



# Choosing the President:

## The “Electoral College Effect” is All Bark and No Bite

By Humphrey Taylor

Every four years, in the months preceding the presidential elections, pundits across the nation tell us that the election may not be won by the candidate with the largest share of the popular vote. What truly matters, they will tell us again in 1996, is the vote counts in the individual states, because they, not the national vote, will shape the electoral college. This argument is theoretically valid, but it flies in the face of history.

In theory, the pundits are right; it would be possible to win a majority of the popular vote and yet fall short of a majority in the electoral college. If we wait long enough, it is virtually inevitable that it — like other low probability events — will *eventually* happen. However, the chances of it happening in 1996, or in any one year, are very small; and it can only occur when two candidates are running almost neck and neck in the popular vote. If one candidate leads the other in the popular vote by two percentage points or more, it is virtually certain that he (or, one day, she) will win a substantial majority in the electoral college as well.

It follows therefore, contrary to what these pundits will say, that the national pre-election polls, not state polls, are the best guide as to who will win the presidential election in November. Those who make the argument that the national vote and, therefore, the national polls are not good guides as to who will be elected president ignore both history and arithmetic. And when they go on to suggest that the statewide polls, rather than the national polls, provide a better indication of the likely result, they are just plain wrong. Historically, state polls have been much less accurate than the

national polls, with errors two or three times larger.

Theoretically, it would be possible for a candidate to “waste” large numbers of votes by piling up huge majorities in some states, while the other candidate squeaks in with paper-thin majorities in key swing states. That is because, of

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course, all the electoral votes of a state go to the winning candidate in that state, regardless of the size of his majority.

### Past Exceptions

However, there are only four elections in our history where, arguably, the popular vote did not produce a majority of electoral votes, and even these are questionable. In 1824, John Quincy Adams was elected president, although Andrew Jackson won a plurality of the popular vote among the four candidates. However, Adams was elected president only because one candidate, Henry Clay, threw his support behind Adams (who had won far fewer electoral votes than Jackson) giving him a total of 13 out of 24 states, the minimum needed to win.

Clay became secretary of state.

In 1876, Rutherford Hayes defeated Governor Samuel Tilden of New York, even though Tilden won a small majority of the popular vote. However, historians are in virtually unanimous agreement that, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Republicans stole this election, with carpetbaggers “miscounting” the votes in Florida, Louisiana and South Carolina. If the votes had been counted honestly, Tilden would have won both the popular vote and the electoral college, instead of losing the electoral college by one vote (185-184).

In 1888, Benjamin Harrison defeated President Grover Cleveland, even though Cleveland won a small plurality of the popular vote. Here again, however, historians tend to believe that Harrison won only because of fraudulent vote counting. If the votes had been counted honestly, most historians feel that Cleveland would have won majorities of both the popular vote and the electoral college.

Perhaps the most relevant election was in 1960, when the record purports to show that John F. Kennedy won a majority of both popular and electoral votes. In fact, much of the popular vote in Alabama and Mississippi—that is credited to Kennedy’s line to give him a small plurality nationally—was cast on behalf of unpledged electors who, when selected, voted not for Kennedy but for Virginia Senator Harry Flood Byrd. Thus, Richard Nixon seems to have carried the popular vote narrowly, while Kennedy won in the electoral college. This is probably the only time in the nation’s history where such a “split result” actually occurred.



## Margins of Victory in US Presidential Elections 1936—1992

	Popular Vote Margin (Percent of Vote)	Electoral College Vote Margin
1936	24.3%	515
1940	9.9	367
1944	7.5	333
1948	4.5	114
1952	10.7	353
1956	15.4	384
1960	0.2	84
1964	22.6	434
1968	0.7	110
1972	23.2	503
1976	2.1	57
1980	9.7	440
1984	18.2	512
1988	7.8	315
1992	5.6	202

Source: *America at the Polls, 2* (1965) and *America Votes* (biennial), published by the Elections Research Center

If we assume that the votes will be counted honestly this year, the likelihood of President Clinton or his challenger winning a majority of the electoral college without a majority or a plurality of the popular vote is extremely slim.

### Predicting the Electoral College Vote

That is not all. If, through polling, we can accurately predict the margin of victory in the popular vote, we should be able to predict with reasonable accuracy the margin of victory in the electoral college. The table on this page shows that most of the recent election results have followed a general pattern, so that for any given lead in the popular vote, a range of probable results can be predicted for the electoral college.

An even better way to do this is to use the concept of "swing," pioneered in

Britain by David Butler of Oxford University and now widely used in the study of elections in many countries around the world. Butler defined swing as half the change in the difference between the two leading parties or candidates in two consecutive elections. For example, if a 5 point Republican lead changes to a 5 point Democratic lead, that is a swing of 5 points (5 + 5 divided by 2).

The Harris Organization's final 1992 pre-election poll showed a Clinton lead of 6 points compared to Bush's 1988 popular vote margin of 7.8. This represented a 6.9 point swing (6 + 7.8 divided by 2). Assuming an average 6.9 point swing in the popular vote in each state (from the 1988 results), we predicted that Clinton would win between 380 and 405 electoral college votes. We were close. In the election, Clinton won the popular vote by 5.5 percentage points and picked up 370 electoral college votes.

It should be noted that the electoral college votes were predicted without taking into account the states where the swing might be higher or lower than the average. Our assumption was that variations around the mean swing would be random.

Unfortunately, traditional wisdom, however misguided, has a life of its own. While I am not ready to predict the winner of next November's election, I would bet the farm that I will often read and hear the pundits recycling the tired, old adage "the national polls are a poor guide to the election because whoever wins the popular vote could easily lose in the electoral college." Old notions die hard.



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