

GOVERNANCE

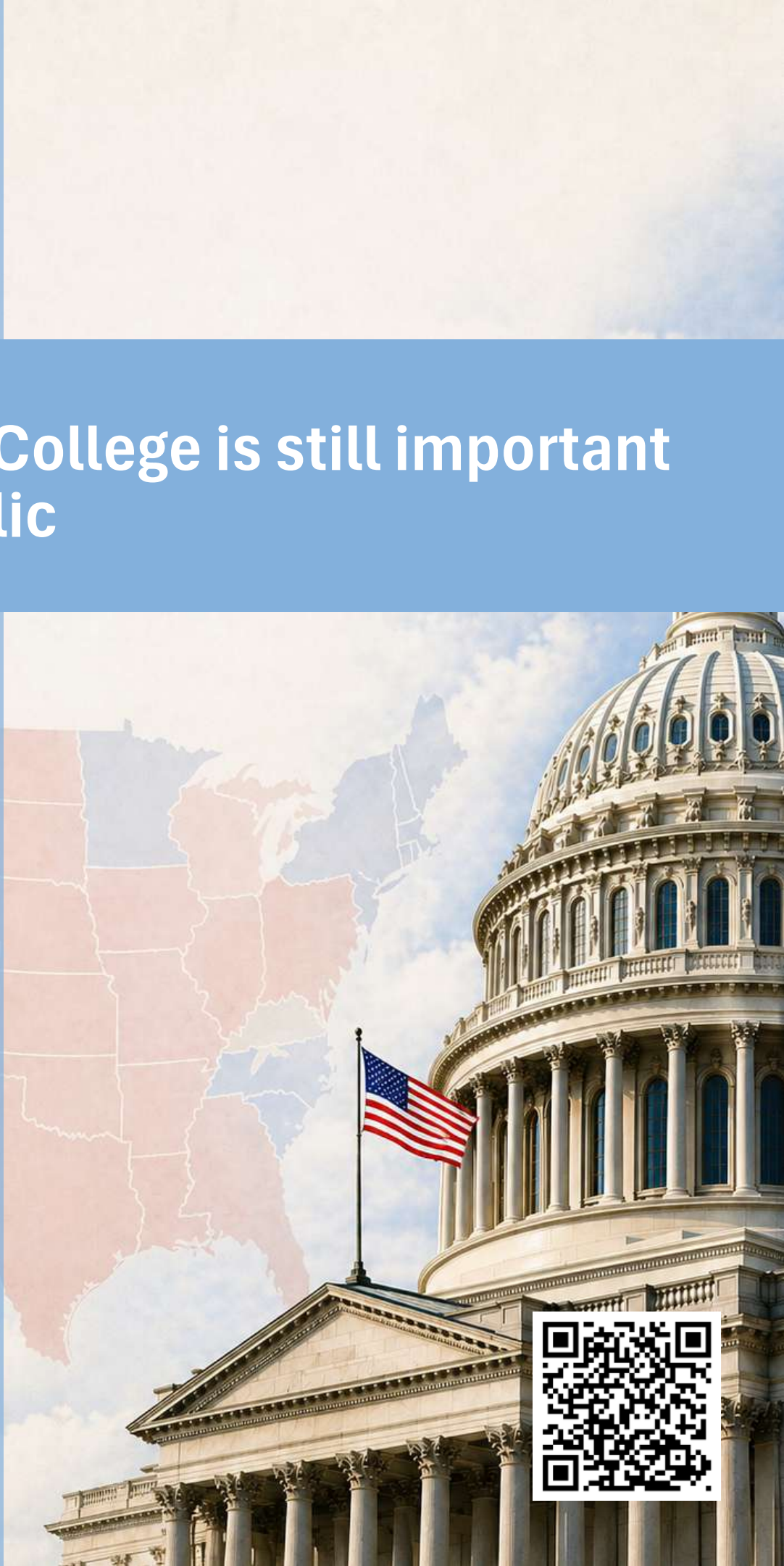
# The Electoral College is still important for our Republic

By Sam Cardwell  
Policy Analyst

APRIL 2026



MOUNTAIN STATES  
POLICY CENTER





# The Electoral College is still important for our Republic

By Sam Cardwell  
Policy Analyst

## INTRODUCTION

For the last couple of decades, the Electoral College has been under increasing scrutiny. Though the controversy dates to our nation's founding, in modern politics it was the 2000 election that reignited a flame to abolish or heavily reform the Electoral College. Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore won the 2000 popular vote by 543,895 votes but lost the Electoral College tally and thus the election.

This divergence has happened five times in the history of the United States: 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016.

Why did the founders adopt a system that allows a candidate to win the popular vote and yet lose the presidency? While some claim it's based on an arbitrary idea, the Electoral College is grounded in deep philosophical roots that prevent the tyranny of populist states over smaller ones. It is also very important for growing states like Idaho.

Despite prior election controversies, the Electoral College continues to play an important role in maintaining the power and importance of states in the operation of our Republic.

## What is the Electoral College?

Article 2, Section 1, Clauses 2 and 3 establish the Electoral College in the U.S. Constitution:

"Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress; but no Senator or Representative, or person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States shall be appointed an Elector. The Congress may determine the Time of choosing the Electors, and the Day on which they shall give their Votes; which Day shall be the same throughout the United States."<sup>1</sup>

*Most states give their votes to whomever receives the most votes in each state, but there are some exceptions including Nebraska and Maine, which allocate based on Congressional district.*

The Electoral College is a process in which 538 electors cast their votes for the presidential nominee their state has chosen. Each state gets a number of electors equal to its number of congressional seats plus its two Senate seats. The District of Columbia is also accounted for and gets three votes. To win the presidency, a candidate must get either 270 electoral votes or half the total plus one.

Most states give their votes to whomever receives the most votes in each state, but there are some exceptions including Nebraska and Maine, which allocate based on Congressional district. Harvard Professor Alex Keyssar likes to make the distinction that we do not have a single national election, but we have an assembly of 50 state elections.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> U.S. Constitution. Library of Congress (1787). constitution.congress.gov. Available at: <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/>

<sup>2</sup> Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College? Alex Keyssar, Harvard Kennedy School, available at <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/behind-the-book/alex-keyssar-why-do-we-still-have-the-electoral-college>

*Currently, 38 states plus the District of Columbia have laws that require the electors to pledge to vote for whomever won the state.*

## **How electors vote in America**

Electors in America cast their votes separately for the president and vice president, unlike the voters who cast their votes for both. These electors meet one month after voters cast their votes for President in the November General Election. Electors must meet minimum qualifications to be a part of the Electoral College. They cannot be a member of Congress, cannot hold any federal office, and cannot have engaged in an insurrection or rebellion against the federal government.

Each state may have its own stipulations on how to qualify specific electors. Up until the mid-1800s, the state legislatures chose electors, but in the present day, it is usually the political parties through their state party convention.

## **Misguided efforts to move away from the Electoral College**

Throughout history, roughly 99 percent of electors have voted for the candidate who won their state popular vote. Currently, 38 states plus the District of Columbia have laws that require the electors to pledge to vote for whomever won the state. Minnesota, for example, has secret ballots, meaning they don't know the specific elector if they decide to vote against the state's popular vote.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a growing movement of states that want their electors to cast their vote for whomever wins the national popular vote. The constitutionality of this concept, called the National Popular Vote Compact, has been questioned.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, 19 states (plus D.C.) have passed legislation to join the compact. In order for it to be valid, states representing 270 electoral votes must join. Right now, there are 222 votes represented in the compact. This NPV is problematic for multiple reasons. The 14th Amendment, for example, states that:

“No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> “Minnesota Has 10 Electoral Votes. Here’s How the Electoral College Works for the State,” CBS Minnesota, November 5, 2024, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesota-electoral-college-votes-2024/>

<sup>4</sup> National Popular Vote,” accessed on April 23, 2026. Available at <https://www.nationalpopularvote.com/>

<sup>5</sup> “U.S. Constitution - Fourteenth Amendment,” Library of Congress. Available at <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-14/>

Also, the NPV compact specifically nullifies a citizen's vote if the state's electoral votes are simply transferred to the winner of the national popular vote.

### **The Founders decided on the Electoral College for many reasons**

The principles found in the Electoral College can be traced back to ancient Athens, Greece, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Most political historians claim that this civilization was the first functional democracy. This form of governance was considered a direct democracy. The thesis of this form is that each citizen gets to decide on government decisions without any intermediary representatives. These decisions include everything ranging from policies, initiatives, electing and dismissing officials, and conducting trials. That society eventually realized the shortfalls of this model.

When every citizen was required to vote on complex policies, some had more time and availability to read up and become knowledgeable on the issues at hand. In a heavy agricultural marketplace, it was difficult for farmers to both tend to their crops and feel confident voting on all of these policies and issues. While it ensured the wishes of the people became true, it was also wildly impractical. It was time-consuming, difficult to assemble the citizens in large numbers, incredibly expensive, and frankly, it proved that representatives who had the opportunity to read up and study the issues of the day could govern in a more effective way.

Later in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there were multiple examples of governmental bodies electing their leader through an Electoral College. The Hungarian, Carolingian, Bohemian, Frankish, and Polish kings were elected by a college.<sup>3</sup> In those days, the colleges were formed by bishops, marquises, counts, and dukes. Later in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century in Rome, the emperor was also chosen by electors as well. Originally, there were seven electors, and this increased to ten by 1803. These electors were made up of citizens who represented both secular and religious interests, usually having multiple electors from the Catholic Church.

Fast forward to 1787, and the founders of the United States had this example of Athens and Rome in the back of their minds. While combating the monarchy, they also knew the dangers of direct democracy. At first, there was a motion to have the state executives elect the president, but it was voted down. This was reflected in both the Virginia and New Jersey plans. The then Governor of South Carolina, Charles Pinckney, made the case that if the people were directly entrusted to select the president, they would "be led by a few active and designing men." He also argued that the more populous states have an unfair advantage in a popular election because their citizens

*California, for example, contains more population than the 21 least populated states combined.*

would vote for a candidate from their own state, and large states would be able to elect the president to the detriment of some of the smaller states in the union.

When the founders could not agree on how to elect the president, they created the Postponed Parts or Brearley Committee, headed up by David Brearley, to make decisions on aspects of the newly formed government, such as the election of the president.<sup>6</sup> Other decisions were made on the president's role, such as having four-year terms and being eligible for re-election. A popular idea was to have Congress elect the President, but eventually the majority rejected that idea due to the principle of separation of powers.

### **A Republic, not a democracy**

It is of utmost importance that U.S. citizens understand that we live in a federal republic, not a direct democracy. This means there is a division between the federal (national entity) and the subdivisions, which in this case are the states. In a republic, citizens elect representatives who vote on their behalf, instead of voting directly on the issues.

The Electoral College is no different. The founders had a healthy fear of concentrated power, even if it was elected by the people through a democracy. This is reflected through the three governmental branches with a separation of powers to establish accountability.

The Brearley committee decided on the Electoral College for a couple of reasons. They understood the ways that direct democracy failed in Athens and knew that the president could not be elected by popular vote, as it would concentrate too much power in large states.

It is estimated that roughly 50% of American citizens live in just nine states.<sup>7</sup> California, for example, contains more than the 21 least populated states combined. Political Scientist Michael Uhlmann notes, "because the states, whether small or large, are the principal presidential battlegrounds, candidates accommodate interests that might otherwise be ignored if the size of the popular vote were the only criterion for election."<sup>8</sup>

If presidents were elected by popular vote, they would only have to visit the top 20 most populous cities, and not state to state. Lastly, this prevented

<sup>6</sup> "Why does the U.S. still have an electoral college?," by John M. Sacher, University of Central Florida. Available at: <https://www.ucf.edu/news/why-does-the-u-s-still-have-an-electoral-college/>

<sup>7</sup> "Just 9 States Make up More than Half the U.S. Population," Independent California Institute, February 27, 2025. Available at <https://ic.institute/2025/02/26/just-9-states-make-up-more-than-half-the-u-s-population/>

<sup>8</sup> "As the Electoral College Goes, so Goes the Constitution," by Michael M. Uhlmann, November 3, 2020. Available at <https://americanmind.org/memo/as-the-electoral-college-goes-so-goes-the-constitution>

*Idaho will potentially add another congressional seat and electoral vote due to an increase in population by 2030.*

corruption and a cabal from an election by the legislature, which could also be impacted by foreign influence.

### **Examples of other countries using an Electoral College**

There is a popular myth that there is no other country with an Electoral College, and while our system isn't replicated exactly, there are multiple examples of nations that use an Electoral College to some degree.

Articles 54 to 58 of India's Constitution detail how, unlike its prime minister, its president is elected by an Electoral College made up of its elected representatives.<sup>9</sup> This includes the Parliament members of India and the legislative assemblies of the states and the union. Each member of parliament holds a vote value of 700, while the members of the legislative assembly's vote value is a little more complicated. Their vote value is equivalent to the total population of the state divided by the total number of the state assembly times one thousandth. This general idea is similar to the vote value amount being weighed by population in the American electoral system.

### **Electoral College impact on states like Idaho, Montana**

The Electoral College specifically impacts our region, giving Idaho, Montana and Wyoming additional voice in the national conversation. In recent elections, presidential candidates have spent time in Montana to try and win the state's growing number of electoral votes.

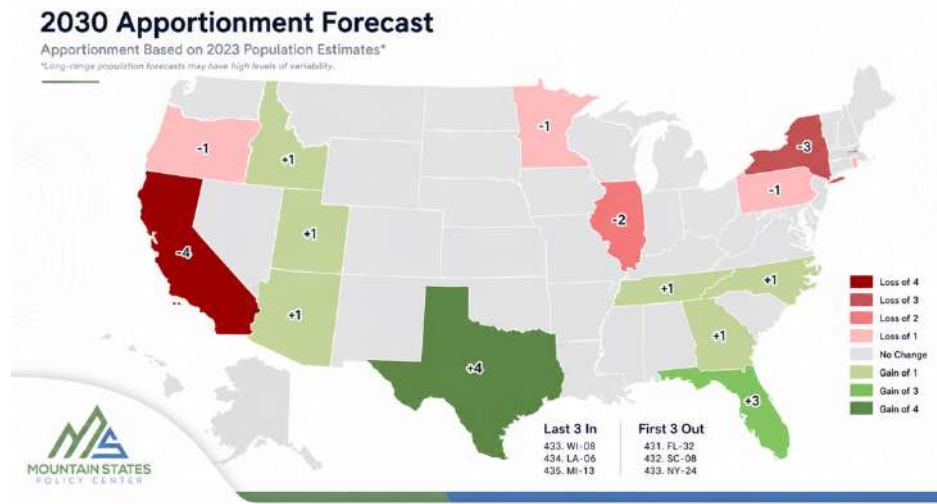
Idaho will potentially add another congressional seat and electoral vote due to an increase in population by 2030.<sup>10</sup> Here are comments from some of Idaho's congressional delegation on the importance of this change.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Article 54: Election of President," Constitution of India. Available at <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-54-election-of-president>

<sup>10</sup> "Idaho's Continued Population Growth Could Increase Congressional Clout in 2030," by Jason Mercier, Mountain States Policy Center, December 26, 2023. Available at <https://www.mountainstatespolicy.org/idaho-s-continued-population-growth-could-increase-congressional-clout-in-2030>

*If the presidential election were only won by a national popular vote, then the candidates would only campaign in the most urban areas and would disenfranchise the concerns and needs of those living outside major cities.*



Idaho Congressman Russ Fulcher stated on this matter:

"The fellow Idahoans I am honored to represent in Idaho's First District now make up one of the largest congressional districts in the country by population—a testament to our state's family and business-friendly economy and rising prominence. The inevitable third congressional seat in the Gem State highlights the strong appeal of the vibrant communities we've built, and the values, policies, and priorities deeply rooted in Idaho's way of life."<sup>11</sup>

Idaho Senator Jim Risch noted:

"As Idaho continues to grow, our citizens deserve a larger seat at the table on federal issues that will shape our state and the West. A third Congressional District in the Gem State would provide Idahoans greater opportunity to make their voices heard on critical matters like land and natural resource management, agriculture, energy, and economic development."<sup>12</sup>

This matter is also important for smaller states such as Wyoming and Montana. The Electoral College ensures that even these less populous states get a seat at the table and are represented more proportionally. If the presidential election were only won by a national popular vote, then the candidates would only campaign in the most urban areas and would disenfranchise the concerns and needs of those living outside major cities.

## Conclusion

The United States is not the only country to use this form of electing its leader, and the principles of the Electoral College are grounded in deep political and

<sup>11</sup> Email to author on June 3, 2025. Copy available on request.  
<sup>12</sup> Email to author on May 30, 2025. Copy available on request.

intellectual thought. While it is tempting to attack the Electoral College when the results diverge from the popular vote, citizens should understand the profound reasons for its existence and continuation.

Whether this system elects our preferred candidate or not, confidence can be rightly placed in the Electoral College our founding fathers established. Our republic needs to continue to support the importance and power of the states, and the Electoral College is a prime pillar of that ideal.

**Nothing in this publication shall be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.**

# SUMMARY & KEY FACTS

The study argues that the Electoral College remains a vital institution in preserving the balance of power between states and preventing dominance by highly populated regions. It contends that, despite criticisms, the system reinforces federalism, encourages broad national campaigning, and reflects the Founders' intent to safeguard the republic from pure majoritarian rule.

## Key Facts:

- ❑ The Electoral College ensures smaller and less populous states retain meaningful influence in presidential elections.
- ❑ It reinforces the United States' structure as a federal republic rather than a direct democracy.
- ❑ The system encourages candidates to campaign across a wide range of states, not just major population centers.
- ❑ Historical and philosophical foundations—from ancient democracies to the Constitutional Convention—support its design.
- ❑ Efforts like the National Popular Vote Compact raise constitutional concerns and could undermine state-based representation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Cardwell is an alumnus of the University of Washington and Liberty University, obtaining a bachelor's degree in political science.

Sam has worked on multiple legislative and congressional campaigns across Washington State. He has experience in the governmental sphere as a legislative intern and a session aide at the Washington State Legislature.

Sam is the author of several MSPC studies, including *Adopting a new income tax liability threshold* and *Powering the Mountain States: A snapshot of the region's energy portfolio*.

His work has appeared in many local news publications and was featured on "Hannity" on Fox News Channel.

