Becoming President

Inquire: How to Become President

Overview

The president of the United States — also known as \textit{POTUS} — is one of the most powerful and influential people in the world. As the head of the American government, he or she is the person most of the world looks to as “America.” The president heads a massive organization that employs over two million people and acts as the commander in chief of the most powerful military force in history.

But, how do you become president? What are the qualifications? What is the process? And, what are the benefits?

We will cover these issues in this lesson, and explore the mysteries of the Electoral College as we seek to answer the question, “How do you become president?”

Big Question: What is the Electoral College, and how does it work?

Watch: Problems with the Electoral College and Possible Solutions

The Electoral College is unique to all the world’s governments. Unique and confusing — especially when the person with the most popular votes does not win the presidency. Here are the problems and the proposed solutions.

First, the winner of the popular vote may not be elected president due to the “winner take all” system in all but two of the states (Nebraska and Maine). A small percentage victory awards the winner 100% of the state’s electoral votes.

Second, some states have so few electoral votes (3 or 4) that candidates don’t spend resources there. These are called “fly-over states,” because the candidates simply \textit{fly over} these states and seldom stop.

Third, states with strong party support can be ignored. Strong Republican or Democrat states are considered safe — the majority party probably can’t lose, and the minority party probably can’t win.

Fourth, the system as it stands makes it nearly impossible for third parties to be relevant. To win any electoral votes, the third party must receive the most votes, beating both major parties.
The candidates and their campaigns know that the best place to spend their time and money is in the battleground states, which have a significant number of electoral votes and which are considered \textit{in play}, meaning they could go either way.

So, what are the solutions?

First, the popular vote system. Technology today would certainly allow a straight “popular vote” for the president. With every vote equal, this would force the candidates to campaign everywhere, and allow third parties more relevance.

Second, the district apportionment system. This system awards a candidate a vote for every Congressional district won, as well as two state votes for every state won. While every vote becomes important, by forcing third parties to carry a district, their relevance could be reduced.*

Third, the proportional system. This would award each candidate the proportional number of electoral votes equal to the percentage of votes received in each state, which would create third parties’ relevance. Nebraska and Maine already employ this system.

So, why have there not been changes? There are two major obstacles to making any changes. First, it would require a constitutional amendment. Second, changes are unlikely because the major supporters of the Electoral College system are the two major parties. The present system inhibits any real challenge by third-parties, and it allows the parties to know where to spend their money, their time, and their resources.

As such, love it or hate it, this distinctly American system called the Electoral College will continue to be our unique way of selecting the president!

\textbf{Read: The Electoral College: All the Power}

\textbf{Overview}

Throughout the summer of 1787, the Constitutional Convention debated the idea of a chief executive — a president. The lack of a central chief executive was one of the acknowledged weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation that the framers intended to rectify. But, how much power should this person have, and how should the position be chosen — by a direct election in the hands of the people, or by the legislatures of each state?

\textbf{The Decision: The Electoral College}

Delegates eventually settled upon a single executive, but they remained at a loss for how to select that person. Pennsylvania’s James Wilson, who had triumphed on the issue of a single executive, at first proposed direct election. When delegates rejected that idea, he responded with the suggestion that electors, chosen throughout the nation, should select the executive. Over time, Wilson’s idea gained ground with delegates who were uneasy at the idea of an election by the legislature, which presented the opportunity for intrigue and corruption. The idea of a shorter term of service, combined with eligibility for reelection, also became more attractive to delegates. The framers of the Constitution struggled to find the proper balance between, on one hand, giving the president power to perform the job, and on the other, opening the way for a president to abuse power and act like a monarch.

By early September, the \textbf{Electoral College} had emerged as the way to select a president for four years, who was eligible for reelection. This process is discussed more fully in the chapter on elections. Today, the Electoral College consists of a body of 538 people called electors, each representing one of the 50 American Government
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states or the District of Columbia, who formally cast votes for the election of the president and vice president.

This map shows the distribution by state of delegate votes available in the 2016 national election. The number of Electoral College votes granted to each state equals the total number of representatives and senators that state has in the U.S. Congress or, in the case of Washington, DC, as many electors as it would have if it were a state. The number of representatives may fluctuate based on state population, which is determined every ten years by the U.S. Census.

In 48 states and the District of Columbia, the candidate who wins the popular vote in November receives all of the state’s electoral votes. In two states, Nebraska and Maine, the electoral votes are divided. The candidate who wins the popular vote in the state gets two electoral votes, but the winner of each congressional district also receives an electoral vote.

In the original design, implemented for the first four presidential elections (1788–89, 1792, 1796, and 1800), the electors cast two ballots (but only one could go to a candidate from the elector’s state), and the person who received a majority won the election. The second-place finisher became vice president. Should no candidate receive a majority of the votes cast, the House of Representatives would select the president, with each state casting a single vote. The Senate chose the vice president.

Problems in the System

While George Washington was elected president twice under this approach, the design resulted in controversy in both the 1796 and 1800 elections. In 1796, John Adams won the presidency, while his opponent and political rival Thomas Jefferson was elected vice president. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson chose a running mate Aaron Burr, and encouraged the electors to cast their votes for the two of them to avoid the problem of 1786. This worked — except that Jefferson and Burr finished tied in the Electoral College.

Burr refused to concede, so the election went to the House of Representatives. On the 36th ballot, Jefferson was chosen as president, and Burr was selected as vice president. Burr’s efforts to undermine Jefferson poisoned their relationship.
Solution - The 12th Amendment

These controversies led to the proposal and ratification of the 12th Amendment, which couples a particular presidential candidate with that candidate’s running mate in a unified ticket.

For the last two centuries or so, the 12th Amendment has worked fairly well. But, this doesn’t mean the arrangement is foolproof. For example, the amendment created a separate ballot for the vice president, but left the rules for electors largely intact. One of these rules states that the two votes the electors cast cannot both be for “an inhabitant of the same state with themselves.”

This rule means that an elector from Louisiana, for example, could not cast votes for a presidential candidate and vice presidential candidate both from Louisiana. That elector could vote for only one of those people. The intent of the rule was to encourage electors from powerful states to look for a more diverse pool of candidates. But, what would happen in a close election where the members of the winning ticket were both from the same state?

The nation almost found out in 2000. In the presidential election of that year, the Republican ticket won the election by a very narrow electoral margin. To win the presidency or vice presidency, a candidate must get 270 electoral votes, which is a majority. George W. Bush and Dick Cheney won by the skin of their teeth with just 271 votes. Both, however, were living in Texas. This should have meant that Texas' 32 electoral votes could have gone to only one or the other candidate. Cheney, who had anticipated this problem, earlier registered to vote in Wyoming where he was originally from and where he had served as a representative years earlier.

It’s hard to imagine that the 2000 presidential election could have been even more complicated than it was, but thanks to that seemingly innocuous rule in Article II of the Constitution, that was a real possibility.

Reflect: Which Will We Elect First?

Poll

Based on your knowledge of American politics, which do you think will occur first — a female president or a Hispanic president?

- female president
- Hispanic president

Expand: “Who can be President?”

Overview

“Anyone can grow up and be president.”

That has been a mantra for Americans for over 220 years. You cannot grow up and become the king or queen of England unless you have the right parents, but anyone can grow up and become president in the egalitarian United States! But, is this really true? The answer is no.
Formal Qualifications

Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution contains formal qualifications that preclude many. You must be at least 35 years of age. You must be a “natural born citizen.” You must have lived in the United States for at least 14 years.

35 years of age seemed sufficient in 1789, but no one under the age of 40 has ever been president. The great trivia question, “Who was the youngest president?” will stump most Americans. The most popular answer, John F. Kennedy, is incorrect. JFK was the youngest person ever elected to the presidency at 43 years of age. However, Teddy Roosevelt was only 42 when, as vice president, he ascended to the presidency upon the death of President William McKinley in 1901.

The biggest question is: what is a “natural born citizen?” Does this mean one has to be born on the soil of the U.S., or simply a person who is a citizen by birth, including citizens born out of the country but with an American parent or parents? What about someone born in a U.S. embassy, or on a U.S. military base in Europe?*

This question has never been answered by the Supreme Court, though the prevailing theory is “natural born” means someone whose citizenship is acquired by the nature of their birth, as opposed to a “naturalized” citizen.*

These formal qualifications continue the pattern in the Constitution of raising the bar with each step up the unseen ladder, from a member of the House, to the Senate, to president.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>House of Representatives</th>
<th>Senator</th>
<th>President</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 years old</td>
<td>30 years old</td>
<td>35 years old</td>
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<tr>
<td>citizen</td>
<td>citizen</td>
<td>“natural born citizen”</td>
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<td>7 years in the country</td>
<td>9 years in the country</td>
<td>14 years in the country</td>
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Informal Qualifications

There are also informal characteristics if you look at the men who have been elected president. Gender remains as the first issue. As of 2018, no female candidate has ever been elected president, though Hillary Clinton was the Democratic nominee in 2016. Again, it is important to note something many Americans do not remember or know — Clinton was not the first woman on a major party ballot for president and vice president. In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro was the Democratic Party’s vice president nominee and Sarah Palin was the Republican vice president nominee in 2008. Regardless, as of 2016, no female candidate has been elected, indicating that gender may still be an informal qualification.

Religion also appears to be an informal qualification. No affirmed atheist has ever been elected, and only one non-Protestant has been. JFK’s Catholicism was a major issue in the 1960 presidential campaign. No Muslim candidates have ever been on a major party ticket and only one Jewish candidate, Joe Lieberman, has ever been on a major party ticket (Lieberman was Al Gore’s VP nominee in the election of 2000).

Looking at the men who have been elected in the modern era, Americans have chosen married men (only one, Ronald Reagan, had been divorced, and his divorce was over 30 years prior to his election), men
with college degrees, men who are not overweight, and men with no facial hair. William Howard Taft was the last man to have facial hair and be elected president, and also the last really large man to be elected, in 1908.

The physical characteristics may seem incidental, but especially since 1960, with the advent of the televised debates and campaigns driven by television, the candidate’s physical appeal on TV has become a major issue. JFK won in 1960 in large part because he looked calm and confident in his debates with Richard Nixon, while Nixon sweated profusely and appeared nervous. To win in today’s heavily visualized media, it may be necessary to have the physical traits America is wanting.

Conclusion
So, can anyone grow up and be president? No; they must meet at least the formal qualifications, and will probably need to meet some number of the informal qualifications that the American people place on candidates.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
How to Become President of the United States - EPIC HOW TO
- A video discussing how someone can become president of the United States
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVkbz10PzxE

America 101: What Qualifications Do You Need to Be President | History
- A video talking about the qualifications for becoming president
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ksV0eJFRpQ

Becoming President
- An article talking more in depth about the qualifications of becoming president, along with interesting facts about our previous presidents

Lesson Glossary

Electoral College: the constitutionally created group of individuals, chosen by the states, with the responsibility of formally selecting the next U.S. president

Check Your Knowledge

1. Hillary Clinton was the first female candidate on a major party ballot for president and vice president.
   A. True
   B. False

2. The 12th Amendment made it so the electors cast two ballots and the person who received a majority won the election, while the second-place finisher became vice president.
   A. True
3. To this day, the Supreme Court has not answered the question of what “a natural born citizen” is when it comes to qualifying to run for president.

   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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Title: American Government – 12.1 The Design and Evolution of the Presidency- The Electoral College (2018): Rice University, OpenStax CNX. License: CC BY 4.0
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