Close Calls in U.S. Election History
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Democracy and power to the people are celebrated as key American values, but sometimes democracy is more complicated than one might think. This informational text investigates some close calls in U.S. elections and what caused their complications. As you read this text, identify the difference between the Electoral College and the popular vote to better understand those complications.

The United States Constitution is designed to make presidential elections relatively easy and smooth. This has usually been the case, but throughout American history, some elections have been so close that they have been anything but smooth.

The Electoral College;

Before learning the stories of famous close presidential elections, it is important to understand how elections in the United States work. In November every 4 years, American citizens cast their votes for the candidate they want to be president. But it is more complicated than that.

Each state has a group of people called electors who represent the voters in their state. Electors from every state are part of the Electoral College, which holds its own smaller election for president. The candidate who gets the most votes in a given state gets all of the Electoral College votes. So, for example, in 2012 President Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney in Ohio by just 2% of the vote. Even though it was really close, he still won all of that state's 18 Electoral College votes.

In the end, the Electoral College result is the one that determines who becomes president, not the direct “popular vote” that regular voters participate in. The system is confusing, but usually people do not pay much attention to it because the Electoral College outcome usually matches the popular vote outcome. A few times in American history, however, presidential races have been so close that the electoral and popular results have been unclear, resulting in some major controversy.¹

Adams versus Jackson

In 1824, more than two men competed for the presidency. A war and an economic crisis had led to the dissolution² of old political parties, so four candidates thought they had a good shot at winning. William Crawford, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and John Quincy Adams all ran. Jackson had the widest support around the country.

1. Controversy (noun): something that creates a lot of discussion and disagreement

¹
The results proved it: Jackson won the most popular votes and the most electoral votes of any candidate. However, at the time he needed to win 131 electoral votes to become president, and he had only received 99. If no one received the necessary 131, Congress had to pick a president to break the “tie.” Congress picked Adams, even though he had come in second.

It was the first time in U.S. history that someone won the presidency after losing the election, but it was not the last.

**Hayes versus Tilden**

The election of 1876 was complicated and messy because the United States was just coming out of the controversial Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War. Tensions were still high between the North and the South, and Republicans and Democrats still mistrusted each other. Rutherford B. Hayes ran as a Republican, and Samuel J. Tilden ran as a Democrat.

The months before the election were brutal. Tilden and the Democrats criticized Republican actions during the Reconstruction period and made fun of the current Republican president for being drunk and corrupt. Hayes and the Republicans claimed their opponents wanted to break apart the Union again.

After the first vote count on Election Day, Tilden had 184 electoral votes and Hayes had 165. But four states could not figure out who had really won, leaving 20 electoral votes unclaimed. Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina all sent multiple, conflicting reports and filed several complaints of voter fraud. In Oregon, one of the electors was declared illegal at the last minute.

In the end, the Republicans and Democrats struck a deal. Hayes could have all of the remaining 20 votes, allowing him to win the presidency by a single electoral vote. In return, Republicans would end their Reconstruction policies in the South, which many Democrats thought were unfair.

**Bush versus Gore**

The most recent close election happened in 2000 between Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore. The election was close all over the country, but by the end of the night on Election Day, only Florida’s votes were still being counted. Each candidate would need to win in Florida to decisively win the election.

After counting and recounting votes, officials in Florida declared that Bush won the state’s popular election by less than 300 votes. Since it was so incredibly close, Gore called for a recount in several counties around the state. This sparked major controversy. The debate went to court, where a Florida state judge ruled that the counties had to comply with a recount request.

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2. **Dissolution (noun)**: the falling apart of or the end of an organization
3. **After the Civil War, Reconstruction was a period of repair and reform in the southern states.**
4. **Decisively (adverb)**: making a clear result
Eventually, the United States Supreme Court had to get involved. They declared that a mandatory\textsuperscript{5} recount was unconstitutional,\textsuperscript{6} and therefore, the original results must stand. Bush won the election and received the 270 electoral votes necessary to secure the presidency. This angered many Democrats, since Al Gore received 540,000 more popular votes nationally than Bush; however, it is the Electoral College that really decides who will be president.

**Bonus: Truman versus Dewey**

The election of 1948 reminded everyone just how unpredictable presidential politics can be. Every political commentator expected Thomas E. Dewey, a Republican, to win the race easily. People were so sure about it that newspapers printed headlines and articles about it before the polls even closed.

To everyone’s shock, Democrat Harry Truman beat Dewey by more than 2 million votes and more than 100 electoral votes. Those newspapers were pretty embarrassed to discover they had printed the wrong results on thousands of papers already out for delivery!

\textsuperscript{5} Mandatory (adjective): not optional

\textsuperscript{6} Not supported by the United States Constitution
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Explain the difference between the Electoral College vote and the popular vote. How does this difference sometimes create tension? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

2. PART A: Which TWO of the following best identify the central ideas of this text? [RI.2]
   A. Voting in the United States is usually controversial.
   B. The popular vote is different from the Electoral College vote.
   C. Democrats usually use the Electoral College to win unfairly against Republicans.
   D. Presidential races usually have obvious winners, but sometimes they are very close.
   E. When a presidential race comes close, controversy often emerges.
   F. If a presidential race comes close, it is conventional for the two sides to strike a deal.

3. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answers to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “The United States Constitution is designed to make presidential elections relatively easy and smooth” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “In the end, the Electoral College result is the one that determines who becomes president, not the direct ‘popular vote’ that regular voters participate in” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “Congress had to pick a president to break the ‘tie’” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “In the end, the Republicans and Democrats struck a deal” (Paragraph 11)
   E. “Since it was so incredibly close, Gore called for a recount in several counties around the state. This sparked major controversy.” (Paragraph 13)
   F. “To everyone’s shock, Democrat Harry Truman beat Dewey by more than 2 million votes and more than 100 electoral votes” (Paragraph 16)
4. PART A: What does the word “comply” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 13?
   A. Report to the public
   B. Recalculate, reassess
   C. Make optional changes
   D. Obey, follow the rule

5. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “This sparked major controversy” (Paragraph 13)
   B. “a recount request” (Paragraph 13)
   C. “a mandatory recount” (Paragraph 14)
   D. “and therefore, the original results must stand” (Paragraph 14)
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. If you were a candidate and you found out on Election Night that you were losing by 1% of the vote, what would you do? Why?

2. In Hayes versus Tilden, a deal was struck to end the controversy. Should politicians be allowed to do this? Is it fair to the citizens?

3. When an election is very close, what do you think should be done? Why?