall be the Vice President"; in case of a tie the Senate would choose the vice president. The Twelfth Amendment, however, resulting from the confused election of 1800 (see Jefferson, Thomas, and Burr, Aaron) provided that electors vote for president and vice president separately. It also reduced from five to three the number of candidates from among whom the House was to choose—in case no candidate had a majority (only two presidents, Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, have been elected by the House).

Changes in the System

In the early days electors were most often chosen by the state legislatures, but with the growth of democratic sentiment popular election became the rule. After 1832 (and until the Civil War) only in South Carolina did the legislature continue to choose electors. In some of the states at first the people voted for electors by congressional districts, with two being elected at large from the whole state, but with the growth of political parties this plan was largely discarded (only Maine and Nebraska currently use it) in favor of the general-ticket system (the one now prevailing), whereby a party needs only a plurality to carry the whole state. Thus in most states a voter casts a ballot for as many electors as the state is entitled to. There is nothing in the Constitution that requires either that the electors be chosen by popular vote or that the general-ticket system be employed.

Electors must be elected on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November, as required by a federal law dating from 1845. As a belated result of the disputed election of 1876 involving Samuel J. Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes, the Electoral Count Act of 1887 placed the responsibility of deciding electoral disputes mainly on the states themselves. Congress now counts the votes (a mere formality) on Jan. 6.

Objections to the System

Only at the very outset did the electoral college function as planned, and there often has been widespread dissatisfaction with the institution. The outstanding objection is that it has given the nation many so-called minority presidents, i.e., presidents who had a majority in the electoral college but lacked it in the total national popular vote—James Polk (1844), Zachary Taylor (1848), James Buchanan (1856), Abraham Lincoln (1860, but not 1864), Rutherford B. Hayes (1876), James A. Garfield (1880), Grover Cleveland (1884 and 1892), Benjamin Harrison (1888), Woodrow Wilson (1912 and 1916), Harry S. Truman (1948), John F. Kennedy (1960), Richard M. Nixon (1968, but not 1972), Bill Clinton (1992 and 1996), George W. Bush (2000, but not 2004), and Donald J. Trump (2016). Only Hayes, Harrison, Bush, and Trump, however, failed to win a plurality of the popular vote.

Since the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment, numerous attempts have been made to alter the electoral college and to change the method of presidential election, but none has succeeded. The popular-vote loss and narrow electoral-college victory of George W. Bush in 2000 again led many to question the appropriateness of the institution in a modern representative democracy. Others continued to voice strong support for the electoral college and its enhancement of the importance of less populous states (by basing the number of a states' electors on its U.S. representatives and senators), fearing that otherwise presidential candidates would focus on more populous states and on the issues important to their voters.

Bibliography

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