

One Voice, One Vote?

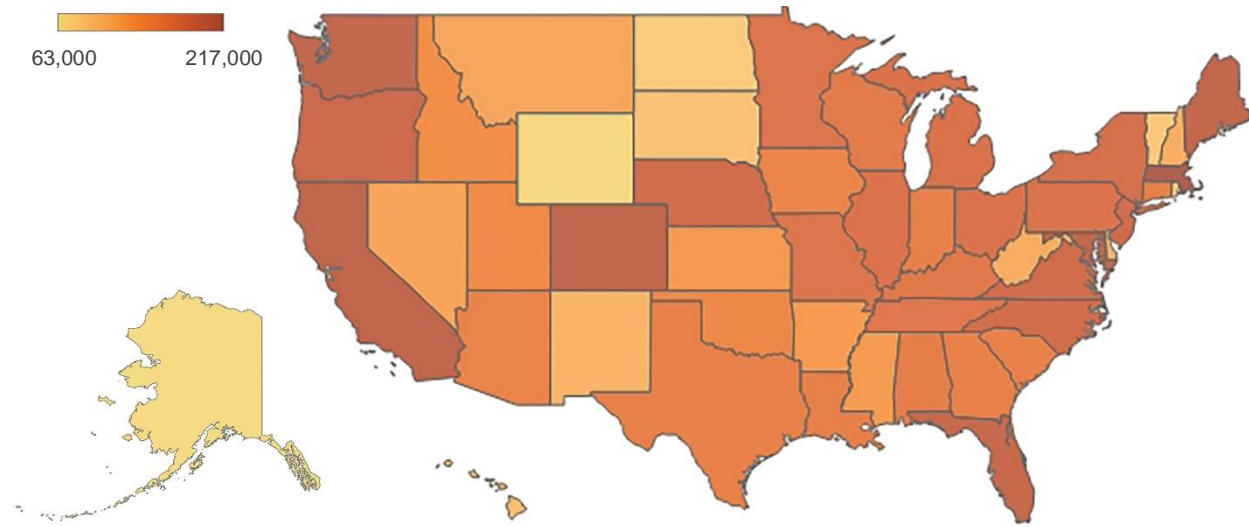
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“Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention.” Despite these sentiments expressed by James Madison in 1787, Americans have favored selecting a President by direct popular vote in nearly every opinion poll since World War II. However, delegates to the Constitutional Convention had no intention of creating a democracy with a single central authority elected directly by the country’s citizens. Instead, they worked toward a federal republic where individual states had degrees of self-governing power. Sixty ballots were required as delegates argued for and against various methods choosing a U.S. President. In the end, selection of the President by vote of electors chosen by state legislatures was the winner. This system later became known as the Electoral College.

By 1868, all US States had decided to choose their presidential electors based on the popular vote of their citizens. While this extended representative democracy to the election of the country’s highest office, the system has not functioned flawlessly. In 1824, no candidate received the required majority of electoral votes and the President was elected by vote of Congress. On four other occasions, the Presidential selection has come from what has become known as a “misfire election” in which the winner of the Electoral College majority does not win the popular vote.

There are several arguments against use of the Electoral College. Perhaps the most convincing is the complaint against the “winner take all” practice where a simple majority of a state’s vote, however small the margin, results in awarding all of that state’s electoral votes to the winning candidate. This creates a system that is far from “one voice, one vote.” As shown in the figure below, the influence that an individual voter has on the awarding of electoral votes varies greatly depending on their state of residence. That influence can be further affected by voter participation within the state.

Votes Cast per Elector in the 2020 Presidential Election



Sources: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, The President & Fellows of Harvard College

Supporters of direct popular presidential elections claim that every vote would carry the same weight no matter where it was cast, resulting in a more democratic, majority rule. Opponents argue that the result would be lawsuits and conflicts following every close election; a situation we have already come to expect.