

Q & A

I don't understand the point of this tool; why wouldn't my vote count just as much as anyone else's?

It's a combination of two things: (1) American citizens don't directly vote for the president and vice president of the United States, and (2) certain states have some political, cultural and demographic factors that influence the way that state will vote; either strongly "red" or strongly "blue."

Wait, what? If I'm not voting directly for the president of my country...who is?

The U.S. uses a system called the Electoral College, made up of "electors" pledged to vote for a presidential candidate. While each state has its own method for selecting electors, the number of electors per state is equal to the number of members in Congress that each state currently has. Thus, each state has at least two electors, equivalent to the number of senators, plus a few more which are equivalent to the number of Representatives. This number varies because each state has a different number of Representatives (based on state population). Currently, there are 538 electors, equal to the 435 members of the House of Representatives, and 100 senators, with the addition of three electors for the District of Columbia (which is not a state, but gets as many electors as the least populous state).

So who chooses electors?

It differs for each state, but, technically, the voters do. Usually, since any given elector is pledging to vote for a specific candidate, the political parties themselves will nominate electors at the state's party convention, or by a vote of the party's central committee in each state. They may be State-elected officials, party leaders, or anyone who has a personal or political affiliation with the Presidential candidate. They cannot be a Senator, a Representative, or anyone holding an office of trust or profit under the United States. So, if you're keeping up, essentially each candidate and party has designated electors for a state. The electors are somewhat invisible to the American voters. Then, on the day of the general election, each state's voters choose their electors by way of voting for the presidential candidate. In some states, the electors' names actually appear on the ballot below the name of the candidates running for president. So basically, when you fill out your ballot checking off

the name of a presidential candidate, you're not actually voting for that person, but rather you are voting to empower the electors who have pledged to vote for that candidate on your behalf ("your" being, more accurately, the voice of the majority of the state). In turn, the elector "votes" the way the majority of the state has asked it to. Given that the elector has pledged itself to a candidate, this means that the candidate who wins the popular vote should win the Electoral College as well.

How is the winner of the popular vote ensured to win the electoral vote then?

With the exception of Maine and Nebraska, all 48 remaining states, along with the District of Columbia, operate on a "winner-take-all" system. This means electors who have previously pledged to the presidential candidate who wins the majority of votes in a state become the electors for that state. After electors have been chosen, the votes for president work the same way: once the popular vote is in, whichever candidate has won the majority of popular votes gets all the electors' votes for that state (hence "winner-take-all"). Then, all the electoral colleges' votes are tallied, and the candidate with the majority of electoral votes wins. These votes are tallied again at the end here because each state has a different number of electors based on its population, as explained above. So for example, if Candidate A beats Candidate B in California 50.1% to 49.9%, Candidate A thus receives all of California's 55 electoral votes (instead of its percentage equivalent).

Has the Electoral College vote ever been different than the popular vote?

While it is said that this should be statistically rare in elections with two candidates, it has happened on 4 occasions, the most recent occurring in the 2000 presidential race between George Bush and Al Gore. Gore won the popular vote but Bush was elected by the Electoral College and thus became president.

Wait how did that happen then? If electors pledge to vote for the majority and one dude won the majority vote...?

That year was a very close race, and in the state of Florida, Bush's margin of victory for the popular vote triggered a mandatory recount, according to Florida state law (he only had won by 300 votes). After the mandatory machine recount, Gore requested hand recounts for four Florida counties, as provided under Florida state law. In certain counties, the law required recounts as well, until it became a matter for the Supreme Court. In the Supreme Court Case Bush v. Gore, the decision was announced on December 12, 2000 that ended the recounts, awarding Florida's votes to Bush and

granting him the victory. That year, the Green Party also won 2.7% of the popular vote, with Ralph Nader as its presidential candidate. Many democrats were pretty unhappy about that, because they think that the small amount of popular votes he received were “stolen” from Gore, and would have helped seal victory for him to the point where the drama in Florida wouldn’t have mattered as much. TL;DR: Gore had had 543,895 more popular votes than Bush. After the recount, Bush won the state of Florida by a mere 537 popular votes. Because Florida is a winner-take-all state, Bush received all of the electoral votes by winning this miniscule margin of the (half-recounted) popular vote. In the end, Bush won with 271 electoral votes (the winner needed to receive 270 electoral votes).

I don’t understand why it can’t just be a popular vote...how is this “more fair” to the citizens of the United States??

A lot of people ask that same question, and there has been some push to change this system for this exact reason. The theory is, if we had a direct popular vote system, candidates would campaign more in the states with the highest population, while (hypothetically) ignoring smaller states, which (hypothetically) would weaken smaller states’ political voices.

Well so then what’s the deal with these “swing states?” Isn’t that just the same deal – presidential candidates only focus on them now instead of the most populous states. What’s the difference?

Basically, due to political, cultural and demographic consistencies among citizens of a state, some states are considered more predictable when it comes to its political leanings. While recent research has shown that there are actually a lot more “purple” states than “red” (republican) or “blue” (democratic), the winner-take-all system of the electoral college really dictates that a state will quite predictably vote blue or red. This is statistically reliable to the point that if a citizen in a state votes contrary to the popular leaning, it is not likely to make much of a difference if a majority of that state (even if by only a slight margin) is going to vote consistently democratic or consistently republican, the entire state’s electoral votes will go to said candidate. Due to this system, candidates are less likely to spend time and money campaigning in states that they know they will win or lose by a sizeable, dependable margin.

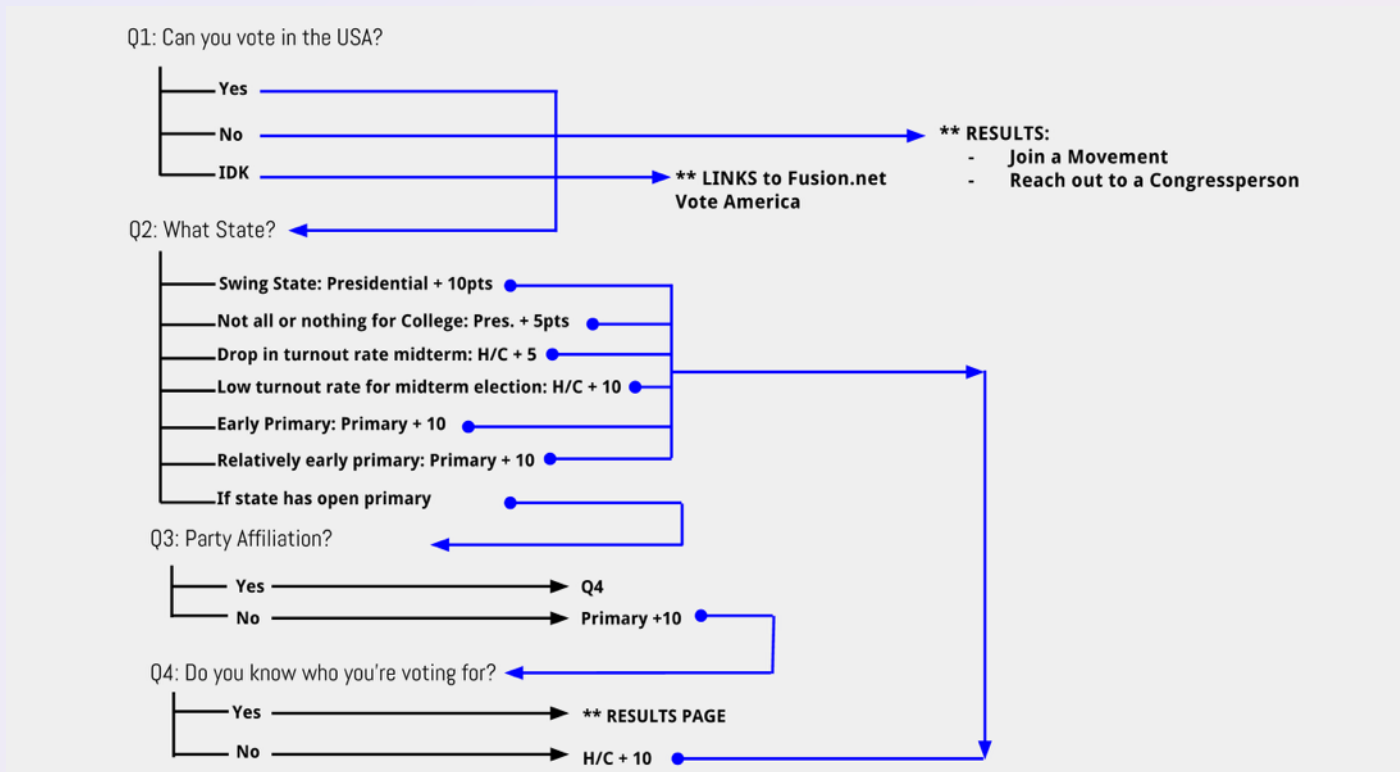
They instead spend their time and money on these swing states. “Swing” means no single candidate or party has overwhelming support in securing electoral votes. This is because candidates for president need to worry more about electoral votes instead of popular votes, and as such is supposed to “save” smaller states from being ignored. These states are usually pretty consistent, though they are not the same every year. There are a few things that make a state identify as a swing, and it is based on statewide opinion polls, political party registration numbers, and results of previous elections. The people in these swing states tend to have a greater influence over which candidate is elected president, because the popular vote of these states will determine how many “extra” electoral votes a candidate will get on top of the ones he or she can expect from states that tend to vote in their party’s favor. This is supposed to be fairer than popular votes, though research is increasingly suggesting that it actually is not very representative of citizens in a given state.

Well this was all a bummer, what should I do to get my voice heard?

Fret not! There are a number of ways to make sure the political issues you care about are taken care of by your government, and, lucky for you, we’ve come up with some ways to help you maximize your political influence! First, answer these questions to let us know where you live and a little bit about your political affiliations, and we’ll let you know based on those answers how you can best be heard. While the presidential election is surely important, it is not the only mechanism for voters to make sure their government hears their concerns.

Here’s how we constructed the system:

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