

POLICY NOTE

Key Findings

1. The U.S. has the most successful electoral system in the world, with the widest-possible voting for nearly all citizens over age 18.
2. One reason American democracy is so successful is that people choose the president through 50 state elections, ensuring that every vote matters.
3. Voting by state means everyone's vote counts, whether they live in a large state, like California, or a small one, like Wyoming.
4. Some presidential candidates "waste" their support by getting a surplus of votes in a few large states, while failing to win enough states overall to prevail in the electoral college.
5. When their favored candidate loses, critics want to repeal the electoral college and take any meaningful vote away from residents of mid-sized and small states.
6. When their favored candidate wins, however, they say the system works just fine.
7. Repealing the electoral college would disenfranchise residents of small and mid-size states, since only votes in the large states would determine the outcome of the elections.

The electoral college means everyone's vote counts

WPC partners with The Heritage Foundation on a new study that explains how repealing our current election system would disenfranchise people living in small and mid-sized states

by Paul Guppy, Vice President for Research

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Introduction

The United States is a uniquely successful democracy. Over a period of 244 years, it has extended voting and self-government to more people over more generations than any other country in the history of the world.

There is a reason government of, for and by the people has worked so well in America. The United States has the most successful electoral system of any country, with the most open and widest-possible opportunity for voting frequently at all levels of government, and with almost no voting restrictions for any citizen 18 years of age and older.¹

Further, the U.S. has expanded the franchise in every national election, with more people voting each time than ever before.

The success of U.S. elections is described in a new study from Washington Policy Center and the Heritage Foundation called "The Essential Electoral College," which explains in clear terms how Americans choose their president.

The success of the electoral college

The reason the system works so well is that Americans vote for president by state, with each state's influence in the electoral college based on population.² Large states have the most influence, as they should, but people living in small states are included too. In other words, everyone's vote counts.

In the presidential election, the candidate who gains the most votes in each state wins all the electoral votes of that state. The number of each state's electoral votes is determined by its representation in Congress – the number of its representatives in the House of Representatives (which is based on population), plus its two senators.

The largest state by population, California, has 53 representatives in Congress, plus its two senators, giving it 55 electoral votes in presidential elections. The smallest states, like Montana, Alaska and Delaware, each have one representative in Congress, plus their two senators, giving them three electoral votes each.

¹ The right to vote is restricted for people serving in prison and for some convicted felons.

² Constitution of the United States, Article II, Section 1.

The combined representation of all states in Congress is 535 (435 representatives plus 100 senators). The District of Columbia has three electoral votes, making a nationwide total of 538 electoral votes. The candidate who wins elections in enough states, in any combination, and gains a majority of electoral votes, wins the national election. In other words, the candidate who gets 270 or more electoral votes wins the presidency.

Past presidents did not always win a majority of the national popular vote

The winning candidate among 50 state elections does not always win the most votes nationally. In 1992, Bill Clinton won just 43% of the national popular vote, but won 370 electoral college votes, and the presidency, because the majority of the national vote was split between two other candidates.

In 1996, Clinton again fell short of a national majority, with 49% of the popular vote, but was easily re-elected with 379 electoral votes.

Some of the country's greatest presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln in 1860, did not receive a majority of the national vote, but won the electoral college vote handily. The electoral college ensures the election produces a decisive result, providing the country with a clear winner.

Opponents of voting by state

Some people don't like this successful election system, especially when their candidate loses. They say they oppose allowing Americans to vote by state.

Some candidates run poor campaigns and "waste" votes by building up too much support in big states while neglecting others. They end up losing in enough states to fall short of the 270 electoral votes needed to win, even though their vote surplus in big states may mean they gained a national majority.

Critics want a single national election only when their candidate loses

Of course critics only want to end the electoral college when their favored candidate loses. In years when their candidate wins they think the system works just fine.

That is why there is so much talk now about ending the electoral college – some people did not like the decision of the voters in 2016, and they suspect they might not like it this year either. The same attacks on letting Americans vote by states were made after the close national election in 2000.

Critics want a single national election. They want to stop people from voting by 50 state elections proportioned by population, because they think it will give their side a better chance to win.



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Throwing democracy into turmoil

However, by trying to destroy the electoral college that has worked in 58 presidential elections in row, critics risk throwing our democracy into turmoil. In recent elections, the U.S. has had enough mean-spirited controversy and hostile divisions in its politics already without twisting the rules in an effort to gain an unfair advantage for one candidate over another.

Holding 50 state elections for president, with each state's electoral votes reflecting its population, means everyone gets to participate and every vote counts. Critics want to disenfranchise people who live in mid-size and small states, because they think they can get the presidency with the votes of big-population states only.

Without the balancing effect of the electoral college, the country would be governed mostly by people living in California, New York, Florida, Texas and other large states. The votes of people living in mid-size states, like Washington, and small-population states, like Montana and Rhode Island, would count for little.

Conclusion

In response to this danger, Washington Policy Center has joined with the prestigious Heritage Foundation in distributing the seminal study "The Essential Electoral College," mentioned above. This short but insightful work reviews the reasons the electoral college was created, how it ensures the votes of all people in all states matter, and how it has successfully guarded our participatory democracy through nearly two-and-a-half centuries.

The study provides facts and data about the central role the electoral college plays in protecting U.S. democratic institutions. A copy is available on request, and is online at www.washingtonpolicy.org.

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