

Why the Electoral College Is Used in the United States

By Donna Bishop

To best answer the question of why the American President and Vice President are not elected by the popular vote of the people, we must look back to the original framers of our United States Constitution. An early proposal at the Constitutional Convention was that the President and Vice President would be elected by the Congress. That idea was later developed into a proposal of selecting citizens from each state as electors. Each state would be allowed the same number of electors as they were entitled to congressmen. Thus each state would have two electors based on their senate seats and electors equal to their seats in the House of Representatives, which are based on the state's population.

The original intent was that the electors would be elected directly by the citizens and would exercise independent judgement when voting. The idea being that citizens district by district would select electors they trusted who would make a decision on their behalf as to which men would best lead the country. The system was designed so the electors never met as a whole group. The Constitution designated the time they cast their votes from their individual state capitals.

The Constitution allowed each state the freedom to decide how they would select their electors. Some state ballots listed only the names of electors, other states listed the elector and the candidate they were pledging to vote for. Each state's process of selecting electors was impacted by the emergence of political parties and organized candidate campaigns. Some states began to realize that if all their electors were pledged to the same candidate that state would have more influence on the entire election. This thinking killed the original intent of an independent electorate. Other states soon modified their state laws to provide for the concept of winner take all. Thus we see our current system where the candidate with the most popular votes receives all of that state's electoral votes. This system can result in a candidate being elected President by the Electoral College but not winning the popular vote of the public. History shows that this has only occurred in the election of 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016.

Although the Electoral College mechanism periodically comes under attack, there has not been sufficient political motivation to abolish it. Why? The system works to the political advantage of both small states and some conservative states. Why? It is a huge advantage to political parties in planning their campaign strategies. Why? Congress has repeatedly been unsuccessful at passing amendment resolutions to abolish the system. Why? There is no indication that a Constitutional amendment would be ratified by two thirds of the state legislatures voting to change the United States Constitution. Why? Somebody still thinks "We the People" aren't smart enough to vote for the best person to lead our Country.