

The Electoral College

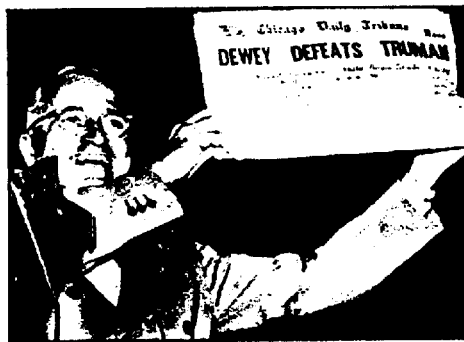
The actual selection of the president and vice president every four years is not made by the direct vote of the people on election day in November. The "real" election takes place on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December, and only 538 people vote. These people are called **electors** and make up what is known as the **Electoral College**. The Electoral College was created by the framers of the Constitution. It provides for an indirect voting procedure for choosing the leaders of the executive branch.

Before election day in November, each party with a candidate running for the presidency selects a slate of potential electors. Each state is given a number of electors equal to its total number of United States Representatives and Senators. (The District of Columbia was given three electoral votes by the 23rd Amendment, which was ratified in 1961.) Thus on election day in November, voters actually are choosing which slate of electors will be sent to the state capital to vote in December.

The current practice in all of the states is that the candidate who wins the largest number of a state's popular votes (**not necessarily a majority**) in the November general election receives **all** that state's electoral votes. Therefore, if a candidate wins by one percent in your state, that candidate will receive every one of your state's electoral votes. The electoral votes are counted before a joint session of congress, and the candidate who receives a majority is certified as the winner of the election.

In the event that no candidate receives a majority of the electoral vote, the selection of the president is made by the House of Representatives. In the 1824 election, with four major candidates running, Andrew Jackson, the candidate with the most

electoral votes (99) and the greatest number of popular votes (153,544), lost the presidency to John Quincy Adams, who had only 84 electoral votes and 108,740 popular votes. With three opponents, Jackson failed to win a majority of the total electoral votes. When the House voted to choose the president, as provided in the Constitution, Jackson's opponents united against him, and a majority of the states' representatives voted for Adams. There have been two other occasions on which the newly elected president received **fewer** popular votes than his opponent. They occurred in 1876 and 1888 (refer to



Reelected President Harry S Truman gets the last laugh. (1948)

the "**Transfer of Power**" Poster for comparison data).

Because of the winner-take-all nature of the Electoral College, the same thing could easily have happened in several other elections. In 1948, if 40,000 voters in Ohio, Illinois, and California had voted the other way, Republican Thomas Dewey would have won the presidency in the Electoral College rather than Democrat Harry S Truman, even though Truman would still have had a popular vote advantage of nearly two million votes. In the 1960 election, John F. Kennedy's total margin of victory over Richard M. Nixon in the popular vote was less than 120,000,

but he won substantially in the Electoral College. If 4,430 voters in Illinois and 4,991 in Missouri had voted Republican rather than Democratic, Nixon would have been president.

Finally, had a small number of people voted differently, the 1968 election would have wound up in the House of Representatives. George Wallace, Governor of Alabama and candidate of the American Independent Party, polled more than 9.9 million popular votes and received 46 electoral votes. The race between the two major party candidates, Nixon and Humphrey, was very close. Nixon received 812,000 more votes than Humphrey and won the electoral vote 301 to 191. If only 42,000 votes in three key states had gone to Humphrey, the election would have been thrown into the House of Representatives because Nixon would not have had a majority of the electoral vote.

Given the problems experienced with the Electoral College system, the confusion its complexity has created in the minds of voters, and its apparent undemocratic tendencies, why does this country still rely on it? Although there have been numerous proposals for reform, there has not been a clear consensus as to what would be a better system. Critics of a direct national popular election to choose the president and vice president have warned of ominous side-effects: a weakening of the two-party system, a decline in the power of the states, and a greater danger of disputed vote counts and the consequent need for costly, time-consuming recounts. The supporters of the current system believe that it has worked satisfactorily for two hundred years and warn that to change the election system in a fundamental way might do more harm than good. What do you think?