

How America picks its President

Find out about the voting system that is key to determining the winner.

On November 5, Americans will go to the polls to choose the next US President. Many will already have mailed in their ballots. But the process isn't as simple as checking off the candidate they want to win. Voters pick a President by name on the ballot, but they're not actually choosing that person—they're voting for members of the Electoral College.

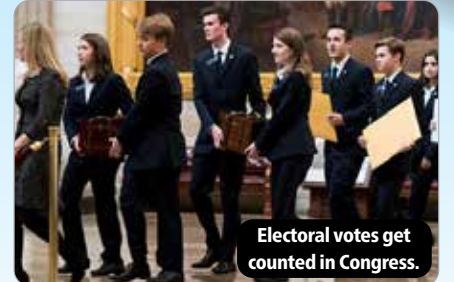
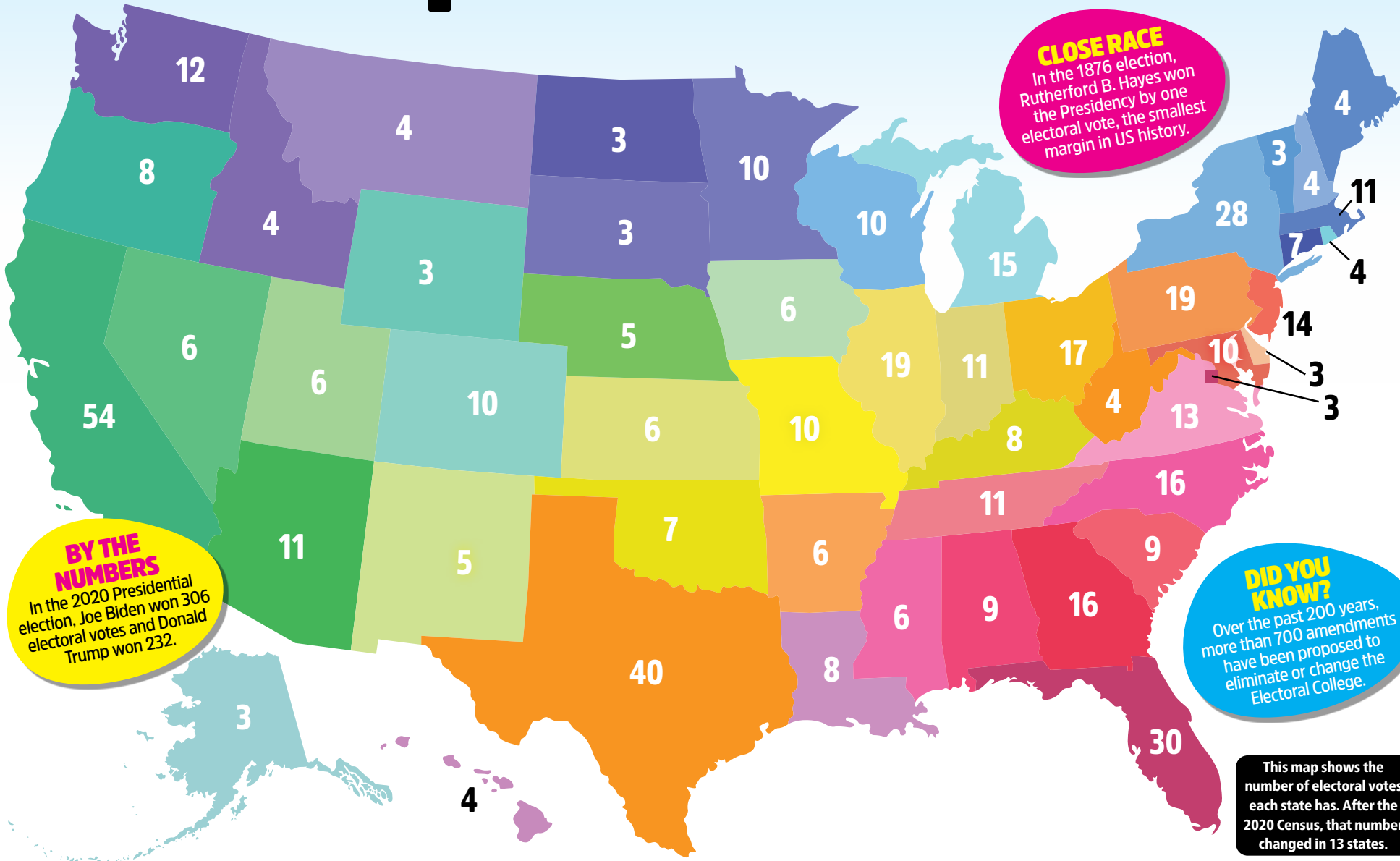


The US Constitution

What is the Electoral College?

The Electoral College was established in the US Constitution (the nation's highest law). It is a group of 538 people, called electors, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Their names aren't on the ballot, but they officially elect the President. Each state has the same number of electors as it does representatives in Congress (the branch of government that makes laws). States with larger populations have more electors. California, the state with the highest population, has 54. States with small populations, like Wyoming, have three. Every state has at least three electors, and each elector has one vote. In order to win the Presidency, a candidate must get 270 electoral votes. This is different from winning the popular vote, which is the total number of votes candidates receive from individual voters nationwide.

Who are the electors?
Electors are chosen before each Presidential election. Political parties in each state nominate them. They can be citizens, state leaders or lawmakers, or even people who make big donations to a candidate's campaign. The electors pledge to vote for their party's candidate.



Electoral votes get counted in Congress.

How does the Electoral College work?

In 48 states and the District of Columbia, the candidate who wins the state's popular vote receives all its electoral votes. (Maine and Nebraska divide up the votes by district.) In December, electors meet in their state capital to officially vote for the winner in their state. The US Congress meets to count those votes in January, and the new President is inaugurated (sworn in) after that.

How did the Electoral College come about?

In 1787, the men drafting the Constitution wanted to make sure no person or group had too much power. Some thought people should vote directly for the President, while others wanted Congress to decide. Another option was voting based on state population. But slavery existed then, and some people did not think slaves should be included in the population count. Some states wanted to count them, and others didn't. Finally the states agreed to count three out of every five slaves. This compromise formed the basis of the Electoral College system.



Is the Electoral College fair?

Not everyone thinks so. In a 2024 survey, 63% of Americans said the popular vote should replace the electoral vote. They say voters choose a person for the top job and the candidate with the most votes should win. In addition, people who vote for a candidate who doesn't receive any of their state's electoral votes can feel that their vote didn't count. Others say the system favors the two major parties (Republicans and Democrats) and prevents candidates from a third party (like Independents) from reaching 270 electoral votes.

What happens if...

The Electoral College can sometimes create an unclear outcome in an election, especially because there is an even number of electors (538).



Trump and Clinton

...one person wins the popular vote and another wins the electoral vote?

The winner of the electoral vote is President. This happened in 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes, but Donald Trump won the electoral vote 304–227.



Gore and Bush

...there's a tie?

If the electoral votes are split evenly, Congress decides the winner. If the popular vote is close in a state, candidates can ask for a recount there. In the 2000 race between Texas Governor George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore, this happened in Florida. Bush won the election.



The Supreme Court

...electors change parties?

In 2016, seven electors voted for candidates in a different party. These "faithless electors" didn't change the outcome of the election. But in July 2020, the US Supreme Court (the highest court in the country) decided that states can require electors to stick to their pledged candidate.