The Direct Election Plan:
In recent decades, the most widely offered proposal to reform the present method of electing the President and Vice President has been the direct election plan. Under this plan, the Electoral College would be abolished, and the President and Vice President would be elected directly by popular vote. Most direct election proposals would require that the winning candidates receive at least 40% of the votes cast, and a less frequently offered variant would provide for election by a joint session of Congress instead of a runoff election in the event no candidates received a 40% majority.

Pro and Con Arguments.
Proponents of direct election make the argument that their proposal is simple and democratic: the candidates winning the most popular votes would always be elected. Direct election would thus eliminate the possibility of a “minority” President and Vice President, because the candidate winning the most popular votes would always prevail. Further, it would eliminate what they characterize as an even greater potential for distortion of the public will by abolishing the contingent election process. In addition, proponents note that the direct election plan would give every vote equal weight, regardless of the state in which it was cast. It is further noted that the direct election plan would reduce the complications that currently could arise in the event of a presidential candidate’s death between Election Day and the date that the Electoral College meets, since the winning candidates would become President and Vice President-elect as soon as the results were certified.

Opponents offer many arguments by comparison. They assert that the direct election plan would weaken the present two-party system, and result in the growth of minor parties, third parties, and new parties. Today’s two major parties are relatively broadly based both ideologically and geographically, and conduct nationwide presidential campaigns in order to assemble the requisite majority of 270 electoral votes. Similarly, the need to forge national coalitions having a wide appeal has been a contributing factor to the comparative moderation of the two major parties and the governmental stability enjoyed by the nation under the present system. Moreover, it is argued, the growth or emergence of more narrowly focused parties could have a divisive effect on national politics, and result in governance by less stable coalitions similar to those in some parliamentary democracies.

Opponents also contend that a direct election plan would weaken the influence both the smallest and most populous populated states are said to enjoy under the present system, since direct popular election would eliminate the role of states as election units in favor of the single nationwide count under direct presidential election. Thus, each vote would be counted equally under the one person, one vote principle, regardless of the population size of the state in which it was cast. Finally, they question the 40% runoff requirement included in most direct election proposals: how can the concept of a “plurality” President, who may have gained well under half the votes, be justifiable if the chief aim of direct popular election is to elect a President who enjoys a majority of votes?

Other critics of direct election contend that the allocation of electoral votes is a vital component of our federal system. The federal nature of the Electoral College system is a positive good, according to its defenders. They assert that the founders of the Constitution intended the states to play an important role in the presidential elections and that the Electoral College system provides for a federal election of the President that is no less legitimate than the system of allocating equal state representation in the Senate. Direct popular election, they claim, would be a serious blow to federalism in the United States. Finally, they note that, as was demonstrated in the presidential election of 2000, close results in a single state in a close election are likely to be bitterly contested. Under direct election, they claim, every close contest in the future could resemble the post-election struggles in 2000, but on a nationwide basis, as both parties would seek to gain every vote. Such rancorous disputes, they argue, could have profound negative effects on political comity in the nation, and possibly even affect the political stability of the federal government.

Electoral College Reform
In contrast to direct popular election, the three proposals described in this section would retain the Electoral College, but would repair perceived defects in the existing system. One characteristic shared by all three is the elimination of electors as individual actors in the process. Electoral votes would remain, but they would be awarded directly to candidates. The asserted advantage of this element in these reform plans is that it would eliminate the potential for faithless electors.
The district plan preserves the Electoral College method of electing the President and Vice President, with each state choosing a number of electors equal to the combined total of its Senate and House of Representatives delegations. It would, however, eliminate the present general ticket or winner-take-all procedure of allotting a state’s entire electoral vote to the presidential and vice presidential candidates winning the statewide vote. Instead, one elector would be chosen by the voters for each congressional district, while an additional two, representing the two “senatorial” electors allocated to each state regardless of population, would be chosen by the voters at large. This plan, which could be adopted by any state, under its power to appoint electors in Article II, Section 1, clause 2 of the Constitution, is currently used by Maine and Nebraska, as noted earlier in this report. Under the district plan, the presidential and vice presidential candidates winning a simple majority of the electoral votes would be elected.

Most district plan proposals provide that, in case of an Electoral College tie, the candidates having the plurality of the district electoral votes nationwide — excluding the at-large electoral votes assigned to each state for Senators — would be declared the winners. If the electoral vote count still failed to produce a winner, most proposals advocating the district plan would require the Senate and House of Representatives to meet in joint session to elect the President and Vice President by majority vote, with each Member having one vote, from the three candidate tickets winning the most electoral votes.

Proponents of the district plan assert that it would more accurately reflect the popular vote results for presidential and vice presidential candidates than the present Electoral College method. Moreover, proponents note, by preserving the Electoral College, the district plan would not deprive small or sparsely populated states of certain advantages under the present system. That is, each state would still be allocated at least three electoral votes, correlating to its two Senators and its one Representative, regardless of the size of the state’s population. The also maintain that in states dominated by one political party, the district plan might also provide an incentive for greater voter participation and an invigoration of the two-party system in presidential elections because it might be possible for the less dominant political party’s candidates to carry certain congressional districts. Finally, proponents argue that the district plan reflects political diversity within different regions of states, while still providing a two-vote bonus for statewide vote winners.

On the other hand, opponents of the district plan contend that it does not go far enough in reforming the present Electoral College method, because the weight of each vote in a small state would still be greater than the weight of a vote in a more populous state. In addition, they note, the district plan would continue to allow the possibility of electing “minority” Presidents and Vice Presidents, who won the electoral vote while losing the popular vote. Some opponents of the district plan further argue that it has the potential to fragment the electoral vote among marginal candidates who may manage to capture a few districts. This, they claim, might actually weaken the present two-party system by encouraging parties that cater to narrow geographical interests or ideological interests that may be concentrated in certain areas.
The Proportional Plan.

The proportional plan retains electoral votes, but awards the votes in each state based on the percentage of votes received in each state (regardless of the districts from which the voters come) by the competing candidates. In the interests of fairness and accuracy, most proportional plans divide whole electoral votes into thousandths of votes, that is, to the third decimal point. This variation is known as the strict proportional plan. Another version, the rounded proportional plan, would provide some form of rounding to retain whole electoral votes. Under most proposals advocating the proportional plan, the presidential and vice presidential candidates receiving a simple majority of the electoral vote, or a plurality of at least 40% of the electoral votes, would be elected. Should presidential and vice presidential candidates fail to receive the percentage, most proportional plan proposals provide that the Senate and the House of Representatives would meet and vote in joint session to choose the President and the Vice President from the candidates having the two highest numbers of electoral votes.

Proponents of the proportional plan argue that this plan comes the closest of any of the other plans to electing the President and Vice President by popular vote while still preserving each state’s Electoral College strength. They also note that the proportional plan would make it more unlikely that “minority” presidents — those receiving more electoral votes than popular votes under the present system — would be elected. Proponents also argue that the proportional plan, by eliminating the present winner-take-all system, would give weight to the losing candidates by awarding them electoral votes in proportion to the number of votes they obtained. They also suggest that presidential campaigns would become more national in scope, with candidates gearing their efforts to nationwide popular and electoral vote totals, rather than concentrating on electoral vote-rich populous states.

Opponents of the proportional plan argue that it could undermine and eventually eliminate the present two-party system by making it easier for minor parties, new parties, and independent candidates to compete in the presidential elections by being able to win electoral votes without having to win statewide elections to do so. Further, opponents argue, the states would generally have less importance as units, since the winner-take-all aspect would be eliminated. In close elections, it is asserted, the proportional plan would lead to more frequent instances of electoral vote deadlock, in which neither candidate would gain the necessary majority of electoral votes, if this threshold were retained. Relatedly, opponents question the 40% plurality threshold. If the point of the presidential election is to ascertain the people’s choice, should not the winning candidate be required to gain at least a majority (50%) of electoral votes in order to avoid a runoff election or election in Congress?
The National Popular Vote effort, explained

The National Popular Vote effort is now halfway to its goal of electing future presidents via the popular vote, after Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee (D) made his state the latest to sign on.

The years-old effort is slowly making its way through state legislatures in hopes of changing the way United States presidents are elected -- without overcoming the huge hurdle of passing a constitutional amendment getting rid of the Electoral College. But precisely what is the National Popular Vote effort? And how close are we to electing a future president by the number of votes cast rather than by the number of electoral votes won? Here's a quick explainer:

What is the National Popular Vote?

National Popular Vote is a campaign launched in the mid-2000s. It basically seeks to get states that comprise a majority of the 538 votes in the Electoral College -- 270, to be precise -- to agree to award their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote. These states are not required to allot their electoral votes to the national popular vote winner until the effort has garnered the number of states it needs to get to 270 electoral votes.

So in other words, Rhode Island can continue to award its electoral votes to the winner of its state -- rather than the nation -- until the effort reaches 270 electoral votes. Once that threshold is met, it would be required, along with the other states that have joined the effort, to award its votes to the national popular vote winner. Those states would effectively determine who wins the election, and their votes would be based on the national popular vote.

Why are they doing it this way?

Basically, it's supremely difficult to overturn the Electoral College, because it's in the Constitution. In order to get rid of that method of electing a president, two-thirds of both the House and Senate would need to vote to repeal it via a Constitutional amendment, and then three-fourths of state legislatures would need to ratify the amendment. Achieving such a change is intentionally very difficult.

"There's literally nothing else on the table that has the remotest chance of fixing it and passing," said Rob Richie, executive director of FairVote, an electoral reform group that favors the National Popular Vote effort. What the National Popular Vote effort does is effectively reduce the number of states that need to agree to the change; the measure only needs to pass in enough state legislatures and get signed by their governors to get to 270. And, of course, Congress plays no role. While the Electoral College would technically still be in effect, the agreement among the states to award their electoral votes to the national popular vote winner would effectively render it moot.

Do people like the popular vote?

In a word, yes. Polling regularly shows Americans prefer electing the president via popular vote rather than via Electoral College. A Washington Post-ABC News poll in October showed 56 percent preferred the popular vote approach, while 37 percent preferred the Electoral College. In addition, supporters of the effort note that it makes every state -- the majority of which are generally ignored because they aren't swing states -- relevant in the process. So if you're from a clearly red or clearly blue state, this method has appeal.
What are the arguments against it?

Well, for one, the framers of the Constitution constructed the Electoral College for a reason -- they were wary of presidents being elected by popular vote. In addition, some states might balk at the idea that they have to award their votes to a candidate that may have lost their state, even by a very large margin. Finally, if you're in a swing state, you probably don't like this, because it makes your vote much less significant. (On the flip side, of course, it would mean you would no longer be bombarded with campaign ads and phone calls.)

Would National Popular Vote actually change anything?

Ever heard of President Samuel Tilden? Of course you haven't. That's because we have the Electoral College. Tilden in 1876 would have beaten Rutherford B. Hayes if the election were determined by popular vote. Hayes is one of four presidents to win without carrying the popular vote. The others are John Quincy Adams (1824, Andrew Jackson won the popular vote), Benjamin Harrison (1888, Grover Cleveland), and of course George W. Bush (2000, Al Gore).