THE MYTH OF
"WRONG WINNER" ELECTIONS

Opponents of the Electoral College inaccurately claim that there have been five "wrong winner" presidential elections (1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016) because the candidate with the most popular votes did not win the election.

In all these elections, candidates ran campaigns based on the rules in place, not an imaginary popular vote system. It would make as much sense to call 2012 a "wrong winner" election because—under a hypothetical Congressional district system—Mitt Romney would have won.

Winning candidates in so-called "wrong winner" elections ran using strategies intended to win an Electoral College majority, not a popular-vote plurality. Campaigning under different rules, these candidates would have changed strategies, and might still have won. It's impossible to know.

It is also impossible to know if other presidents would have been elected under a popular-vote system. Martin Van Buren won the Electoral College and a popular-vote plurality against four regional Whig Party candidates in 1836, but the election that year would have looked very different under a popular-vote system and he could have easily lost.

The claim also ignores that, in the 1824 election, six of the 24 states (including the most populous, New York) did not even hold popular elections for presidential electors. And, in both the 1876 and 1888 election, fraud and suppression of black voters in the South contributed to Democratic candidates' popular-vote margins. The Electoral College quite likely prevented handing the presidency to someone based on vote fraud and suppression.

It is highly misleading to claim that there have been "wrong winner" elections when the winners all campaigned under the rules in place at the time, and it is impossible to know the outcome under different rules.

KEY POINTS

- Presidents who won without a popular-vote plurality campaigned under the rules of the time, and it is misleading to call them "wrong winner" elections based on some imaginary preferred election process.

- Past presidential candidates would have campaigned very differently in a popular-vote system, and it's impossible, in many cases, to know who might have won under different rules.

- The Electoral College likely prevented two candidates from winning in 1876 and 1888 based on election fraud and voter suppression.