

## The US Congress and Presidential Elections

Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRu\\_JcarCDY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRu_JcarCDY)

Voting - the people's chance to decide who they want to run their country and represent their interests. But how does it work in the United States of America?

Across the pond, voting is quite different.

Like the UK Parliament, the United States Congress has two houses:

- the House of Representatives, and
- the Senate

Unlike the UK, there are public elections for both houses and a third, separate election is held to choose a president. In the US, the president is both the head of state and the head of government. In the UK, these roles are carried out separately - by the Monarch, and the Prime Minister.

The House of Representatives in the US Congress is designed to give a voice to the people of every local voting region in America. Members of the House of Representatives stand for re-election every two years.

Each state is split into Districts and each District votes for one representative. The number of Districts depends on the population of each State. For example, California, the most populous state, is split into 53 Districts, so has 53 Representatives, but Alaska, which is huge, but has a really small population, only has one District, and therefore only one Representative in the House.

Like the UK House of Commons, the election system is “first-past-the-post” so the candidate with the most votes in each District wins a seat in the House of Representatives. The party that wins a majority of seats in the House takes control. The ideal situation for a President is that the House is controlled by their own party. However with elections held every two years, there's always a mid-term election in the middle of the President's time in office. If the public thinks that the President is not doing a great job, they can vote in more members of the opposition party, making it more difficult for the President to pass laws.

The Senate, in the US Congress, like the House of Lords in the UK Parliament, is sometimes called the “Upper House”. George Washington described the Senate as “*the saucer that cools the coffee*”, meaning that it's their job to scrutinize and question all proposals made by both the House of Representatives and the President, before voting to decide whether they should proceed as law.

Senators, like members of the House of Representatives, are also elected to their seats by the public. Senators serve six-year terms and elections are staggered, so every two years, a third of the Senators run for re-election. Each State is represented by two Senators, regardless of its population, and again, the “first-past-the-post” voting system is used, so the candidate with the most votes, wins.

So how do Americans choose their leader? Well, presidential elections take place every four years. The two main parties -

- the Democrats, and
- the Republicans,

host big “get-togethers”, where they choose their presidential candidates, the person they think will be the best leader for the nation.

The winning candidate then chooses their vice-presidential candidate, also known as their “running mate”, to help support the campaign. Presidential candidates usually choose someone with different areas of skill or knowledge so they present voters with the best package. Together they're known as a “ticket”.

Presidential candidates from both parties then start out on massive election campaigns to gain as much voter support as possible. They travel across the country and hold great big campaign rallies, where they set out the policies and their ideas for the whole country. These campaigns cost money, lots of it, so both candidates have large campaign teams who help raise the tens of millions of dollars needed to keep them afloat.

When it comes to election day, the public go to the polls to vote for one presidential ticket. So far, so easy. However, the public don't vote directly for their choice for President, instead a system called the “Electoral College” is used. Each State is allocated a number of Electors that will make the final choice. A State has the same number of Electors as it does Senators and Representatives. In most States all the Electors will vote for the Presidential ticket which receive the most support and public vote. Finally, the Presidential ticket with the most Electoral College votes becomes President and Vice President of the United States of America.

So that's how things work in the US, a democracy like the UK, but on a much larger scale.

## The Electoral College explained

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9H3gynN468>

Most people have heard of the “Electoral College” during presidential election years. But what exactly is the Electoral College? Simply said, it is a group of people appointed by each state, who formally elect the President and Vice President of the United States. To understand how this process began and how it continues today, we can look at the “Constitution of the United States” - article two, section one, clause two of the constitution. It specifies how many electors each state is entitled to have.

Since 1964, there have been 538 electors in each presidential election. How do they decide on the number 538? Well, the number of electors is equal to the total voting membership of the United States Congress. 435 representatives, plus 100 senators, and 3 electors from the District of Columbia. Essentially, the Democratic candidate and Republican candidate are each trying to add up the electors in every state so that they surpass 270 electoral votes, or just over half the 538 votes, and win the presidency.

So how do states even get electoral votes? Each state receives a particular number of electors based on population size. The census is conducted every 10 years, so every time the census happens, states might gain or lose a few electoral votes. Let's say you're a voter in California, a state with 55 electoral votes. If your candidate wins in California, they get all 55 of the state's electoral votes. If your candidate loses, they get none. This is why many presidential candidates want to win states like Texas, Florida, and New York. If you currently add up the electoral votes of those three states, you would have 96 electoral votes. Even if a candidate won North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut and West Virginia, they would only gain 31 electoral votes total from those eight states.

Here is where it can get a little tricky. On a rare occasion, like in the year 2000, someone can win the popular vote but fail to gain 270 electoral votes. This means that the winner may have won and collected their electoral votes by small margins, winning just enough states with just enough electoral votes, but the losing candidate may have captured large voter margins in the remaining states. If this is the case, the very large margins secured by the losing candidate in the other states would add up to over 50% of the ballots cast nationally. Therefore, the losing candidate may have gained more than 50% of the ballots cast by voters, but failed to gain 270 of the electoral votes.

Some critics of the electoral college argue the system gives an unfair advantage to states with large numbers of electoral votes. Think of it this way. It is possible for a candidate to not get a single person's vote -- not one vote -- in 39 states, or the District of Columbia, yet be elected president by winning the popular vote in just 11 of these 50 states:

California, New York, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Georgia or Virginia.

This is why both parties pay attention to these states. However, others argue that the electoral college protects small states, such as Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire, and even geographically large states with small population, like Alaska, Wyoming and the Dakotas. That's because a candidate can't completely ignore small states, because in a close election, every electoral vote counts.

There are certain states that have a long history of voting for a particular party. These are known as "safe states".

For the past four election cycles -- in 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008 -- Democrats could count on states like Oregon, Maryland, Michigan and Massachusetts, whereas the Republicans could count on states like Mississippi, Alabama, Kansas and Idaho.

States that are teetering between parties are called "swing states." In the past four election cycles, Ohio and Florida have been swing states, twice providing electoral votes for a Democratic candidate, and twice providing electoral votes for a Republican candidate.

Think about it. Do you live in a safe state? If so, is it a Democratic or Republican safe state? Do you live in a swing state? Are your neighboring states swing or safe? Is the population in your state increasing or decreasing? And do not forget, when you are watching the electoral returns on election night every four years, and the big map of the United States is on the screen, know that the magic number is 270 and start adding!