



Table 2.19 Impact of presidential debates on electoral support, 2008

Q: What is the main reason your opinion of Barack Obama has changed for the better over the past couple of weeks?	
Debate performance	23%
Health care policy	16%
Prepared/experience/knowledge	13%
Calm/steady	11%

Source: New York Times/CBS Poll, 10–13 October 2008

and Kerry (2004) were all judged as debate winners, but condemned by the voters to be election losers. But debate performance seemed to be key to Barack Obama's surge in the polls in early October 2008. As Table 2.19 shows, 'debate performance' was given as the most common reason as to why likely voters' opinion of Obama had changed for the better during the closing weeks of the campaign.

Election day coverage

Election day polling hours are decided by state law, but most states permit polling from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Once the polls close, the votes are counted and declared in each state with the television networks announcing 'results' based on exit poll data. This led them into embarrassing problems on the evening of 7 November, 2000. Just 35 minutes after most — but not all — of the polls had closed in Florida, CNN proclaimed Gore the winner in that state. The other networks quickly followed suit. But less than 3 hours later, the television networks changed their minds, deciding that Florida was 'too close to call'. Then the networks announced that Bush was the winner of Florida, only to retract that statement 2 hours later. It would take another 35 days and numerous court decisions before the result was finally declared. NBC's Tom Brokaw gave voice to the networks' utter humiliation: 'We don't have egg on our face, we have omelette all over our suits.'

Turnout

Voter turnout has been a topic of some debate in recent elections. After peaking at a high of 67% of the voting-age population in the 1960 election, voter turnout dropped in each of the next five presidential elections to 54.7% in 1980. After some small increases, turnout fell to just 51.4% in 1996. But by 2004, it was back up to just over 60%.

There was much pre-election talk in 2008 of another significant increase in voter turnout — expected because of the apparent widespread enthusiasm for the candidacy of Barack Obama — but the early evidence presented by the Center for the Study of the American electorate failed to show this. Neither had the introduction in some states of 'convenience voting' made any significant difference. By convenience voting we mean being able to vote early — polling stations are open in selected venues in the days running up to election day. Another type of convenience voting is what is called

no-excuse absentee voting whereby voters can apply for an absentee ballot without having to give a reason for not being able to vote in person on election day. Of the 10 states which saw the largest percentage increase in voting between 2004 and 2008, only three — Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee — had some form of convenience voting. But of the ten states which saw the largest decrease in voting, nine had introduced some form of convenience voting.

Voting behaviour in presidential elections

The result of a presidential election is decided principally in the swing states. A large number of states will almost always vote for the Democratic candidate — Massachusetts, New York, California and Illinois for example. Other states are nowadays solidly Republican — Texas, Georgia, Kansas and South Carolina, for example. But there are a number of swing states, such as Missouri, Ohio and Florida, which will vote for the Democratic candidate in one election and then the Republican in another. Missouri voted for the winner of every presidential election in the 20th century, except in 1956. (And it very narrowly went for McCain in 2008.) Ohio has now voted for the winner in the last 12 presidential elections, stretching all the way back to 1964.

For the 50–62% of the American voting-age population who *do* vote in a presidential election, what are the most important factors that help to determine how they vote? There are nine possible factors:

- **Party affiliation.** Despite all that is said about the weakness of US political parties, party affiliation seems to be an important determinant of voting behaviour. In 12 out of the 15 presidential elections between 1952 and 2008, the party that managed to gain the highest level of support from its own identifiers was the party that won the election. In 2004, 89% of Democrats voted for Kerry, but 93% of Republicans voted for Bush. However, in 2008, while Obama won 89% of the Democratic vote, McCain managed 90% of the Republican vote. What was significant in 2008 was that far more Democrats turned out to vote than Republicans, thereby wiping out McCain's minor advantage.

Elections are often said to be decided by so-called 'independent voters'. But this term does not cover a simple, cohesive, homogeneous bloc of voters. A study of independent voters in 2007 conducted by the *Washington Post* and Harvard University explored the 25–30% of the electorate who call themselves independent voters. As Box 2.7 shows, there were essentially five different categories of voters within this one group all with very different backgrounds and political allegiances. But independent voters were critical in giving Barack Obama victory in 2008. For a start, they made up 29% of the electorate. Furthermore, whereas in 2004, independents had given Democrat John Kerry a mere 1-percentage point advantage, splitting 49–48%, in 2008 they gave Barack Obama an 8-percentage point advantage, splitting 52–44%.



Box 2.7 Different types of 'independent voters'

Disengaged (24%)

Removed from politics, often by choice. Three-quarters of the people in this group say they are independent because they are not very interested in politics, and less than half are registered to vote. The majority have confidence in government, view both parties and the two-party system favourably and are generally content with the status quo.

Disguised partisans (24%)

Tend to vote consistently with one party and sometimes seem more partisan than registered Democrats and Republicans. But they are more open to voting for an independent presidential candidate.

Deliberators (18%)

Classic swing voters who hold favourable views of and vote equally for both parties. They have faith in the two-party system and believe that bipartisanship is essential to good governance.

Disillusioned (18%)

Deeply dissatisfied with both parties and the two-party system. About 80% have little or no confidence in government.

Dislocated (16%)

Socially liberal, fiscally conservative voters who are uncomfortable with the two polarised parties. Nearly two-thirds are male, while nearly half describe themselves as 'progressive' and one-third say they are libertarians.

Source: *CQ Weekly*, 16 June 2008, p. 1610

- **Gender.** In nine out of the ten elections between 1964 and 2000, women were significantly more supportive of the Democrat candidate than men. This is what we call the '**gender gap**', meaning that men and women vote in a distinctly different fashion. In 2000, Bush gained the votes of 53% of men but only 43% of women. Gore, on the other hand, gained the votes of only 42% of men but 54% of women. The gap was even wider in 1996, when men split equally between Clinton and Dole but women favoured Clinton by 16 percentage points. But in 2004 the gender gap narrowed slightly. Bush enjoyed an 11-percentage point advantage among men while Kerry held only a 3-percentage point advantage among women. In 2008, Obama gained only a 1-percentage point advantage among men but a 13-percentage point advantage among women.

Key concept

- **Gender gap.** The gap between the support given to a candidate by women and the support given to the same candidate by men. In US elections, women have traditionally supported Democratic candidates more than men, while the reverse has been true of Republican candidates. This was especially noticeable in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996.

The reason for the gender gap is often thought to be connected with policy differences between the two parties. In five major policy areas — abortion, defence, law and order, gun control and women's rights — the Democrats tend to take positions that are more favoured by women. Democrats are pro-choice on abortion, tend to favour lower levels of spending on defence, oppose capital punishment and support gun control. It was the Democrats who pushed — albeit unsuccessfully — for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution protecting the civil rights of women.

- **Race.** The most significant minority racial groups in the American electorate are African-Americans and Hispanics. Since the 1960s, African-Americans have given solid support to the Democratic Party. Democrat presidents such as Kennedy and Johnson persuaded Congress to pass civil rights laws that protected African-Americans' rights in such areas as housing, employment, education and voting. In the eight elections between 1980 and 2008, African-Americans never gave less than 83% support to the Democrats. President Clinton was said to have a particular affinity with African-Americans during his presidency, and they were his most loyal group of supporters, especially during the difficult period of his impeachment and trial. With Barack Obama as the first African-American presidential candidate for a major party in 2008, the share of black people voting Democrat rose from 88% in 2004 to 95% in 2008. Black turnout was also up, accounting for 13% of the electorate in 2008 compared with just 11% in 2004.

Hispanics are a growing group. According to the 2000 census, they formed 12% of the population, but because they are a young group and a significant proportion is not yet of voting age, their full political importance is yet to show. The states where Hispanics make up more than 25% of the population include California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico. Hispanics are a disparate group — from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as other Central American countries. Bush's Republican campaign in 2000 made a significant pitch for the Hispanic vote. Bush himself speaks fluent Spanish. His brother, Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, is married to a Hispanic. The Republican vote among Hispanics has increased significantly from 20% in 1996 to 31% in 2000 and to 43% in 2004. But in 2008, the figure was back to 31% with Obama holding a 36-percentage point lead amongst Hispanic voters. As Hispanics become a larger cohort within the voting-age population in future decades, they will become an increasingly important racial group for the two parties to attract.

- **Religion.** There are certain important trends in voting according to religion. First, Protestant voters tend to vote Republican, giving a majority of their votes to George H. W. Bush in 1992, Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, and to John McCain in 2008. Second, Catholic voters have tended to vote Democrat, giving a majority of their votes to Clinton in both 1992 and 1996, and to Gore in 2000. However, the Democrats' 'pro-choice' stance on abortion can cause problems for Catholic voters, whose church is unmistakably 'pro-life'. In 2004 Bush won 52% of the Catholic vote against a Democrat who was a Catholic, though the majority of Catholic voters



returned to the Democratic Party in 2008, Obama having a 9-percentage point lead among this group of voters. Third, Jewish voters vote solidly for Democrats. They gave 78% support to Clinton in both his elections and 79% to Gore in 2000. One might have expected a rather higher percentage in 2000, given that Joseph Lieberman, Gore's running mate, was Jewish (the first Jew to appear on a major party's national ticket).

In the elections of 2000 and 2004, the most interesting correlation was between frequency of attendance at religious services and candidate support, shown in Table 2.20. Those 42% of voters who attended religious services weekly or more often, voted 59–39% for George W. Bush in 2000, whereas the 42% of the voters who seldom or never attended religious services voted 56–39% for Al Gore. White Protestants — 56% of the voters — were even more supportive of Bush in 2000, voting for him by 63–34%. Even white Catholics — 25% of the voters — supported Bush, by 52–45%. One of the stories of the 2004 election was the way in which the Bush campaign targeted traditional Catholics with some obvious success. In the words of political commentator Michael Barone (2002), America is now 'two nations of different faiths'. One is observant of religious practice, tradition-minded and morally conservative. The other is unobservant of religious practice, liberation-minded and morally liberal. You could see these two 'nations' in their starkly different reactions to the impeachment and trial of Bill Clinton. You could see them again in their voting in the 2000 and 2004 elections.

But in 2008, with no declared born-again, evangelical Christian running as a presidential candidate for either major party, the religious divide was somewhat less marked. Among voters who attended religious services 'more than weekly', McCain attracted only 55% of the vote, compared with Bush's 64% in 2004 and 63% in 2000. Likewise Obama's share of support among these voters was up 8 percentage points, from the 35% Kerry won in 2004 to 43% in 2008.

Table 2.20 Frequency of attendance at religious services and candidate support, 2000

Attend religious services	Proportion of electorate (%)	Voted for Bush (%)	Voted for Gore (%)
More than weekly	14	63	36
Weekly	28	57	40
Monthly	14	46	51
Seldom	28	42	54
Never	14	32	61

Source: Voter News Service exit poll, *New York Times*, 12 November 2000

- **Age.** Voting by age is a somewhat confusing picture in presidential elections and as a consequence it is quite difficult to identify any long-term trends. Young voters (aged 18–29) have given the majority of their votes to the Democratic candidate in each of

the last five elections, with 66% voting for Obama in 2008 — by far the highest percentage this age group had given to any candidate in over 40 years, besting the 59% they gave to Ronald Reagan in 1984. For five successive elections between 1972 and 1988, seniors (60 and older) gave the majority of their votes to the Republican candidate peaking at 60% for Reagan in 1984. But for three successive elections — 1992, 1996 and 2000 — they voted predominantly Democratic, though by small margins. In the last two elections, they returned to the Republican Party, in 2008 breaking 51–47% for John McCain.

- **Wealth.** About a year before the 2000 election, a number of political scientists in America predicted that Gore would easily win the forthcoming election with around 56% of the two-party vote. They based their forecast on the outcome of previous elections, looking at economic factors: good economy, incumbent party re-elected; poor economy, incumbent party defeated. But, as Michael Barone has commented, ‘man does not vote by bread alone’, and the economic cycle is not the only determinant of voting in presidential elections.

Gore’s support was stronger among the less wealthy sectors of the electorate; Bush was stronger among the more wealthy. But the margins of difference are not all that large. Bush led Gore by only 9 percentage points among those voters earning more than \$75,000 (£50,000) per year. This ‘wealth gap’ is not nearly as big as it was back in the New Deal period; not even as large as when Bush’s father was elected in 1988. Then, the Republicans carried the highest income group by 25 percentage points — and the Democrats carried the lowest income group by the same margin. So neither Bush’s promise of big tax cuts nor Gore’s slogan of ‘the people versus the powerful’ seemed to pay off in terms of votes.

In 2008, Obama increased his party’s support in every economic group and saw the largest increases at the two extremes of the scale. Democratic Party support among those voters earning less than \$15,000 increased by 10 percentage points from 2004, while their support among those earning over \$200,000 increased by a staggering 17 percentage points. Obama had won both the Wal-Mart vote and the Starbucks vote.

- **Geographic region.** There are two important trends when it comes to voting in relation to geographic region. First, the Northeast has become the new heartland of the Democratic Party. Gone, as we shall see, are the days of the Democrats’ ‘solid South’. Now it is the ‘solid Northeast’. In the seven elections from 1984 through to 2008, the Northeast gave the Democratic Party candidate his largest percentage of the vote. In 2008, the Democrats won every northeastern state. But the bad news for the Democrats is that the Northeast is the one region that has a declining proportion of the nation’s population.

Second, the South has moved from being ‘solid’ for Democrats to being very supportive of Republicans. This was shown most clearly when in 1996 the South was the only region in which the Democratic ticket of Clinton and Gore — both



Table 2.21 Who voted for whom, 2008

Category	Proportion of electorate (%)	Voted for Obama (%)	Voted for McCain (%)
All	100	51	48
Party and ideology:			
Democrats	39	89	10
Republicans	32	9	90
Independents	29	52	44
Liberal	22	89	10
Moderate	44	60	39
Conservative	34	20	78
Gender:			
Men	47	49	48
Women	53	56	43
Race:			
White	74	43	55
African-American	13	95	4
Hispanic	9	67	31
White men	36	41	57
White women	39	46	53
Black men	5	95	5
Black women	7	96	3
Religion:			
Protestant	54	45	54
White Protestant	42	34	65
Born-again/Evangelicals	38	41	57
Catholic	27	54	45
Jewish	2	78	21
Age:			
Aged 18–29	18	66	32
Aged 30–44	29	52	46
Aged 45–59	37	50	49
Aged 60+	16	45	53
Family income:			
Under \$15,000	6	73	25
\$15,000–29,999	12	60	37
\$30,000–49,999	19	55	43
\$50,000–74,999	21	48	49
\$75,000–99,999	15	51	48
\$100,000–149,999	14	48	51
\$150,000–199,999	6	48	50
Over \$200,000	6	52	46
Geographic region:			
East	21	59	40
Midwest	24	54	44

South	32	45	54
West	22	57	40
Population area:			
City over 50,000	30	63	35
Suburbs	49	50	48
Small town/rural	21	45	53

southerners — failed to beat the Republican ticket of Dole and Kemp, neither of whom was from the South. In 2000, the Republicans won every state in the South, including Gore’s home state of Tennessee, and did the same again in 2004. In 2008, Barack Obama managed to flip three southern states — Virginia, North Carolina and Florida — into the Democratic column. It was the first time Virginia had voted for the Democratic presidential candidate since they voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

- **Population area.** There is a high degree of correlation between voting and population area in that the more densely-populated areas tend to vote Democratic, while the more sparsely-populated areas tend to vote Republican. The battleground of an election is therefore often in the suburbs. The Democrats have won at least 60% of the vote in cities over 500,000 in each of the last seven elections, with the exception of 1992 when independent candidate Ross Perot kept the Democratic vote down to 58% in big cities. But for the last ten presidential elections, the party that won the suburbs, won the election. In 2004, George W. Bush won the suburban vote 52–47%, but in 2008 it went to Obama 50–48%.
- **Policies.** Policies can be an important determinant of voting. Which policies they are tends to vary from one election cycle to another. The state of the economy can be critical. Bush’s breaking of his 1988 ‘No New Taxes’ pledge was central to his defeat in 1992. ‘It’s the economy, stupid!’ became the Clinton campaign catchphrase. In that election 82% of those who thought the economy was in ‘good shape’ voted for Bush, while 65% of those who thought it in ‘bad shape’ voted for Clinton. The trouble for Bush was that the latter group was twice as big as the former group.

Table 2.22 Policy issues and candidate support, 2008

Which issues mattered most (%)	Proportion of electorate (%)	Voted for Obama (%)	Voted for McCain
Moral values	22	80	18
The economy	63	53	44
War in Iraq	10	59	39
Terrorism	9	13	86
Health care	9	73	26
Energy policy	7	50	46



In 2004, the four policy issues most frequently mentioned by voters as being important to them were moral values, the economy and jobs, terrorism and Iraq. Voters preferred Kerry's policy positions on the economy and Iraq, but Bush's policy positions on moral values and terrorism. But in 2008 it was the economy that dominated the issues agenda (Table 2.22). Nearly two-thirds of voters told pollsters that the economy was the most important issue in this election, and Obama had a 9-percentage point lead over McCain in this policy area.

The parties' typical voter

Who is the typical Democrat voter? She is a woman, probably unmarried, could be white but is equally likely to be an ethnic minority, someone who attends church less than once a week (if at all), earns less than \$15,000 (£10,000) per year, belongs to a trade union and thinks of herself as liberal and pro-choice. Typical Democrat voters live in a big city either in the Northeast, the upper Midwest or on the west coast, and left school to get a job. They think the federal government should do 'more' rather than 'less'. In 2004, they thought that the economy and jobs were far more important than moral values.

The typical Republican voter is a white male who is married with children, probably a Protestant who attends church at least once a week, a white-collar professional who earns at least \$50,000 (£35,000) per year, owns shares — and guns — and thinks of himself as conservative and pro-life. Typical Republican voters live in small-town, rural America in the South or the Midwest and they are college educated. They usually think that the federal government should do 'less' rather than 'more'. In 2004, they thought moral values and the war on terrorism were more important than the economy and jobs.

During the first few years of the 21st century, these two groups seemed to be pretty evenly matched. The 2000 election produced a result so close that the popular vote was won by Gore by just 539,947 votes out of over 103 million cast. The Electoral College vote was 271–266. The Supreme Court decision that finally brought an end to the election was decided by five votes to four. In Congress, the Republicans had a nine-seat majority in the House while the Senate divided exactly 50–50. The election of 2004 also produced close results. The 2008 election saw a tip towards the Democrats with Obama winning nine states that Bush had won for the Republicans in 2004.

Why Obama won in 2008

There were six main reasons why Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election.

The two-term itch

Only twice since the Civil War (1861–65) have Americans elected a president from the same party as a president who has just completed two full terms — in 1876 when Rutherford Hayes followed Ulysses Grant, and in 1988 when George H.W. Bush followed Ronald Reagan. Both were Republicans. So for Republican John McCain to be elected

after 8 years of Republican George W. Bush would have been to fly in the face of history. And in 1988, George H. W. Bush had the advantage of a popular incumbent president.

George W. Bush

Bush's approval ratings during his first term were almost always above 50%. After 11 September 2001, they shot up to 91% but they remained over 60% even to the end of 2002 and again reached 70% after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. But during his second term, as the Iraq war turned sour, Bush's approval ratings fell through the 40s, and even through the 30s and were hovering around 27% by election day 2008. Exit polls in 2008 showed that of the 27% of voters who approved of Bush, 89% voted for McCain. But the 71% who disapproved of Bush, broke for Obama — 67–31%. The Obama campaign spent most of the campaign trying to tie McCain to Bush. For example, when in the first TV debate the discussion turned to the budget deficit, Senator Obama wasted no time in pointing out to Senator McCain: 'John, it's been your president, who you said you agreed with 90% of the time, who presided over this increase in spending.' Throughout the three debates, Obama mentioned Bush 21 times; McCain mentioned him only six times.

Right track/wrong track perception

A question pollsters in the US have regularly asked is: 'Do you feel things in the country are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?' It is referred to in shorthand as the right track/wrong track question. Analysts will tell you that it is exceedingly difficult for the incumbent party to keep hold of the White House if the wrong trackers are in the majority. George W. Bush actually managed to defy that rule in 2004 by winning re-election with the right track/wrong track split 41–47%. But in 2008, only 21% thought the country was on the right track while 75% thought it on the wrong track. And those 75% wrong trackers split for Obama 62–36%, a huge Obama lead. It was because so many Americans believed the country was off on the wrong track that this was an election about 'change' — the theme of the Obama campaign. When asked: 'Which quality mattered most in deciding how to vote for president?' the number one answer was that he can 'bring about needed change'. Of the 34% who identified that as their number one determinant, 89% voted for Obama, only 9% voted for McCain.

The economy

When exit pollsters asked voters to describe the US economy as either excellent, good, not so good, or poor, just 1% said 'excellent', only 6% said 'good', with 44% saying 'not so good' and 49% describing it as 'poor'. Among the 93% of voters who described the economy as either 'not so good' or 'poor', Obama led McCain 54–44% — a 10-percentage point lead. And in some swing states the margin went higher — 13 points in Nevada, 14 in Iowa, 18 in Nevada, and 22 points in New Mexico. If the picture was bleak in terms of the national economy, it was even more gloomy on the personal economy. When asked: 'How worried are you that the current economic crisis will harm



your family's finances over the next year?' 81% said they were worried. And among that 81%, Obama led 58–40%.

The Palin effect

The selection of Governor Sarah Palin as his vice presidential candidate hurt McCain at the polls. In answer to the question: 'Which vice presidential candidate is qualified to become president should it become necessary?' 66% judged Joe Biden qualified, but only 38% judged Sarah Palin qualified. And of the 60% who judged Palin 'not qualified', 81% voted for Obama and just 16% for McCain. Palin's lack of qualification was exacerbated by McCain's age — 72 — and therefore the increased likelihood that a President McCain could die in office. Furthermore, McCain's selection of Palin called into question McCain's judgement and his ability to choose qualified people for top jobs should he become president.

Obama's campaign

The first five factors might suggest that any Democrat could have won the White House in 2008. But this was a win of historic proportions by Barack Obama. Not only was he the first African-American to be elected president, but he was the first Democrat to get more than 51% of the popular vote since Lyndon Johnson in 1964. He was the first Democrat to win Indiana since 1964, the first to win Virginia since 1964, and the first to win North Carolina since 1976. He was also the first northern liberal to win the White House since JFK in 1960. We have already seen when looking at the campaign that Obama managed to turn his huge money advantage into advantages in the media, in campaigning, in organisation and in staff. Professor Ken Goldstein of the University of Wisconsin put it this way:

Presidential campaigns usually have to make tough choices: If I advertise here, I can't advertise there. If I spend this money on TV, I can't spend this much money on field organisation. But Obama didn't have to make these tough choices. He could spend on TV, he could spend on radio, he could spend on field organisation, he could spend on mailing.

The Obama campaign was impressively efficient, well-disciplined, highly organised and entirely leak-proof. The candidate himself exhibited sound judgement and a cool temperament — both qualities which voters judge to be important in a president. When asked: 'Which candidate do you think has the right judgement to be a good president?' 43% replied Obama, but only 36% replied McCain. And of the 43% who replied Obama, 98% voted for him.

Obama won the 2008 election by attracting a significantly greater proportion of certain groups of voters than Kerry had won in 2004: young voters (up 12%); Hispanics (up 10%); big city dwellers (up 10%); as well as more independents, more very poor and very rich voters and more Midwesterners. He also won the suburbs and overall increased the Democrat share of the vote. He won because voters, believing the country was on

the wrong track, wanted to turn the country in a different direction. They were worried about both the national and personal economies, and trusted Obama more than McCain to improve their economic situation. Finally, they believed that Obama possessed both the better judgement and the better team to run the country for the next 4 years.

The Electoral College

How it works

In the **Electoral College**, each state is awarded a certain number of Electoral College votes. This number is equal to that state's representation in Congress — the number of Senators (2 for every state) plus the number of Representatives. Thus in 2008, California had 55 (2 + 53) while Wyoming had just 3 (2 + 1). There are 538 Electoral College votes. To win the presidency, a candidate must win an absolute majority, which is 270.



Key term

> **Electoral College.** The institution established by the Founding Fathers to elect the president indirectly. The Electoral College never meets. Instead, the presidential Electors who make up the Electoral College meet in their state capitals to cast ballots for president and vice-president.

The popular votes for each candidate are counted in each state. In all but two states whichever candidate wins the most popular votes receives all the Electoral College votes of that state — the so-called 'winner-takes-all' rule. This 'rule', however, is not in the Constitution. It is purely a convention that developed during the 19th century in most states. The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska.

The Electoral College never meets together. Its members — called Electors — meet in their respective state capitals on the Monday after the second Wednesday in December. They then send their results to the vice-president of the United States in Washington DC. The vice-president formally counts the Electoral College votes and announces the result to a joint session of Congress in early January. Thus, on 6 January 2001, Vice-President Al Gore had the dubious privilege of announcing his own defeat at the hands of Governor George W. Bush of Texas by 271 Electoral votes to 266.

What if no candidate wins an absolute majority of Electoral votes? This could happen either if a 269–269 split occurred between two candidates, or if more than two candidates won Electoral votes. The former situation almost occurred in 2000. The latter situation might have occurred in 1968 when third-party candidate George Wallace won five states with 45 Electoral votes.

Under such circumstances, the president would be elected by the House of Representatives from the three presidential candidates with the most Electoral votes. Each state would have one vote. The winner would require an absolute majority — 26 of the 50 votes. Balloting would continue until one candidate emerged as the winner.