



# ELECTORAL COLLEGE ENCOURAGES BROAD COALITIONS, MODERATION

The Electoral College's state-by-state election process makes it impractical for a presidential campaign to focus on a few large constituencies or population centers and try to win by maximizing turnout among voters that already agree with them. Instead, successful campaigns have to reach beyond the regions and constituencies that already strongly back them.

This was exactly what happened in the years after the Civil War. Democratic presidential candidates could run up huge vote totals in the old Confederacy (often winning states by margins that ranged from 20 to 50 percent) and in a few Northern cities controlled by Tammany Hall and other political machines, but struggled elsewhere.

Recognizing the realities of the Electoral College, the Democrats chose presidential and vice-presidential nominees capable of appealing to voters outside the South such as New York Governor Grover Cleveland and Nebraska Senator William Jennings Bryan – the party did not nominate a Southerner for president until Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964.\*

The Electoral College also forces candidates to compete hardest in states that tend to be politically divided, focusing on voters that are more moderate and independent. These “swing voters” can make the difference between winning and losing in key states, pushing presidential candidates to adopt more moderate positions than they might if they only had to focus on generating enthusiasm from their partisan base.

To win the presidency, candidates cannot simply focus on a handful of national issues that can drive turnout. Instead, they have to try to win states by addressing the unique political, economic, and cultural character of each state's voters as they try to build as broad of a coalition as possible.

\*Although Woodrow Wilson was born and raised in the South, his adult life was spent in the North where he was governor of New Jersey.

## KEY POINTS

- The Electoral College pushes presidential candidates to build large national coalitions instead of focusing on their strongest regions and constituencies.
- In order to compete for the White House, the post—Civil War Democratic Party broadened its appeal beyond its strongholds in the South and the political machines in a few Northern cities.
- Currently, presidential candidates compete hardest in states with large numbers of moderate and independent voters, giving them an incentive to avoid extremism and overly partisan positions.