



Who Elects the President?

The upcoming national elections this year in the U.S. are attracting even more interest than usual. One thing many of my German friends and colleagues often ask me is, Who exactly elects the new president of the United States?

To simplify things a bit, think of it this way: as American citizens, we vote *by state* for our choice of president and vice-president; then the states, depending on how we have voted, actually elect the president and the vice-president. Each state, in turn, has a number of votes equal to its number of congressional representatives in Washington D.C.

On Election Day, this November 4th, we go to the polls in our state and decide which “ticket” we will vote for — the Democratic ticket, Obama-Biden; or the Republican ticket, McCain-Palin (ignoring here small parties, historically with no chance of winning). Each state determines which ticket has the most votes and then awards all its “state-votes” to that candidate pair.

These “state-votes” correspond to persons the U.S. Constitution refers to as “electors.” These electors meet in December to determine, *de jure*, the next president and vice-president. The outcome is, however, predetermined. Each state requires its electors to vote in accordance with the results of the November election in that state. With two exceptions (Maine and Nebraska), the states have a “winner-take-all” system: the party ticket with the most votes gets all the state’s electors.

Texas, where I personally vote, has 34 electors — two U.S. senators and 32 house representatives; Wyoming, with only a small population, has three electors — two U.S. senators and one house representative. No state has less than this, but the votes in high-population states such as California and Texas are, despite popular opinion, usually decisive for the final outcome.

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