

TOP STORY

## How the Electoral College affects elections, and what could be done about it

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Most adults living in this country know divisiveness defines the current political landscape.

But this isn't the first time the various political leaders in America could not all agree on one thing.

The creation of the Electoral College, the body that votes to choose the person who will serve as president and vice president of the United States, was created via a compromise during the Constitutional Convention in 1787 in Philadelphia, said Claire Abernathy, an assistant professor of political science at Stockton University.

Fifty-five delegates from 12 of the 13 states at that time came from across the country and gathered to develop the Constitution, Abernathy said.

“Initially, they decided Congress would appoint the president, but they weren't entirely satisfied with that. It didn't have a clear separation between the branches of the government that way,” Abernathy said. “So, as a compromise, they developed the Electoral College.”



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The Electoral College has representatives from each state, who are not members of Congress, who are appointed as electors. They cast their state's votes for president and vice president.

“That is the mechanism that determines who wins the presidency and the vice presidency,” Abernathy said.

The number of electors in each state is based on the number of representatives in the House of Representatives plus two people representing the two senators, Abernathy said. A person needs 270 electoral votes to be named president.

New Jersey's 14 electors will meet during the afternoon of Dec. 14 at the State Capitol in Trenton, Abernathy said. Electors are usually party loyalists, activists, or local or state elected officials, she said.

“They officially cast ballots for president and vice president, a separate one for each. Those ballots are collected, sealed and sent down to D.C.,” Abernathy said. “This will be happening across all the states Dec. 14. Sealed electoral votes will be opened Jan. 6 in the Senate.”



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In 29 of the 50 states, there is some type of requirement for the electors' vote to reflect the will of the people or penalty involved if the electors' vote is out of line, Abernathy said.

New Jersey doesn't have this requirement, Abernathy said.

Electors who vote for or attempt to vote for a candidate they are not pledged to are called faithless electors. In 2016, faithless electors voted for Colin Powell, John Kasich, Ron Paul, Bernie Sanders and Faith Spotted Eagle.

Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 by earning 304 electoral votes compared with Hillary Clinton's 227, but the Clinton-Kaine ticket collected almost 3 million more popular votes than the Trump-Pence ticket.

In the wake of this discrepancy, talk arose again around the idea of abolishing the Electoral College, just as it did when George W. Bush beat Al Gore in 2000. Gore gained 50.9 million votes versus Bush's 50.4 million votes, but Bush was named president because he earned 271 electoral votes compared with Gore's 266.



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One of the main reasons for keeping the Electoral College is that it is an institution that provides stability, Abernathy said.

“We know how it works, and any change to the way we run elections that changes the Electoral College, that got rid of it, would result in a lot of uncertainty and might shift the way candidates have to campaign or who the decisive voters are,” Abernathy said.

There are persuasive arguments to change or abolish the Electoral College as well, Abernathy said.

Abolishing or getting rid of the Electoral College would require a Constitutional amendment because it is part of the Constitution, which calls for two-thirds of the House and Senate voting to make the change and then three-quarters of the states signing on also, Abernathy said.



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Abernathy usually spends more time talking to her students about reforming the Electoral College than about it being abolished.

New Jersey and most other states use a winner-take-all formula. If you win the state, you earn all the electors. Maine and Nebraska use a state district allocation plan, Abernathy said.

“They give two electoral votes to the statewide popular vote winner,” she said. “The remaining electoral votes go to the winner of the popular vote in each congressional district.”

Another reform would be proportional allocation, where candidates would receive electoral votes based on the proportion of the vote that they earned in the state.

“So if you had a Democratic candidate get 60% of the vote in New Jersey, they would get 60% of the electoral votes, which would be eight instead of 14,” Abernathy said.

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