



These "cards" are actually the ballots cast by members of the Electoral College.

# Voting for Strangers

BY GARY BUGH

*Politics and New York's Electoral College have always gone hand in hand, from the earliest days of state government to the supremacy of the two-party system. Blame it on the Constitution...*

If you look closely at the fine print on the ballot at your polling place on November 2, you might see this short phrase atop the list of names of presidential candidates: "Electors for..." This means that although you'll be voting for the candidate of your choice, you're doing so via a slate of designated citizens who, well after the popular vote has been counted and the winner declared, will gather on December 13 in states across the country to actually elect the next president and vice president of the United States.

The large group to which these electors belong was established by the U.S. Constitution, and is called the Electoral College. While its electors confirm the decision made by the people in each state, they must also honor their pledge to cast their votes for the candidate chosen by the political party that also chose them. So when we vote for president, we are actually voting for strangers who have been selected by that party to elect a candidate for us.

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES



*Patricia Jaworowicz and Morton Haves cast their ballots at the 1976 Electoral College meeting.*



*For President of the United States  
Woodrow Wilson  
of the  
State of New Jersey  
New York Electoral College  
1913*

### Eyes on the Prize

It's complicated, legal, local—and eminently political. Each state and the District of Columbia has its own Electoral College; the number of a state's electors is equal to the number of that state's congressional representatives (which reflects population) plus senators (two per state). New York currently holds thirty-one of the nation's 538 electoral votes. Its Electoral College is one of the oldest and largest in the country, and its history exemplifies, through the commonly used "winner-take-all" method, the

Electoral College meeting. This works to consolidate the major parties' power, since minor parties rarely receive electoral votes. But it is also a "loser-gets-nothing" method: a candidate who fails to win in a particular state receives no electoral votes at all in that state, no matter how many popular votes he or she has actually gotten. For example, independent candidate Ross Perot (whose Reform Party was not created until after the election) won 19% of the national popular vote in 1992, but received not a single electoral vote.

Knowing there's an ultimate "prize" to this system greatly boosts the influence and power of the two major parties, and helps them gain support for both candidate and party during campaign season. With their superior state and local organizations and financial resources, Republicans and Democrats have an easier time winning a state's popular vote than do smaller parties and independent candidates.

### Making the Most of the Meeting

The Constitution protects the right of each state to determine how to appoint electors—a rule ultimately advantageous to major parties. New York's history illustrates this well. The state legislature chose electors for the first few elections, a practice that allowed partisan differences to divide the state's electoral votes among different candidates. Then in 1788, the Assembly and Senate could not agree on a slate of electors, which prevented the state from participating in the first presidential election. In 1828, New York's districts chose electors, but this also led to a split vote. Since the adoption of the winner-take-all method in 1832, a single party has won all of New York's electoral votes each election.

The actual Electoral College meeting in each state (which follows the presidential election) also benefits the major parties, providing an opportunity for consolidation and exercise of party power at best—and unabashed grand-



*The only photographs among the Electoral College records at the State Archives are from 1976's Electoral College meeting.*

advantage that the presidential election system extends to the two major political parties, Republican and Democrat.

The winner-take-all system, used by every state (except Maine and Nebraska) and by the District of Columbia to transform its popular vote into electoral votes, allows the candidate (and by default, the party) who wins the most popular votes in a state in November to receive all of that state's electoral votes at the December

*For President of the United States*  
*Charles C. Hughes*  
*of the*  
*State of New York*  
*New York Electoral College*  
 1897

*For President of the United States*  
*Harvey S. Harding*  
*of the*  
*State of Ohio*  
*New York Electoral College*  
 1924

FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
 HERBERT ROOVER  
 OF THE  
 STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1929

*For President of the United States*  
**FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT**  
*of the State of New York*

standing at worst. In 1893 and 1897, electors introduced resolutions supporting candidates for the U.S. Senate. In 1889, patriotic Republicans mustered a 100-gun salute after the balloting. (Congress moved the date of the electors' meeting to January of the following year in 1887; in 1934, it was moved back to December). The meeting also sets the stage for future party wins by showing the strength and support of the parties.

In New York, along with a few other states, state party committees appoint electors, generally party leaders and loyalists. Horace Greeley, founding editor of the *New York Tribune* and early leader of the Republican Party, was a New York elector in 1864. So was abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, a Republican who voted at the 1872 meeting and delivered New York's votes to the president of the U.S. Senate. Elector Horatio Seymour, former Democratic governor of New York and early presidential candidate, said of the contentious defeat in 1876 of popular vote winner Samuel Tilden by Republican Rutherford Hayes, "The Democratic Party, conscious of its strength and the justness of its position, and feeling that future power is theirs, will do no unwise nor unpatriotic act which will destroy its heritage." John Jacob Astor balloted at the 1880 Republican meeting, as did piano manufacturer William Steinway in 1893 and George Eastman of Rochester in 1901.

Other high-profile party leaders who served as New York electors have included Governors Averell Harriman, Herbert Lehman, Hugh Carey, and Mario Cuomo, as well as former National Democratic Chair James Farley and New York City Mayors Abraham Beame and David Dinkins. Albany's longtime mayor Erastus Corning II once filled in for an absent Democratic elector. Elizabeth Moynihan, wife of U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his 1988 re-election campaign chair, served in 1988 and 1992.



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

### A Charitable Tradition

Even the meager pay electors still receive for attending the meeting has been subject to politicking. Democratic electors of 1913 began the tradition of donating their Electoral College earnings to charity when they gave their \$15 stipends and mileage reimbursements to three Albany hospitals. Electors at each of the four Franklin Roosevelt election meetings from 1932 to 1944 sent their money to the Warm Springs Foundation for Infantile Paralysis in Georgia, while 1992's and 1996's electors made contributions to the Children's Aid Society and Gay Men's Health Crisis, respectively. In 2000, they gave to Senior Services of Albany through the United Way.

In 1917, Republican electors declined to follow this practice and decided not to donate their stipends to charity. According to the *Albany Times Union*, one anonymous elector said, "We'll have nobody vote our money to anything or anybody. We're just against the principle

*State party committees often appoint high-profile party leaders as electors. Samuel O. Fredman and Rev. Donald Harrington line up behind New York City Mayor Abraham Beame to cast their ballots.*

FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
**THOMAS E. DEWEY**  
 OF THE  
 STATE OF NEW YORK  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1948

FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
**JOHN F. KENNEDY**  
 OF THE  
 STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1960

FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
**HUBERT H. HUMPHREY**  
 OF THE  
 STATE OF NEW YORK  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1968

FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
**JIMMY CARTER**  
 OF THE  
 STATE OF GEORGIA  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1976

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*New York, as well as forty-seven other states and the District of Columbia, uses the winner-take-all system of assigning electoral votes: the winner of the popular vote receives all of the state's electoral votes. New York County Clerk Norman Goodman holds the ballot box while Governor Hugh Carey votes.*

of the thing.” The newspaper reported that electors “pocketed their checks and went home.” But in 1972 and 1980, Republicans donated their stipends to Eisenhower College, and in 1984 they gave their pay to Catholic Relief Services for famine relief in Ethiopia.

### Questioning Their Existence

At the meeting, New York’s electors have also traditionally announced their positions on Electoral College reform. In 1936, elector Daniel S. Quigley was ready to submit a resolution for the state’s electors to condemn the Electoral College and call for election by popular vote, but was dissuaded from doing so after a request by Secretary of State Edward Flynn. As host of the state’s 1944 meeting, New York Republican Secretary of State Thomas J. Curran supported elimination of the Electoral College. In his speech before the Democratic electors, Curran asserted that this would likely be the last such gathering, since so many Americans regarded

the procedure as outmoded. Elector Alice Campbell Good, however, attending her fourth meeting, disagreed with Curran’s viewpoint, explaining that she had “always felt that the Electoral College was one of the finest examples of...checks and balances in state government.”

In 1968 and 1972, Republican Secretary of State John P. Lomenzo argued for keeping the Electoral College but removing the independence of electors and the House contingency procedure outlined in the Twelfth Amendment (which, in case of no electoral majority for a presidential candidate, allows each state delegation in the House of Representatives one vote to choose from the top three candidates). Several Democratic electors at New York’s 2000 meeting also favored amending the system. Elector and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer proposed several reforms to state election law, including same-day registration, a database of registered voters, and modernized voting machines.

Our will—and our votes—remain to be counted in 2004. While those votes may go to unnamed electors, every person’s vote still matters in a system where the candidate with the most popular votes in each state moves ahead in the electoral vote tally. But the biggest winners in this process are the major parties, aided by the Electoral College—an unintended consequence of the freedom given to the states in the process of electing a president. ■

*Sources for this article included documents, news articles, electoral meeting proceedings, interviews, books, journals, election tabulations both historical and contemporary, and state and federal election guides and procedural manuals. Particular collections of the New York Department of State, Electoral College, and the State Board of Elections in the State Archives and State Library were especially helpful.*



THE PROGRESS OF THE EIGHTH REGIMENT  
**RONALD REAGAN**  
 IN THE  
 PHOTO REPRODUCED  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1960



THE PROGRESS OF THE EIGHTH REGIMENT  
**BILL CLINTON**  
 IN THE  
 PHOTO REPRODUCED  
 NEW YORK ELECTORAL COLLEGE  
 1960

Facts About the Electoral College

Article II of the Constitution established the Electoral College (although the term itself is not found in the Constitution), and guarantees every state, as well as the District of Columbia (added by the Twenty-Third Amendment in 1961), at least three electoral votes.

The "colleges of electors" (the designation means "decision-making body") perform three activities during a presidential election year:  
 1) Electors are appointed by political parties;  
 2) Electors are themselves "elected" by voters in every state in November;  
 3) Electors cast their ballots in December and deliver their totals to Washington D.C. Congress then officially counts the nation's electoral votes in January.

Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia use the "winner-take-all" method of assigning electoral votes. Maine and Nebraska use district systems, whereby the statewide popular vote determines two "at-large" electors, and voting in the districts determines the rest.

A presidential ticket needs a majority of electoral votes to win the White House, currently 270 out of 538 electors.

This canvass of votes cast by New Yorkers in the 1960 presidential election shows just how close the Kennedy-Nixon race was.

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Form 20-A (11-14-58) (Rev. 12-28-58)

State of New York, ss.

Witnessed of the whole number of votes cast for all the candidates for the OFFICE OF PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

at a general election held in the said State, on the EIGHTH day of November, in the year 1960, wherein the several counties in which the said votes were given are distinguished.

COUNTY	REPUBLICAN NIXON LODGE	DEMOCRATIC KENNEDY JENNISON	OTHERS KENNEDY JENNISON	JOV. WING DUBOIS WELLES	BLANK	VOID	SCATTER- ING	TOTAL NUMBER OF VOTES
Albany	67,600	88,026	3,977	117	1,067	2	157,741	
Albany	19,708	48,751	385	7	125		70,076	
Brockton	56,467	36,778	1,749	56	799	6	97,055	
Cattaraugus	21,799	13,790	1,037	87	190		37,803	
Cayuga	20,937	16,567	688	23	577	5	38,790	
Chemung	3,786	24,996	1,177	51	513	12	30,629	
Chemung	2,667	17,152	797	28	312		20,956	
Chenango	14,533	5,187	970	12	178		20,780	
Clinton	11,139	12,676	1,104	15	327	8	25,269	
Columbia	1,587	8,007	773	27	276		10,670	
Cortland	12,305	5,435	284	9	139		18,151	
Delaware	16,336	5,932	230	13	183	2	22,584	
Dutchess	76,109	28,355	1,887	50	891	3	106,475	
Erie	21,137	26,284	1,937	909	1,019		49,367	
Franklin	11,577	5,722	912	10	177	11	18,301	
Fulton	9,388	9,139	767	17	217	5	19,506	
Fulton	1,943	7,779	615	17	173	7	10,534	
Hamilton	14,727	7,492	701	18	162		23,000	
Herkimer	11,878	6,182	259	1	299		18,519	
Herkimer	2,168	797	98	1	17		3,072	
Herkimer	17,708	13,835	1,192	33	492	6	33,266	
Jefferson	20,270	14,621	1,177	29	388	19	36,505	
Lewis	6,632	38,701	184	7	122	6	45,622	
Litchfield	13,681	7,273	522	7	187	28	21,591	
Madison	16,215	7,787	977	16	290	3	25,277	
Madison	14,823	13,763	931	197	2,532		29,717	
Montgomery	1,983	1,528	794	19	347		4,662	
Montgomery	32,425	24,387	2,000	725	1,191	36	59,638	
Nassau	30,001	9,910	2,770	87	1,072		43,820	
Nassau	3,933	5,773	3,571	100	1,432		14,709	
Orleans	10,710	8,730	3,316	150	1,117	58	23,023	
Orleans	1,767	11,981	770	24	188		14,528	
Orleans	48,676	27,793	2,278	62	677	3	77,427	
Orleans	10,397	5,265	280	5	188		16,035	
Orleans	24,013	19,823	711	11	480		44,038	
Orleans	1,792	7,532	367	26	288		9,905	
Rensselaer	11,798	7,130	873	27	106	1	20,034	
Rensselaer	9,019	33,989	2,427	61	415		46,411	
Saratoga	33,107	25,378	1,580	103	535	8	60,601	
Saratoga	25,818	18,278	1,132	29	418		45,265	
Saratoga	2,503	16,379	1,803	39	902	2	21,426	
Schoharie	40,180	3,446	2,572	60	447	5	47,705	
Schoharie	7,694	9,097	245	16	192		17,144	
Schoharie	5,201	2,158	137	11	98		7,599	
Schoharie	8,791	3,371	922	1	194	3	13,087	
Schoharie	27,638	13,468	930	13	331	15	42,074	
Schoharie	14,469	10,722	681	297	2,676	21	28,175	
Schoharie	13,797	10,185	1,301	27	318		25,527	
Schoharie	12,572	9,671	187	9	133	1	22,443	
Schoharie	1,706	7,597	1,062	13	125	1	10,493	
Schoharie	36,418	20,522	2,997	65	718	2	59,713	
Schoharie	19,433	4,728	400	17	193		24,661	
Schoharie	15,037	787	403	6	273		16,497	
Schoharie	21,270	8,465	811	11	205		30,761	
Schoharie	13,560	18,937	1,653	657	3,172	36	34,287	
Schoharie	10,773	5,278	210	6	132		16,299	
Schoharie	4872	2,227	186	7	76		7,362	
Total for New York City	330,217	177,615	11,609	3790	3,792	199	513,421	
Total for New York State	182,377	329,794	28,472	2,057	10,373	19	522,711	
Total for New York State	32,797	59,778	7,689	316	1,082	47	94,609	
Total for New York State	21,727	3,6774	68,784	3343	1,318	31	68,784	
Total for New York State	36,788	34,702	5,976	1,850	10,997	13	82,491	
Total for New York State	30,354	3,5672	3,021	93	785	1	38,726	
Total for New York State	11,4205	16,4621	1,5291	1,0327	5,1605	120	31,9378	
Total for New York State	33,497	23,907	4,461	26	8,177	199	58,000	