Electing the President

The Electoral College
Historical Background of the Electoral College

• The framers of the Constitution disagreed on how to elect a president
  • Congressional selection
  • direct popular election

• The electoral college was a compromise
  • combining features of both approaches

• The electoral college also reflects the federal nature of the Constitution
  • Ensures that the states have a role in selecting the president.
Delegating Electoral Votes

• Each state is entitled to as many electoral votes as the sum of its representation
  • U.S. House of Representatives
  • U.S. House of Senate
    • Ex. Nebraska has 2 senators and 3 representatives for a total of 5 electoral votes

• Total of 538 Electoral Votes
  • 435 House members
  • 100 senators
  • 3 electors for the District of Columbia

• 270 Electoral Votes needed to win
Choosing the Electors

• Individuals selected in each state to officially cast that state’s electoral votes.
  • Ex. Ohio selects 20 electors to cast the state’s 20 electoral votes.
• Framers anticipated that electors would be state leaders who would exercise good judgment.
• Today, party leaders select electors who are typically long-time party activists.
  • Electors almost always vote for their party’s candidates.
Results of the November Election

- Each state determines the manner of selection
- All but two states use a winner-take-all delegates statewide election system
  - Nebraska
  - Maine
- Everyone else
  - If Candidate A gets the most votes in a state, Candidate A gets all of the delegates.
The Electoral Election

• In December of election year
  • The electors gather in their respective state capitols to cast ballots for president and vice president.

• In January
  • Congress comes into session
  • They open the ballots received from each state
  • They announce the official outcome.
Electoral Complications

• To win, a candidate needs a majority,
  • 270 electoral votes.

• If no candidate has a majority
  • the House of Representatives selects the president from among the three presidential candidates with the most electoral votes.
  • If this happens, each state has one vote.
    • Happened only once
      • 1824 Congress chose John Quincy Adams over Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay.

• The Senate selects the vice president from the top two vice-presidential candidates.
The Representative of the People?

• In a close race, the popular vote winner may not win the electoral college.
  • One candidate may win states by lopsided margins while the other wins states by narrow margins.

• Electoral vote winners who lost the popular vote
  • Bush over Gore in 2000
  • Benjamin Harrison over Grover Cleveland in 1888
  • Rutherford B. Hayes over Samuel Tilden in 1876
Criticism of Electoral Voting System

• The popular vote winner may lose the presidency
• Electors may vote for persons other than their party’s presidential and vice presidential candidates
• If no candidate receives a majority, Congress will pick the president and vice president