

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

MARCH 16, 2020: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Elections on the brain after last night's Presidential debate? It's a good time to talk about how we choose leaders in America, specifically: the Electoral College.

THE STORY

The Electoral College emerged from the Constitutional Convention of 1787, during which the founders were justifiably bummed at having to spend their entire summer indoors in Philadelphia.

The "[Committee of Eleven](#)" that was tasked with figuring out election methods had big questions to answer. Should Congress directly elect the President? Well, that makes it hard for the chief executive to be truly independent. How about a straight popular vote? Some liked that idea, but wondered: given human nature and the limited reach of 18th century communication technology, can the people be fully informed about every candidate?

There was also Southern panic over the fact that, in a popular vote, its non-voting enslaved population would result in subordination of the South to Northern voting interests. And discussion of the urban-rural interest divide is by no means unique to the 21st century.

And so the committee proposed an intermediary in the election process, a college of electors based on the recently-agreed structure for representation in Congress – with a caveat that if there was no candidate with an electoral majority, Congress would handle final selection from among the top five vote-getters. (Read here for the [Constitutional language](#).)

This worked all right until George Washington opted out of a third term, the Federalists got riled up and it became clear that America was becoming a nation of major national parties. Almost every election since has had concerns, contests or quirks (some [scholars](#) think that small shifts in voting might have changed half of the elections for which data is available.)

Read on at [the blog](#) for more fun facts and resources.

DISCUSS:

What are the pros and cons of the Electoral College?

How is and isn't the Electoral College democratic? Does every vote count?

Ranked-choice voting is suddenly a hot topic. Would it solve Electoral College problems? (See: pros and cons, [via Quartz](#))

Was the Electoral College pro-slavery? (Arguments: [yes](#) and [no](#).)

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

[What Is The Electoral College?](#),
National Archives

[How the Electoral College Works](#)
(video), CGP Grey

[Electoral College Lesson Plan](#), KQED
Primary source: [1860 Political Map of the U.S.](#), Library of Congress