How the United States of America Elects a President

The United States of America uses an electoral college to choose its president and vice president. An electoral college is a group of delegates, or electors, chosen every four years by each state for the presidential election. Each state has as many electors as it has federal representatives and senators. (This number comes from the U.S. Census.) For example, in 2012 the state of Illinois has two U.S. senators and 19 U.S. representatives, so it has 21 electors. A presidential candidate must win 270 or a majority of electoral votes to win the election.

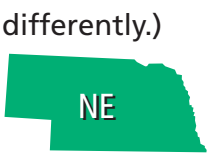
Do You Know?

In about half the states, electors are not required to vote for whom the public voted. Electors rarely vote differently from the public vote, but many can if they choose.

1 State political parties choose electors for their candidate.

2 The public votes on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

3 States award electors based on the public's vote. In most cases the candidate that wins the most votes in the state wins all of that state's electors. (Maine and Nebraska divide electors differently.)



4 Electors for the winning party cast their votes for president and vice president.

5 On Jan. 6, both houses of Congress meet together to officially count the electoral votes and announce the winners. Congress also might vote in the case of a tie.

6 On Jan. 20 an inauguration formally begins the new presidency.

Courtesy of the White House Photograph Office/NARA

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