

What Is the Electoral College?

In fact, what really happens to your vote isn't quite that simple. A whole complicated process, known as the Electoral College system, stands between your vote and who actually becomes the president. When you cast your vote, you're not actually voting *directly* for a candidate. Instead, you're voting for an *elector*, a person who has been chosen by his or her political party to represent its presidential candidate. Each state is allocated a number of electors. This number is equal to the number of its U.S. senators (two for all states), plus the number of its U.S. representatives (determined by a state's population—see map p. 12). Once all the votes have been counted, the candidate who wins the state's *popular vote* receives all of that state's electoral votes. This is the case for 48 out of 50 states. In Nebraska and Maine, the state is divided up along Congressional district lines. The candidates in those states receive electoral votes proportional to the number of congressional districts in which they win the popular vote. The two statewide electoral votes go to the candidate receiving the largest statewide tally.

Looking Back

So how can this complicated system possibly be better than the simple “one person, one vote” approach? After all, most of the time the outcomes of the

IT ALL ADDS UP Game Theory AND THE Electoral College

by Elizabeth Deatrick

Voting for a president is simple, right?

You go to the polling station, get into a booth, and indicate which candidate you prefer. Then you get an “I voted!” sticker and wait to find out who won. Well, sort of.



LEFT: America's Founding Fathers based aspects of our government on the ancient Roman concept of a senate and rule by representation.

BELOW: Electoral College members in Texas cast their ballots in 2008.

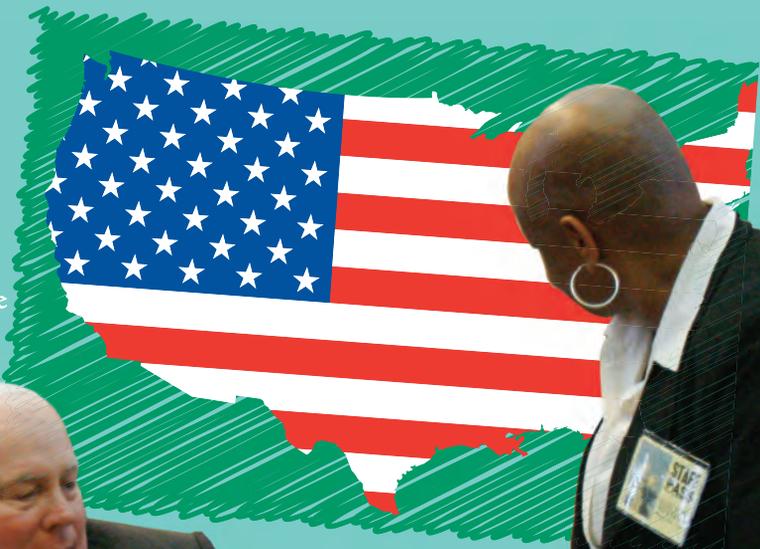
To establish their system, the Founders looked to the Ancient Roman Republic. They based the structure of the Electoral College on its Centurial Assembly system.

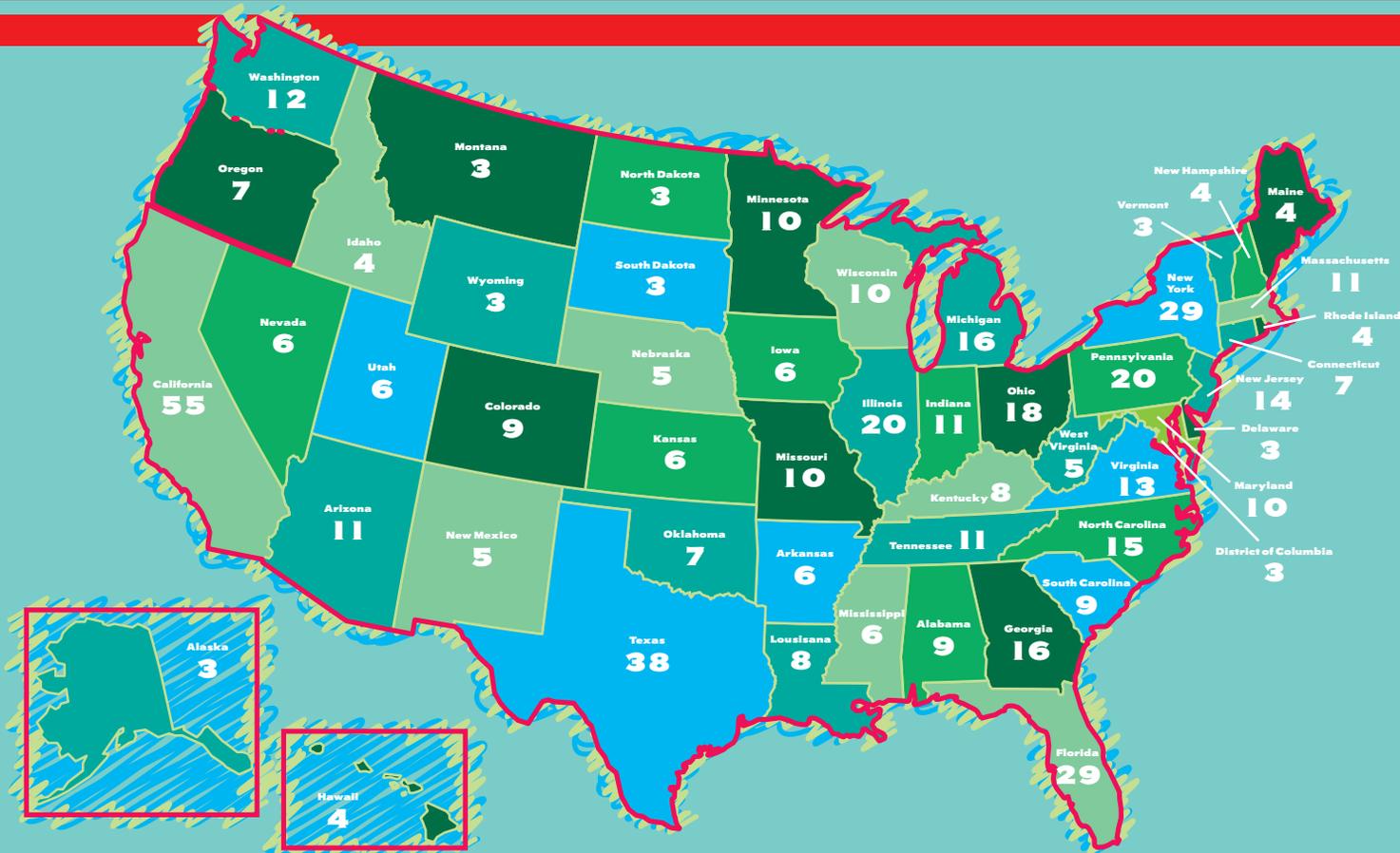
Under that method, the population of adult men eligible to vote was divided into groups of 100, called *centuries*. When an issue was presented, the members of the century would all cast a ballot. The decision receiving the majority of votes then became one vote, which was cast in the Roman Senate by the century's representative.

The Founders tried to set up a similar system: each state would select the most

popular vote and electoral vote are the same—although there have been a few memorable exceptions (see sidebar p. 13).

The answer lies in the history of the Electoral College itself. In the early days of the United States, when the Constitution was being drafted, the Founding Fathers debated the best method of electing a new president. There were several major obstacles to a successful election. The most important was that the individual states weren't used to working as one big country yet. The newly united states were suspicious of one another, and the Founders worried that each would simply vote for a candidate that would place its interests over those of the other states. In that case, the candidate with support from the state with the largest population would almost always win. In addition, the Founding Fathers wanted to avoid a political party system like we have today. They believed that a president should be chosen for his ability to govern, not his political agenda.





How many electoral votes does your state have? Is it a swing state in the 2012 election?

informed members of their region to be electors. The electors would be chosen however the states wished—for many years, the decisions were left entirely up to the state legislatures. (Now, electors are nominated by their party, or campaign in their own states to be elected to the position.) The number of electors per state would depend partly on population, but each state would also be guaranteed two. After the electors had been chosen, each state's electors would gather together and vote for the person they believed was best suited to be the future president. In theory and hopefully in practice, the electors would be intelligent enough to disregard where a candidate came from, and only consider whether or not he or she would make a good president. The system would eliminate the problem of large states dominating the polls, and the potential for political parties to form.

Gaming and Elections

Though the Founding Fathers did not realize it at the time, they were using a specialized kind of strategic decision making, known as *game theory*, when they set up the Electoral College. Game theory is a broad branch of mathematics that combines logic and social and behavioral science. It is where what one player has to optimize is determined by what the other player does. In game theory, players move, bet, or strategize simultaneously. (For example, in a game of chess, game theory can tell you whether it would be better for you to move your knight or your rook next. That information, combined with the fact that you know your opponent loves to play the Sicilian Dragon position, increases your odds of making the right move and eventually winning the game.) In setting up the Electoral College, the Founders looked at the potential situations that might arise with many different methods of voting, and using logic and their predictions of how people might act, they

crafted a system that is fairly sound and reliable. It includes a compromise that made everyone happy: To avoid big states from dominating, the Founders gave each state an elector for each senator; to recognize the size of large states, they gave an additional elector for each of the states' representatives.

Of course, the Electoral College system didn't work out quite the way the Founders hoped. Although it kept large states from dominating the polls, political parties surfaced almost immediately. Today, a typical presidential election ballot has the candidate's name in large letters, and the elector's name in tiny type or not at all. The College continues to address the balance between large and small states, but the assumption of why we need the Electoral College has changed: Today, *individuals* make their own decision about which candidate to mark on their ballot for president, and electoral votes are more of a stand-in for the popular decision. They also turn the election into a game of strategy for the candidates and their political parties—a very different one than it would be if candidates were merely trying to win the popular vote.

Not Perfect

Clearly some problems exist with this system: It's possible for a presidential candidate to win the popular vote and lose the Electoral College vote. Say that Allison Poppy and Benjamin Smart are running for president. Poppy campaigns even in states that she knows she will probably win, trying to garner as many votes as possible. Smart applies game theory strategy and focuses on the *swing states*—those with substantial numbers of

electoral votes that might “swing” in his favor but could also go for Poppy. His game strategy is to win as many electoral votes as possible. Poppy wins by a landslide in those states she

When “One Vote, One Person” Really Counts

The highly contested Bush vs. Gore election of 2000 is one of four examples in history of a candidate winning the popular vote but not the electoral vote, and so losing the presidency. Although Gore won the popular vote by 0.5 percent, a slim margin, the contest went in Bush's favor after a recount of votes in Florida gave him the state's 25 electoral votes, thus giving Bush a total of 271 out of 537 possible Electoral College votes—and the presidency. (See map below.)

A third candidate in the race, Ralph Nader of the Green Party, also may have helped upset Gore's game strategy. In the aftermath of the campaign, many Gore supporters claimed that Nader acted as a spoiler in the election, because votes for him would have likely been cast for Gore, a known environmentalist.

Nader dismissed such concerns.

While George W. Bush won the most states (red) in 2000, he still lost the popular vote to Al Gore—but it was close (47.9 percent for Bush to Gore's 48.4 percent). Gore took the most populous, electoral vote-rich states of New York and California too. Still, when a recount vote in Florida gave that state's 25 electoral votes to Bush, he won the presidency with a total of 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266.



anticipated winning, and receives a reasonable number of votes in the states that Smart wins. Smart wins his states by a very slim margin, and gets only a few votes in the states that Poppy wins. She gets more total votes than

Smart (the popular vote). He, however, wins the electoral vote—either because he won populous states with many electoral votes, or because he simply won more states (and electoral votes) overall. Hail to the Chief—President Benjamin Smart!

So, if the electoral system has flaws, what would it take to change it? A lot! Small states have a vested interest in keeping the system in place. Remember, all states, big or small, automatically have two electors, one for each senator, plus a number of additional electors based on the state's population. This means that the smaller states actually have more of an electoral vote impact *per person* than the larger states. Changing to a popular

vote would rob them of that power. Since Electoral College procedures are written into the Constitution, a 3/4 majority of states would be needed to approve a Constitutional amendment doing away with the electoral vote—an extremely unlikely event!

Watch Closely

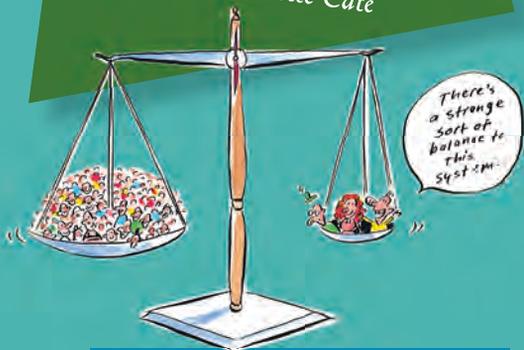
Take heart, though. Whether or not you believe the Electoral College should prevail or be done away with (see sidebar below), you can at least have fun watching the candidates' strategies unfold. As the 2012 campaign draws to a close, who do you think has used game theory to their advantage? Which candidate is concentrating his efforts on swing states, and who is best responding to his opponent's criticisms? Check the map on page 12 to see how many electoral votes are available in your state in November, and keep a close watch on the polls to see who is likely to win them. The game is in full swing! *Who will be the next president?*

POPULAR VOTE —

The largest portion of qualified votes cast in an election

The Electoral College: Keep It or Leave It?

illustration by Annette Cate



MANY VOTERS HAVE STRONG OPINIONS about whether we should keep the Electoral College or not. Here are just a few of the arguments made on both sides of the issue:

PROS



+ The Electoral College Fairly Balances Voting Power—States with large urban populations have more voters than smaller states. Thus, candidates often cater to those states during their campaigns. The Electoral College makes sure that states with smaller populations still have a say in the election.

+ The Electoral College Promotes Federalism—The Electoral College recognizes the importance of individual states by maintaining a formal federal structure of government, while preserving political power within the states.

CONS



- The Electoral College Is Outdated—Voters do not need electors to pick their president for them. With modern technology improving communications and travel, candidates can organize nationwide campaigns. As a result, voters can easily learn about issues and make their own informed choices.

- The Winner-Take-All System Seems Unfair—Almost all states award all their electoral votes to whoever wins the popular vote. So, the rest of the votes in those states become meaningless.



What do you think? Send your comments to: **TIME FOR A CHANGE? ODYSSEY**, 30 Grove St. Suite C, Peterborough,

NH 03458 or email them to odysseymagazine@caruspub.com