



## WHY DO WE HAVE THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

The Electoral College is one of many carefully crafted institutions designed by the American Founders. But why was it created?

The American Founders needed to establish an executive branch separate from Congress, but wrestled with how to select the president. For most of the convention, the plan was to have Congress appoint the president, but there was significant concern that the president would not be independent from Congress and able to serve as a check on its power.

The main alternative to congressional appointment was using electors, with separate proposals by Oliver Ellsworth, Alexander Hamilton, Luther Martin, William Patterson, and James Wilson. Among the principal arguments for electors was that it would be a check on Congress because the president would not need to rely on it to be elected or re-elected.

There was little support for direct election of the president. The less populous states were concerned that only candidates from more populous states could be elected, and many delegates argued that the public would not be familiar enough with the candidates to make an informed choice. On the two occasions when direct election was voted on, Pennsylvania supported it both times and Delaware once. No other state supported direct election.

The matter was finally referred to a committee to resolve the issue. The committee proposed that electors be chosen by states to select the president, with each state getting electors equal in number to their congressional delegation. In explaining the plan, Gouverneur Morris stated that “no body had appeared to be satisfied with an appointment by the Legislature” and cited “the indispensable necessity of making the Executive independent of the Legislature.”

The convention voted 9-2 for the Electoral College, making it part of Article II of the Constitution. After modification by the 12th Amendment in 1804, that remains the system we have today.

### KEY POINTS

- Only two methods of selecting the president were seriously considered at the Constitutional Convention: congressional appointment or electors.
- Direct election was seen as impractical: too few voters would be familiar with the candidates and it would disadvantage less-populous states.
- The Electoral College was ultimately chosen because it ensured the president would be independent of Congress and small states would have a voice.