#### [The Electoral College, Pro and Con](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/case/3pt/electoral.html" \l "fn2#fn2)

The Electoral College mechanism has not lacked for critics over the years. The basic objection is that the system clearly has the potential to frustrate the popular will in the selection of a president and a vice president. Because of the aggregation of electoral votes by state, it is possible that a candidate might win the most popular votes but lose in the Electoral College voting. This happened in 1824 (when the election was thrown into the House), in 1876 (when there were disputed electors from several states), and in 1888. The winner-take-all system literally means that the candidate team that wins most of the popular votes (the plurality vote winner) in a particular state gets all of the electoral votes in that state, and the loser gets none, even if the loss is by a slim popular-vote margin. Thus a candidate who fails to carry a particular state receives not a single electoral vote in that state for the popular votes received. Since presidential elections are won by electoral-not popular-votes, it is the electoral vote tally that election-night viewers watch for and that tells the tale.

Another problem cited by critics is the possibility of "faithless electors" who defect from the candidate to whom they are pledged. Most recently, in 1976, a Republican elector in the state of Washington cast his vote for Ronald Reagan instead of Gerald Ford, the Republican presidential candidate. Earlier, in 1972, a Republican elector in Virginia deserted Nixon to vote for the Libertarian party candidate. And in 1968, Nixon lost another Virginia elector, who bolted to George Wallace.

The main danger of faithless electors is that the candidate who wins the popular vote could wind up one or two votes short of a majority in the Electoral College and could lose the election on a technicality. This prospect becomes more probable when there are third-party or independent candidates who could negotiate with electors before they vote.

Many see the apportioning of the Electoral College votes by states as a basic flaw, because it gives each of the smaller states at least three electoral votes, even though on a straight population basis some might be entitled to only one or two.

Critics of the system also argue that the possibility that an election could be thrown into the House of Representatives is undemocratic. In such a case each state has a single vote, which gives the sparsely populated or small states equal weight with more populous states such as California or New York. The two occasions when it occurred (1800 and 1824) were marked by charges of "deals" and "corrupt bargains." In any event, giving each state one vote in the House of Representatives regardless of the number of people represented is not consistent with the widely accepted concept of one-person-one-vote. Also, one vote per state in the House of Representatives may not necessarily result in a choice that replicates the electoral vote winner in that state in November.

Those who argue in favor of retaining the present system state that there is too much uncertainty over whether any other method would be an improvement. They point out that many of the complaints about the Electoral College apply just as well to the Senate and, to some extent, to the House. They fear that reform could lead to the dismantling of the federal system.

Another argument made by defenders of the Electoral College is that the present method serves American democracy well by fostering a two-party system and thwarting the rise of splinter parties such as those that have plagued many European democracies. The winner-take-all system means that minor parties get few electoral votes and that a president who is the choice of the nation as a whole emerges. In the present system, splinter groups could not easily throw an election into the House. Supporters feel strongly that if the electors fail to agree on a majority president, it is in keeping with the federal system that the House of Representatives, voting as states, makes the selection.

Supporters also argue that the Electoral College system democratically reflects population centers by giving urban areas electoral power; that is where the most votes are. Thus together, urban states come close to marshaling the requisite number of electoral votes to elect a president.

A final argument is that for the most part, the Electoral College system has worked. No election in this century has been decided in the House of Representatives. Further, the winner's margin of votes is usually enhanced in the electoral vote-a mathematical happening that can make the winner in a divisive and close election seem to have won more popular support than he actually did. This is thought to aid the healing of election scars and help the new president in governing.

[www.ksg.harvard.edu/case/3pt/electoral.html](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/case/3pt/electoral.html)

**The Pro’s and Con’s of the Electoral College System**

Arguments against the Electoral College:

* + The possibility of electing a minority president (meaning one without the absolute majority of popular votes.)

A third party candidate draws enough votes that no one candidate receives the 270 votes necessary to win the election.

* + The risk of so-called “faithless” Electors. Electors are supposed to vote for the candidate they represent, but they don’t have to.
  + The possible role of the Electoral College in depressing voter turnout. Citizens feel their vote doesn’t matter because the number of electoral votes has already been assigned.
  + The failure of the Electoral College to reflect the public will. The winner-take-all system can allow a candidate with a smaller number of popular votes in the general election to win the Electoral College and the presidency.

Arguments for the Electoral College:

* Promotes unity in the nation by requiring a candidate to have support from various regions in order to be elected. A candidate cannot receive support from only one region and expect to be President regardless of the size of the population.
* Enhances the status of minority groups. Small numbers of voters can make a difference in whether a candidate receives all of the electoral votes for a state or not.
* Contributes to the political stability of the nation. Promotes a two-party system. It is very difficult for a third party to win enough votes to have a chance of winning the election.
* Maintains a federal system of government and representation. Represents the State’s choice for president and allows the state some power in decision making.