But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

What are red states and blue states?

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Jane 00:19
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids? I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from kids just like you all over the world, and we find answers. We do a lot of science here on But Why? But today, we're thinking about a different kind of science, political science. That's the study of government and politics and how people relate to those topics. Of course, here in the United States, politics is something we hear a lot about every four years when we have a presidential election, and a little bit every two years when we have congressional elections. But elections happen all the time. Sometimes towns and cities have elections for things like mayors or town or city council. School districts elect people to their school boards, and sometimes voters have to go to the polls to agree to a town or school district budget. Sometimes we'll even vote on local issues, and that's just in the US. Elections of all sorts happen all over the world all the time, going to the polls or mailing in a ballot, these are important parts of our democracy. We'll be talking today about voting in the context of the U.S. presidential election. This show is based in the US, after all, but we hope if you live in a different country, you'll learn something too. Our guide today is Bridgett King from the University of Kentucky.

Bridgett 01:40
I am a college professor, which means I teach students who continue with school after they graduate from high school. I am someone who is a political scientist, and what that means is I study government, the people who work in government, and sort of the things that they do and how those decisions affect people.

Jane 02:02
Our first question is from Ellie.

Ellie 02:04
And I'm five years old, and I live in Massachusetts, Cambridge, and my question is, what is voting?

Bridgett 02:13
Voting is how you tell people in elected office, or people who will be in elected office, who you want there, what you care about, what issues matter to you.

Jane 02:25
Voting is how we decide who's going to make decisions for our towns, states and country. We elect the people who run our governments, and sometimes we vote on decisions about how to spend our money or what kind of changes we want to make to our laws. The act of voting is actually pretty simple. You have to register. That means, say that you want to vote and make sure you're eligible or allowed to. You register in the town or county that you live in. Generally, we don't vote with our hands or our voices in major elections. We vote using something called a ballot. A ballot is simply a piece of paper with

options to choose from. Often, you fill in the circle next to the name of the candidate you want to vote for. Sometimes there's a box that you can put a checkmark next to, and sometimes you can write in the name of someone who wasn't already printed on the ballot. You could even write in your own name, but you wouldn't get elected unless lots of other people wrote in your name too. Lots of people vote in person at what's called a polling place. That just means it's a place set up to take voters on election day. But lots of people vote before the election using something called an absentee ballot.

Bridgett 03:35
Yes, so absentee ballots, which are also sometimes called vote by mail ballots, so that also can be a little confusing, because different states use different words to describe the same thing. Absentee ballots basically give you an opportunity to not vote in person. Maybe it's because you're busy or because you're not going to be in town on election day, but it's a way for you to still cast a ballot the same way you, the same ballot you would vote if you voted in person, but to do it in a different time frame that accommodates your schedule.

Jane 04:07
Because if you're busy or, let's say you were on vacation, let's say your family decided to go out of town for a couple of weeks, and you're out of town on election day, even if you were at another place in the United States, you can't just go vote wherever you want. You have to go vote in the town that you're registered to vote in.

Bridgett 04:23
That is correct. And absentee ballots also allow citizens who are overseas to vote as well. So it's not just people who are maybe not at home on election day because they're in another part of the country. Absentee ballots also let people who are in other parts of the world still participate in our democracy.

Jane 04:40
But if you're going to vote in person on election day, you go to the polling place where you're registered to vote, and you're going to be helped by people called poll workers, who, you guessed it, are working at the polling place. There's a lot to do on election day, so people volunteer to help out.

Bridgett 04:56
Yes, they're mostly volunteers, individuals who are from your community. So they're your friends, your neighbors, they might even be a relative, but they are the people who on election day, will greet you when you show up and help you work your way through the process to make sure you can cast a ballot. The equipment or the machines that are in polling locations are very different, sometimes within the same state, but definitely across states. But generally, though, the process is the same. You show up, someone is going to confirm that you are who you are. You're going to receive a ballot, you're going to make choices on that ballot, and then you're going to submit it, and then it comes my favorite part, you get an "I Voted" sticker.

Isla 05:38
My name is isla. I'm in Colorado, I'm five and a half years old and why do people vote?

Jane 05:44
Isla in Colorado wants to know, why do people vote? So why do we have the system, and why do people still do it?

Bridgett 05:54
Part of the reason is so, if you think back to like early America, where the colonists basically had to follow the desires of the King of England, in an effort to get away from that after the American Revolution and the founding of the United States, voting creates an opportunity for citizens to express their choices, their desires and things that they want to see happen, Not only in the nation, but also in their local communities and in the states. So voting is something that we do in a democracy, which is what we live in, because it allows citizens to actively participate in government.

Raanan 06:36
Hi, my name is Raanan, and I live in Houston, Texas. My question is, how can someone win the most votes in the state in America, but still lose the presidential election?

Jane 06:50
Did that question surprise you? You would think that in a democracy, whoever gets the most votes wins, right? Well, kind of. There's one other step in the presidential election, and it's really complicated. When we vote for president, it doesn't mean all the votes of everyone in the United States get added together and counted. The way it works is each state gets counted separately, and a small group of people called the Electoral College are the people who actually get to vote for who becomes our president.

Bridgett 07:24
When citizens show up to cast a ballot, we're talking about president, you either vote from one candidate or the other, and depending on in most states, which candidate gets the majority of the votes cast by the public, that is where the electors go. So you can think about the electors as kind of being middlemen, right, who are in position to communicate to our two major parties or to the government, actually, more clearly, who it is that citizens in a specific state have selected. So if, for example, let's say, in a state, the Democratic candidate for president gets the majority of the votes, then those democratic electors would go to the state capital, and the electors or votes would be cast for that person. In the event a republican candidate gets the majority of the vote in a state, then the republican electors basically assert that that state has been won by the republican candidate, and that candidate, in turn, gets the electors. Basically, you start with the popular vote. The popular vote is then changed into an electoral vote, which is based on the outcome of who wins the popular vote in the state, and then those electors are then applied to reaching that 270 which you need to become president. It is complicated, and it's not going anywhere.

Jane 08:53
There are a total of 538 people in the electoral college. You need to get the votes of more than half of them to be president. Half of 538 is 269 so when Bridget says you need 270 to be president, that means you've got to have at least one more than half the votes of the electoral college. That 538 number seems kind of random, doesn't it? Well, it's not. Not every state has the same number of

electoral votes. It depends on how many people live in each state. States with more people get more votes.

Bridgett 09:29
That is true. So the number of electors is based on the number of representatives in Congress, and that is the House of Representatives plus the Senate put together. And so because everyone has two senators, every state's the same in that way, but because the House of Representatives is based on population, that is why we see larger states with larger populations having more electors, and smaller states with smaller populations having a smaller number of electors.

Jane 09:56
In most states, all but Maine and Nebraska, whoever wins the most votes in that state gets all of that state's electors. Even though they may only have won 60 percent of the votes, they get 100 percent of the electors, which makes it really important to try to win in states where it looks like the election is going to be close, because you can get all the electoral votes, even if you just get barely more popular votes from regular people than the other candidate.

Bridgett 09:59
Yes, but right, because so we don't have a national popular vote, so across our fifty states, who gets the most votes in their favor does not determine the outcome. So when you're doing the presidential election math, the best way to think about it is to sort of think about the individual states and what is happening in each individual state in terms of the popular vote, because that will then determine who gets the electors. And you need electors to become president. See, I

Jane 10:54
told you the Electoral College and our presidential election system were confusing. Can you even remember the question that started this whole explanation?

Raanan 11:02
How can someone win the most votes in the state in America but still lose a presidential election?

Jane 11:11
Thanks for the reminder, Raanan, because it's usually winner take all in each state where the winner gets all the electoral votes, even though they didn't get all of the votes of the regular people, it's possible that overall, one candidate could get more of the popular vote of the whole country, the votes of each individual person, but still get fewer of the Electoral College votes. Most recently, this happened in 2000 when George W. Bush became president, even though Al Gore had more votes, and in 2016 when Donald Trump became president, even though Hillary Clinton got more votes. Many people don't like the Electoral College and the way it influences our election outcomes, but it's written into the U.S. Constitution, and it would take a lot of work to get rid of it. So Bridgett thinks it's here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. The presidency is the only office where the Electoral College system is used. Okay, I need a break, and maybe you do too more on voting and voting systems coming up.

Jane 12:17

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids? I'm Jane Lindholm, we're learning about elections with Bridgett King, a political scientist at the University of Kentucky. Here's a question from Isaac.

Isaac 12:28
I'm eight years old, and I'm from Colorado, and my question is, why are there color states like red and blue?

Jane 12:38
We often hear people, especially in the media, talking about red states are going to vote this way and blue states are going to vote this way. And it can be confusing, because the states don't have colors, so why are we talking about them like they have colors?

Bridgett 12:52
This language of red states and blue states wasn't really agreed upon or consistent until the 2000 presidential election. So before that, you would have newspapers or print media inconsistently referring to democrats as red or blue or republicans as red or blue. So this, this language we use to describe states as red or blue is, I'm actually older than it. It's relatively new. And so it was in the 2000 election that sort of, news media agreed upon this idea that democrats would be described as blue and republicans would be described as red. And all that really means is that in a blue state, overwhelmingly, the voters voted, at least in a presidential election for the Democratic candidate, and in red states, it means they voted overwhelmingly for the Republican candidate.

Jane 13:51
So that a red state is a state that pretty consistently, pretty usually, goes for a republican presidential candidate, and a blue state pretty typically goes for the democrat who's running for president. And then we sometimes describe states that can go either direction as purple states, because when you mix red and blue, that makes purple.

Jane 14:11
It does. So there are also states that from presidential election to presidential election, sometimes they're red, sometimes they're blue, and so, because they're not as easy to sort of figure out in terms of what's going to happen on election day, we refer to them as purple states, right? Because they could either be red or they could be blue. And it's those states that you also see presidents spending a lot of their time, because those are the states where they have the biggest chance of picking up new voters or those states can be very important in helping them get enough electors to become the president of the United States.

Jane 14:48
And those states are also sometimes called "swing states," because they swing back and forth from one to the other. Why red and blue, though? Why? Why did it get decided that we would call these two different political parties by the colors red and blue, why not green and yellow?

Bridgett 15:04

I mean, I think it might be, in part have to do with the advent of color TV. So there was a point in time, for example, when, so when Ronald Reagan was president, for example, like, because his name was Ronald Reagan.

Jane 15:18
This was back in the 80s.

Bridgett 15:19
Oh yes, in the 80s. Yes, important context. he was affiliated with the color red, in part because his name began with an R.

Jane 15:27
Really, that was part,that was why?

Bridgett 15:29
Yeah, so there's no real sort of, people sat in a room and made this very well thought out sort of decision about red and blue. Part of it, I mean, red and blue show up really well on TV and in print media, so part of it is that, but I mean, our red and blue states could just as easy be green and orange, but again, perhaps not as pleasing on the eyes. Red and blue are also colors that are deeply embedded in the American flag. So in that way, it also perhaps makes the most makes makes more sense compared to some other colors.

Jane 16:04
Maybe you've seen a map of the United States. We often see them on TV and newspapers leading up to and after an election where states are colored in red or blue, depending on how they voted. Now you know what that means. Red states are states that tend to vote republican, and blue states tend to vote democratic. Often when you see maps like this, it's a representation of the Electoral College that we just learned about and which candidate that state's electors are giving their votes to. We also have animals that represent political parties. There's an elephant for republicans and a donkey for democrats. What's that all about?

Bridgett 16:44
They actually derive from a cartoon. So there was a cartoonist who, in sort of discussing our political landscape, used a donkey and an elephant, labeling the donkey the democratic sort of party slash candidate and the Republican Party the elephant, the Republican Party slash candidate. And so over time, it kind of just stuck, and the parties kind of adopted these symbols. So like a lot of the things that seem to be sort of long-standing intentional, things that we use to understand our political parties, oftentimes, kind of just happened as a consequence of, in the case of the elephant and the donkey, someone trying to be funny, or in the case of us thinking about red and blue, obviously them being in the American flag, but also thinking about that, there was no consensus until about 24 years ago, with respect to which candidate or which party would be described as red versus blue.

Jane 17:46

I should also mention, I keep saying our two political parties. We have more than two political parties in the United States. We have many, many political parties right now, in this point in American history and culture, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are the two strongest parties, but it hasn't always been that way, and it probably will not be that way forever and ever. Things change over time. We have different political parties, and even sometimes we have people who don't run within any political party. They're called independents, and we've never had an independent for president, but we have independents who represent their constituents, the voters and the people who live in their state in Congress. So I don't mean to give the impression that we only have two political parties. We just currently have two that are the strongest, and they wind up taking a lot of the votes.

Bridgett 18:39
Outside of our two major political parties, there are other people who have put themselves in the race to be president. A couple weeks ago, I was giving a lecture, and I wanted to know how many people had filed to run for president, and it's somewhere over 400, right? So there are, I know it's a lot. The problem is they often don't have the resources or the visibility, or sort of the support of individuals who are affiliated with our two major political parties, so it's often harder for them to get the number of votes which we talked about that are necessary within the state to secure the number of electors that you eventually need to become president.

Bridgett 19:19
So we talked a little bit about the states, and states wind up being very important when it comes to all elections. Really, we vote in a lot of different ways in this country, and each state runs its own elections. Why don't we all do it the same way? Why don't we just sort of nationally vote regardless of what state we're in. Why are states in control?

Bridgett 19:43
The Constitution provides the states with the authority to effectively determine election processes and procedures, and so there are some constitutional amendments and some pieces of federal legislation that do make some things consistent. But because of the Constitution, the Constitution is, in fact, what gives states the power and authority to design their election systems the way they choose. And so you can think about why that might be good, right? Because it allows states to create systems that might better reflect the preferences of their voters or what it is that their voters want.

Jane 20:20
And that, as you said, is the way it's been written up in our constitution. So this is sort of the way the U.S. was founded, and it's the way that it runs. But when we think about states, and we we kind of separate them out, and we call certain states red states and other states blue states. Do you think that's fair? Is that a good way to do it, or does that somehow not quite represent how different we all are and yet how the same. I mean, it's, it's sort of divides us up in an odd way.

Bridgett 20:47
Yeah, I mean, I think red states and blue states are a good way to describe a state or a city, even, or, you know, calling them red or blue if you just want to talk about the majority of people within a place who cast a ballot right but we also know that there are people who don't vote, and even in your red

states or blue states, there are people who don't vote with the majority. And so when we talk about states using this, sort of these colors as the descriptors, there's the potential to ignore, or for people who don't necessarily vote in according to the color of their state, to feel like they're not as much as part of the process and that their voice doesn't matter as much.

Jane 21:31
Do you think that affects how we feel about our elections?

Bridgett 21:34
Yes, as you know, when we think about why people don't participate, particularly when you look at surveys, one of the I would say top three or four reasons is usually that people feel disconnected from the process, or they feel like they don't know enough about what's happening. And so when people who can participate but feel like they aren't in the best position to do so choose not to, not only are they not voting, but they tend to be less engaged civically in general. So maybe they're also not watching the news, they're not reading the newspaper, they're not following candidates, candidates or campaigns. And you know, when we think about democracy and sort of why we vote in the first place, part of it is to get the input of citizens so they have a say in sort of what it is that government does or what it prioritizes or focuses on. And when so many people don't participate, they're basically excluding themselves from the conversation.

Jane 22:35
If voting is so important, why can't everyone do it?

Elizabeth 22:38
My name is Elizabeth. I live in St. Albans, Vermont, and I'm four years old, and my question is, why can kids not vote for president?

Benjamin 22:51
Hi, I am Benjamin. I am seven years old, and I am from Brewster, New York, and my question is, why can't kids vote?

Bridgett 22:59
The voting age in the United States has not always been 18. At one point it was 21. But so if we think about why younger children can't participate, one of the things that I think we as a country and people value is that individuals participating also having enough information to sort of understand the offices, who they're voting for, what it is that individuals do, and sort of why an issue or other sort of things someone might be deciding on on the ballot matters. And so one of the hopes is that as young people go from kindergarten through 12th grade, they're getting civic education. They're learning about government institutions and structure what it is that our elected officials do how to vote, perhaps more importantly, and so that when they graduate from high school, they will have enough information to be informed citizens and to make decisions in the voting booth on election day when they're able to.

Jane 24:05

You know, I mentioned that we have not always had just two political parties, or these two political parties, and you mentioned Bridgett, we haven't always had the same age range of people who are allowed to vote. And in fact, there have been lots of changes over our country's history in who is allowed to vote, and who isn't, and who is allowed to vote in this country reflects what we believe as a culture, and often what the people in power believe is the right of someone to be able to vote. And you know, our history has some not so great voting records. People of color have not been allowed to vote in our country's past, women have not been allowed to vote. People who did not own land have not been allowed to vote. And so it's not necessarily going to be the same forever with the age range of people who can vote too. And so if you are a kid who thinks I'm 16, or I'm 14, and I think I should be able to vote, so. That's something that you can work on and advocate for or make a case for, because our country is not set in stone, and we have made changes over the course of history.

Bridgett 25:12
You can have conversations with your parent or other adult about what's happening. I know a lot of schools sometimes bring in the voting equipment so students can, like, use it for, like, student council elections. A lot of states create opportunities for young people to design their "I Voted" stickers, which, if you'll recall, is my favorite part of the sort of in person process. There's programs like this where you can learn more. So there's beyond being able to cast a ballot. I just want to encourage everyone to sort of consider all of the other ways you can be civically engaged or educate yourself. I know for me, when I was younger, when my mother would go vote, she would take me. I may or may not have stolen her sticker, but she would take me, and I would stand in the booth while she made her selections. And I mean, I think it's a good way for young people to sort of get a sense of what the process looks like, even before they're able to participate in it themselves.

Jane 26:07
So if you're curious about the election, start talking to the adults around you about it. That's all the time we have for today. But our next episode is about elections too. We're going to talk more deeply about voting and how people know their votes are getting counted by the machines and devices used at polling places.

Bridgett 26:25
It's very important that not only are they accurate, but that people believe and have trust and faith and confidence that what they mark in that bubble on their actual ballot is what actually shows up in the totals that makes the decision.

Jane 26:39
As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record it. You can submit a question through our website, or you can record it on a smartphone using a voice recording app, and then have your adult email the file to questions@butwhykids.org We can't answer every question we get, but we love hearing what's on your mind. But Why, is produced by Melody Bodette and meet Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Joey Palumbo is the video editor on our YouTube series, But Why Bites. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!