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How To Win The Presidency With 23 Percent Of The Popular Vote

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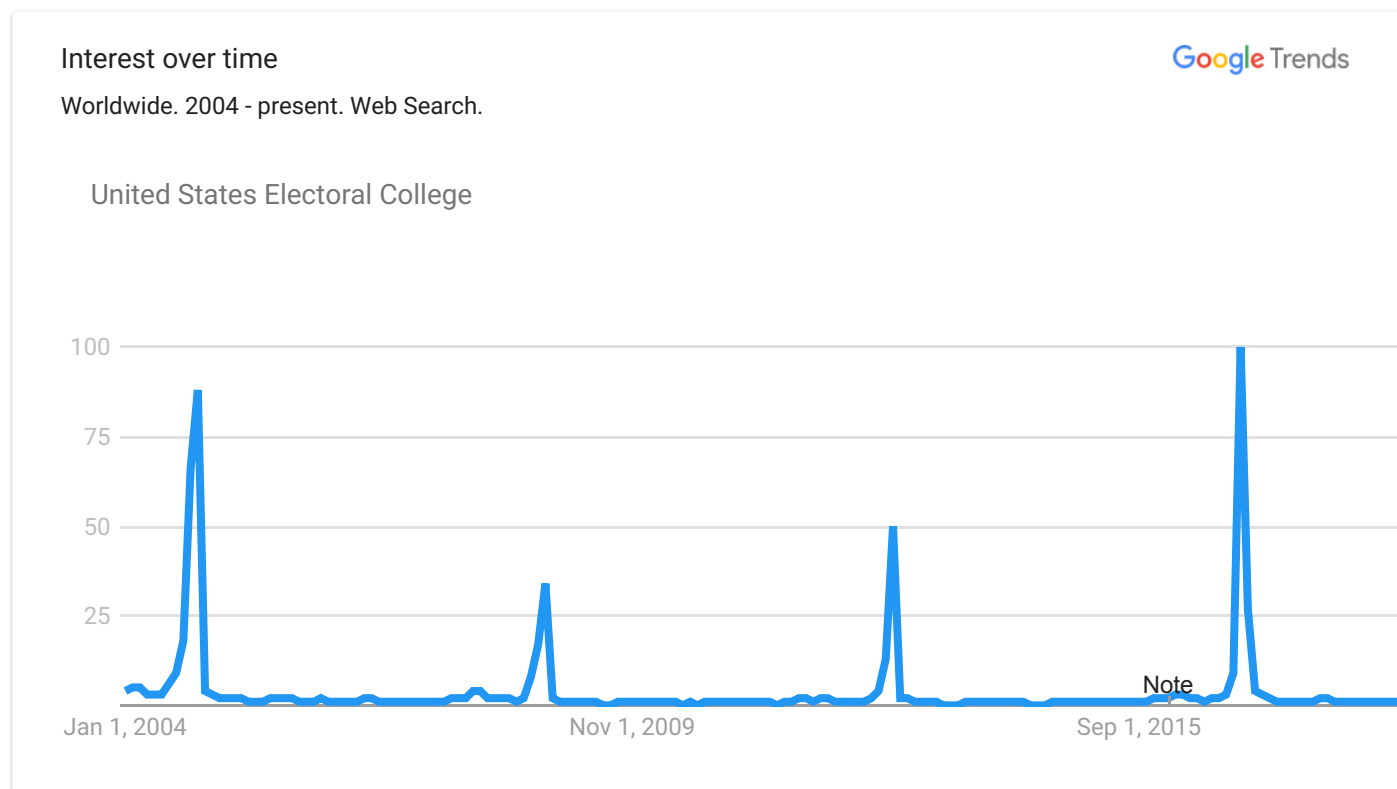
DANIELLE KURTZLEBEN



Rakeda Leaks (right) and Candice Williams fill out Electoral College maps on election night 2008.

Bloomberg via Getty Images

It's that time again: time for Americans to figure out how, exactly, their presidential election works. "Electoral College" searches spike every four years, just before Election Day, according to Google ... and the search volume is picking up right now.



Long story short: To win the presidency, you don't have to win the majority of the *popular* vote. You have to win the majority of *electoral* votes — that is, 270 of them.* In most states, a candidate wins electoral votes by winning the most voters.

So. Win a state by just one vote, and you win all of its electoral votes (unless you live in Nebraska or Maine, which divvy up their votes a little differently).



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Why Do We Vote On Tuesdays?

This can lead to off-kilter election results — in 2000, for example, Democrat Al Gore won the popular vote by a few hundred thousand votes, but lost the presidency by five electoral votes. So we wondered: Just how few votes would a candidate need to win 270 electoral votes?

We decided to find out. A candidate only needs to win the 11 states with the most electoral votes to hit 270. Assuming only two candidates (a big assumption; see below) and that one candidate won all of those states by just one vote, and then didn't win a

single vote in any of the other states (or D.C.), how many votes would that candidate have to win? It depends on how you do the math. Either way, it's far less than half.

Initially when we did this story, we found that if you start with the biggest-electoral-vote states, the answer is 27 percent. However, we have an update: as Andrej Schoeke very nicely pointed out to us on Twitter, there's another way to do it (via CGP Grey) that requires even less of the popular vote: start with the smallest-electoral-vote states. Our math went through a few iterations on this but by our final math, in 2012 that could have meant winning the presidency with only around 23 percent of the popular vote.

How To Win An Election With 23 Percent Of The Vote

Starting from the smallest-electoral-vote states, a candidate could have won the presidency in 2012 with only around 23 percent of the popular vote.

STATE	TOTAL VOTES CAST IN 2012	VOTES NEEDED TO WIN STATE	STATE'S ELECTORAL VOTES
Wyoming	249,061	124,531	3
Vermont	299,290	149,646	3
South Dakota	363,815	181,908	3
North Dakota	322,627	161,314	3
Montana	484,484	242,243	3
District of Columbia	293,764	146,883	3
Delaware	413,921	206,961	3
Alaska	300,495	150,248	3
Rhode Island	446,049	223,025	4
New Hampshire	710,972	355,487	4
Maine	724,623	362,313	4
Idaho	656,742	328,372	4
Hawaii	434,697	217,349	4
West Virginia	672,119	336,060	5

New Mexico	783,757	391,879	5
Nebraska	772,515	386,259	5
Utah	1,020,861	510,431	6
Nevada	1,014,918	507,460	6
Mississippi	1,285,584	642,793	6
Kansas	1,157,532	578,767	6
Iowa	1,582,180	791,091	6
Arkansas	1,069,468	534,735	6
Oregon	1,789,270	894,636	7
Oklahoma	1,334,872	667,437	7
Connecticut	1,558,993	779,497	7
Louisiana	1,994,065	997,033	8
Kentucky	1,798,048	899,025	8
South Carolina	1,964,118	982,060	9
Colorado	2,571,846	1,285,924	9
Alabama	2,074,338	1,037,170	9
Wisconsin	3,068,434	1,534,218	10
Missouri	2,763,689	1,381,845	10
Minnesota	2,936,561	1,468,281	10
Maryland	2,707,327	1,353,664	10
Tennessee	2,460,904	1,230,453	11
Massachusetts	3,167,767	1,583,884	11
Indiana	2,633,143	1,316,572	11
Arizona	2,306,559	1,153,280	11
Virginia	3,854,489	1,927,245	13
New Jersey	3,651,140	1,825,571	14
TOTAL		29,847,550	270

TOTAL U.S. VOTES	129,227,221	538
SHARE OF TOTAL	23.1%	50.2%

Notes

Maine and Nebraska use a different method of apportioning electoral votes. They give one vote to the candidate who wins each congressional district — three in Nebraska, two in Maine — plus each gives two at-large electoral votes to the person who wins the plurality of the popular vote in the state. We have taken data on the number of votes in each of these five districts in 2012 from Ballotpedia and reported the totals of votes and votes needed to win here (these are *congressional* vote totals but they at least approximate what the presidential vote totals looked like in those districts). We incorporated those into Dave Leip's U.S. popular vote total, which is why the U.S. vote total is slightly different here from the first table.

Source: [Dave Leip's Election Atlas](#), [Ballotpedia](#)

Credit: Danielle Kurtzleben/NPR

The idea here is that a voter in a low-population state like Wyoming counts for a larger share of electoral votes than popular votes.

And if one were to start with the largest states, it would be 27 percent. Here's a look at that math:

How To Win An Election With 27 Percent Of The Vote

The below 11 states, combined, would give a candidate 270 electoral votes — just over 50 percent of that total and, therefore, enough to win the election (given a two-person race). However, they also together made up only around 27 percent of the popular vote in the 2012 election.

STATE	TOTAL VOTES CAST IN 2012	VOTES NEEDED TO WIN STATE	STATE'S ELECTORAL VOTES
California	13,055,815	6,527,908	55
Texas	7,999,657	3,999,829	38
New York	7,081,536	3,540,769	29
Florida	8,492,175	4,246,088	29
Pennsylvania	5,755,620	2,877,811	20
Illinois	5,251,432	2,625,717	20
Ohio	5,590,934	2,795,468	18
Michigan	4,745,316	2,372,659	16
Georgia	3,908,369	1,954,185	16
North Carolina	4,505,372	2,252,687	15
New Jersey	3,651,140	1,825,571	14
TOTAL		35,018,692	270
TOTAL U.S. VOTES	129,237,642		538
SHARE OF TOTAL		27.1%	50.2%

Source: *Dave Leip's Election Atlas*

Credit: *Danielle Kurtzleben/NPR*

We're making a lot of assumptions here — we're using vote totals from 2012, for one thing. Moreover, we're assuming there are only two candidates in the race.

And let's be clear about the obvious here: This kind of an extreme election isn't going to happen. And if it did — if there were somehow a bunch of 1- or 2-vote wins, you can bet the recounts would stretch into 2017.



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A Week From Election Day, Democrats Have Many Paths To A Majority

And we're also sure that with any number of tweaks to the math (like plugging in a third or fourth candidate), you could come up with results that are slightly-to-moderately different. But that's not really the point here. The point is that the Electoral College can skew election results to a fantastic degree.

How a 7-point win becomes a "landslide"

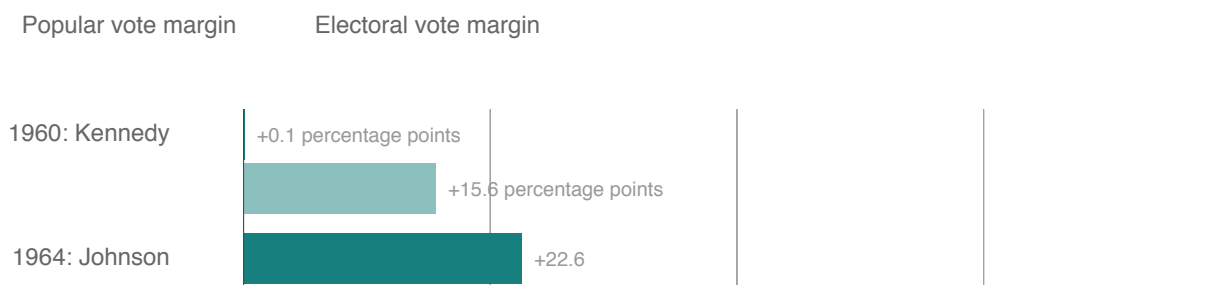
This kind of popular-electoral vote discrepancy is why some articles about the 2008 election had to be careful to call Obama's win an *electoral* landslide — he won 68 percent of the electoral vote but only about 53 percent of the popular vote.

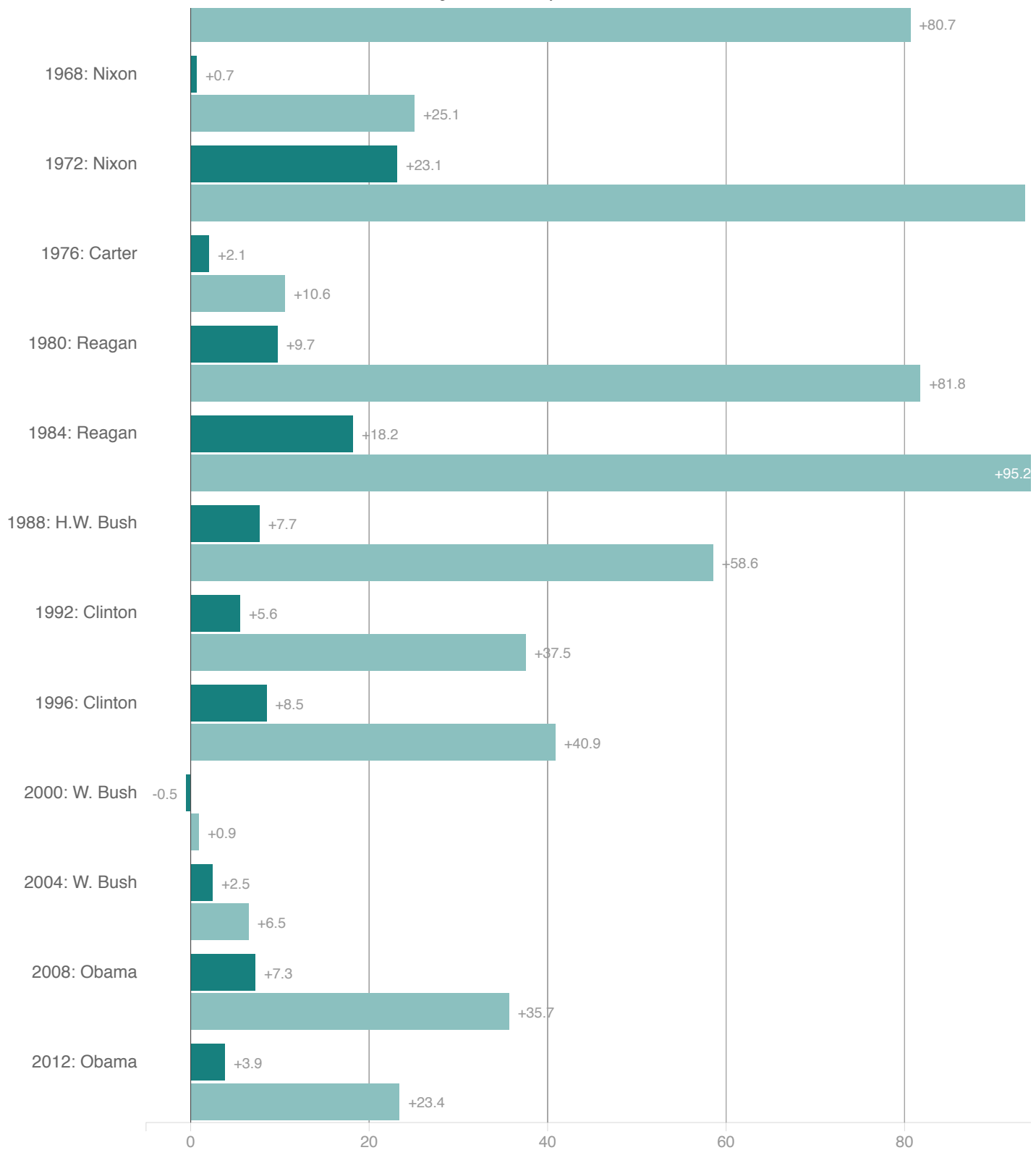
Skewed wins like this happen regularly in U.S. elections — a modest popular vote margin can yield a ridiculously large Electoral College margin. For example, in 1984, Ronald Reagan beat Walter Mondale in the popular vote by 18 points — a sizable gap, but nothing like the Electoral College walloping: Reagan won 525 electoral votes, beating Mondale by 95 percentage points.

Here's what those gaps look like in every election going back to 1960's race, in which John F. Kennedy only squeaked past Richard Nixon in the popular vote by around 100,000 votes:

The Electoral College Turns Modest Wins Into Landslides

Presidential election victors often win by a larger margin in the Electoral College than in the popular vote. Notably, in 1984, Ronald Reagan beat Walter Mondale by about **18 percentage points in the popular vote** (winning 59 percent of the vote to Mondale's 41), but by **95.2 percentage points in the Electoral College** (with 97.6 percent of the electoral vote (525) to Mondale's 2.4 percent (13)). Below, the winning candidate's margin of victory in the popular vote and Electoral College for each election year since 1960:





Source: Dave Leip's Election Atlas

Credit: Danielle Kurtzleben/NPR

Ironically, the 2000 election — whose outcome struck many people as unfair because Gore won the popular vote but not the electoral vote — also has the electoral-vote

margin that most closely reflects the popular-vote margin. In that sense, one could call it one of the "fairest" elections in modern politics.

Well, maybe. But then, come Nov. 9, there will be no difference for the losing candidate between getting 250 electoral votes or 150 — a loss is a loss.



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Obamas Welcome Trick-Or-Treaters, Dance To 'Thriller'

The difference an Electoral College makes

The Electoral College and current demographics mean that both parties often take particular electoral votes for granted: Democrats regularly win California and New York, while Republicans win Texas and Georgia (however, things have been closer than usual in those states this year).

(Likewise, there are plenty of easy wins for each party at the low end of the spectrum. Wyoming is regularly Republican. Hawaii regularly votes Democratic.)

And that means that candidates regularly spend a disproportionate amount of time in high-electoral-vote battleground states like Florida and Ohio as they plot their "paths to 270." This means voters in Los Angeles or San Antonio (or Cheyenne or Honolulu) don't get that much attention.

If the Electoral College disappeared tomorrow, campaign strategy would probably shift dramatically; Democrats might campaign more in Austin, Texas. Republicans might do more outreach in conservative parts of California. Either way, the people of Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania might get some respite from the onslaught of rallies and ads every four years, as candidates try harder to win bigger parts of the country.

*Before you fire off an email, yes, we know: You can still win the presidency without winning 270 electoral votes. If no candidate hits 270, then the House votes. But we're talking outright on election night.

Correction

Nov. 2, 2016

This story initially reported 24 and 21 percent for the newer method of computing the popular vote that Andrej Schoeke sent us. The number we eventually landed on is 23.

2016 donald trump electoral college democrats hillary clinton republicans

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