

## But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

### Why Are We Still Talking About The Election?

November 20, 2020

**Jane** [00:00:21] This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio.

**Jane** [00:00:26] I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, our listeners are in charge. You send us questions about things you want answers to and then Melody Bodette and I run around and find them.

**Jane** [00:00:37] A few weeks ago, we talked about why kids can't vote in government elections. And we answered some of your questions about the U.S. presidential election. Election Day was officially November 3rd, but this year, a lot more people than normal voted before Election Day by sending in their ballots by mail or by voting early at a location called a polling place where people go and fill in their ballots. The ballot is the document that has all the people and issues someone is voting on. Everyone who decided to vote this year had to do it or mail it in by November 3rd. But we didn't actually know who won the presidential race until four days later. We'll explain why in a little while.

**Jane** [00:01:19] We now know that former Vice President Joe Biden won the most votes. He got about five point eight million more votes than President Donald Trump. But the way a winner is determined in the United States is a little more complicated than that. We use a system called the Electoral College, which we'll talk about in this episode. But one thing you should know about it as we begin the episode is that votes are kind of counted on a state by state basis. So the winning candidate needs to win enough states with enough people in them to get the presidency. That's why you might see adults around you staring at or talking about maps of red and blue states for the last several weeks. States that have more voters who vote Republican, for Donald Trump in this case, get colored in red and states that vote more for the Democrats, Joe Biden in this case, get colored in blue. So in this election, Joe Biden not only won the most total votes in the country, but he also won enough votes within states in the Electoral College to win the presidency.

**Jane** [00:02:31] You might have heard that the current president, Donald Trump, hasn't yet said he believes that Joe Biden won. Trump has a team of lawyers and they've been asking some states to count their votes again or to check and make sure that nothing went wrong. So the adults around you and all the news you might watch or listen to are still talking a lot about the election. And some of you have questions you'd like us to answer about all of this. So we invited a reporter who works for a national news organization called NPR and who knows a lot about elections to help us understand more.

**Jane** [00:03:06] Ayesha Rascoe is a reporter for NPR who focuses on the White House and the president. Adults and maybe some older kids who are really interested in politics might recognize her voice not just from the radio, but from a daily podcast she's often on called the NPR Politics podcast. One of the things they do on that podcast right at the beginning is give a little warning that things might have changed from when they recorded the podcast to the time when people hear it. So when we called up Ayesha on Wednesday, November 18th, I asked her if all of you listening to this podcast should assume the same thing, that some things might have changed by the time you hear it.

**Ayesha** [00:03:45] Yes, things are always changing. And so, you know what we say today, you know, the broad thrust of it would be true, but some of the details could change.

**Jane** [00:03:58] Let's start off with one question that I think some kids may have, which is we thought we had an election day on November 3rd. It's called Election Day because that's the day you're supposed to have the election. But this year, not only were people not all voting on that day, but we didn't even have results in the presidential race on that day. So what the heck is up with that?

**Jane** [00:04:19] First of all, we always have early voting, but because we have the coronavirus pandemic, it seemed like a lot more people were trying to vote early, maybe to beat the crowds. They didn't want to stand in long lines and be around a lot of people on Election Day. And we also had more votes that you could mail in. So people who didn't want to go out because they, you know, a lot of people were concerned about getting sick or they didn't want to do that. So what they did was they mailed in their votes. And so because of that, we had many, many more people participate in voting than we normally do. But it took longer, a longer time to count all of the votes. So really what we looked at as Election Day was really just the last day to vote. People have been voting for weeks, but that was the last day that people could vote. And then in some states, that was the first time they could really start counting the votes, and so it took a while.

**Ayesha** [00:05:25] There are some places where they are maybe they've counted and now they are recounting. There are certain states where the votes were close or that are really there states where it was really important to the election and we didn't know exactly who would win those states. And so there's a lot of attention on about six states where most of the votes have been counted or the vast majority have been counted. Some of them, all of them have been counted, but now they want to go back and make sure that they got the right number. So they're recounting some of the votes.

**Jane** [00:06:01] And in the presidential election, which is the big national one that a lot of people are focused on. We know that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won. So now Joe Biden is called the president-elect. He's not the president yet, but he will be. But not everybody seems to agree on that. So can you explain, Isha, why that's the truth, but not everybody seems to be following it right now?

**Ayesha** [00:06:27] Well, the reason why we say in most news outlets, most places that report the news and we say that is based on the votes that we know about. And so the states have voted and they've counted their votes. And based on that, we know that Joe Biden has won enough votes to be president when in January, January 20th, 2021. But there are, you know, the president of the United States right now, President Trump is trying to cast doubt on that or he's saying that, well, maybe we don't know. But we know based on the votes that have been counted that Joe Biden won and that even if someone made a mistake somewhere, it is possible someone made a mistake somewhere or maybe someone did something and they voted and they weren't supposed to, but not enough people would have done that. Or there hasn't been a mistake big enough to overturn the fact that Joe Biden got enough votes to win. And so that's the thing. So what really they're some of these people are talking about, they're saying, well, there could have been a mistake and there could have been a mistake. And they're probably mistakes in every election, almost certainly because you have millions and millions of people voting, so they're going to be mistakes, but there are not enough mistakes and not enough things could have gone wrong for Joe Biden not to have won, because right now he's leading

President Trump by thousands and thousands of votes in those very important states that would determine the election.

**Jane** [00:08:14] Well, that's actually a question that we got from a young listener in Toronto, Canada.

**Merida** [00:08:19] Hi, my name is Merida. What would happen if someone counted wrong and someone found out that they did it?

**Jane** [00:08:31] What happens in that case?

**Ayesha** [00:08:34] Well, and so that's what's happening in some of these states. So, for instance, in Georgia, they found that someone had made a mistake and hadn't counted all the votes and one of the counties. And so all they do on that point is they look at it and they say, OK, you know, this these votes, we didn't count them. And so that person might have to they might get a little trouble because they made a mistake. But ultimately, it's not enough to change the fact that Joe Biden won. And so in some states, we will see there was a mistake somewhere or someone made a mistake or someone did something and it and it affected the votes. But it's not enough to because Joe Biden, for instance, in Georgia is up by he was up by 14,000. Now he's up by not 14,000, but 12,000. So is still and you only need to win by like one vote. You don't need to win. You just need to win. You just need more votes. So in the U.S., you only need more votes in that state.

**Ayesha** [00:09:35] And so by the time you get up more than 10,000 votes, you that's you're not going to find mistakes. And the thing is, even if say, he like, there was one state where it it turned out, oh, Donald Trump won that state, there are all these other states where the same thing would have to happen. That wouldn't automatically mean that Donald Trump won. That would just mean he won that state. But Joe Biden is ahead in so many states that you would have to have multiple states with all of those, you know, problems and then you would have to have them to overturn. And that's just it's very unlikely to happen. And that is why we say he is president-elect.

**Jane** [00:10:21] Well, Maggie, who lives in Naperville, Illinois, wants to know:

**Maggie** [00:10:25] Why is President Trump going to collect and why are people saying Joe Biden might not be president?

**Jane** [00:10:34] Why then is President Trump going to court? And why are people saying Joe Biden might not be president?

**Ayesha** [00:10:39] Well, one of the things about the U.S. system is we have this very long period of time where you have the president, where the person who is president, remains president, and for a few months until the new person is brought in.

**Jane** [00:10:56] If kids haven't heard this before, when when that's the position you're in as the president who's not going to be president for much longer, you're called a lame duck.

**Ayesha** [00:11:04] Yes, you're called a lame duck. So there's this very long stretch of time. But there's also this period of time because it takes we have so many votes, it can take the states a long time to get their whole process together. So they have to certify the vote and then you have to go do this thing, which I'm sure we'll talk about later, the Electoral College. So there are all these steps that they have to go through.

**Ayesha** [00:11:29] And so until all those steps are reached, then you can people can try to, I would say, cast doubt on who is president, because it's not absolutely legally official yet. But on January 20th, we will have a new president. And people that study this and know this, they know who is going to be president, even though we have some people saying something different.

**Jane** [00:12:00] You know, Maggie's question is interesting because you could almost divided into two parts. I mean, you're explaining that people who say Joe Biden might not be president are wrong. But the fact that President Trump is going to court, he's not doing anything illegal by going to court. And in fact, it's the president's right to say or any but any candidate's right to say, I want you to recount the ballots. It was too close to call. I want to make sure you got it right. And if they're close, that can happen. So there's nothing wrong legally with what the president is doing right now.

**Ayesha** [00:12:33] No. And you can go. We've had close elections in the past. You know, everyone talks about way before you guys were born, back in the olden days of 2000, there was a very close election in Florida. And we went a long time. And in that time, we really didn't know who was going to be president-elect because it was one state and it was a small amount of votes and they were going to court over it. And so you people have politicians have the right to go to court and to see what is happening. Now what has happened in the vast majority of cases where President Trump has gone to court is he is not winning the cases. So that's the other reason why people say that Joe Biden will be president is because he's going to court and he's asking sometimes not really asking to overturn the results, but he's, you know, going to court, raising concerns about certain things. But he's not really winning. And so that's the other part of that.

**Eliza** [00:13:33] Hi, my name is Eliza. I'm 11 years old and I live in Franklin, North Carolina. And my question is, why did we put the Electoral College in place and why haven't we gotten rid of it and just done a popular vote for president?

**Ayesha** [00:13:48] So the Electoral College and I will try to explain this, because this is something that is so it's complicated even for adults to understand. And I think a lot of adults don't understand. But basically in the U.S., it's not necessarily, you know, as you said, how many people voted in the U.S. in the most the person gets the most votes wins.

**Ayesha** [00:14:09] It's on a state by state basis and each state gets a certain amount of votes wins or you could call them electors or electoral votes. And so each state gets a certain amount. And so it's whoever gets the most electoral votes wins the election. So it's based on the the combination of states that you win. That is how you determine who the president is. And the vast majority of states are winner take all. So that means if you win the state, you get all of their votes. There's some states that are a little more complicated than that. I think we just leave those alone. But in most states are you know, if you win the state even by one vote, yes. So if you win the state of North Carolina, you get all of North Carolina's votes.

**Ayesha** [00:15:03] And the magic number is you want to get to 270, you just need to get to 270 and you win.

**Jane** [00:15:10] Right. Because once you've had 270, the other person can't get 270.

**Ayesha** [00:15:14] They can't get 270. So once you get 270, then you win the election.

**Jane** [00:15:19] Now, the Electoral College and the electoral votes, those are actually real people who get to cast those votes on our behalf. Electors, as they're called, are chosen by the political parties in each state. And it's kind of more complicated than we need to go into right now. But basically, when everyone votes in a presidential election, that's actually not the final part of the process in choosing the president once everyone has voted, it's kind of like they've told their electors in their state how they expect those electors to vote, who the electors should be voting for. Each state has a certain number of electors and electoral votes. States with more people have more electors than states with small populations. And so when we talk about the magic number of 270, that basically means that when one of the candidates has won enough states that 270 electors are going to vote for him or her, that candidate has essentially won the race. But the Electoral College vote hasn't actually happened yet for this election.

**Ayesha** [00:16:28] It hasn't happened. It doesn't happen until December. And so once that happens, it's really over. You know, then it's the process is really over, as you know. Now, you know, Donald Trump will still be president until Inauguration Day in January. So we still have more time to wait. But the process will really be over once the electors go through their formal process.

**Jane** [00:16:54] The other part of Eliza's question was, why do we still have the Electoral College? Well, because it's in the Constitution. The men who wrote the Constitution of the United States, which is the document that sort of lays out what kind of country the U.S. is supposed to be and what basic rules were going to follow. The men who are writing the Constitution back in the 1700s didn't actually think that every adult in the United States should be allowed to vote directly for the president. Maybe we'll get into that more in a future episode. But for today, we'll just say that the creation of the Electoral College was a compromise they made in 1787 when they were drafting the Constitution to make sure that all of the states at that time would sign on and agree to it.

**Jane** [00:17:41] Lots of people today think we shouldn't have the Electoral College anymore and that we should instead just let all the eligible voters cast their votes around the country and the candidate with the most votes wins. Not everyone agrees with that, though, and getting rid of the Electoral College would require an amendment, a change to the Constitution. And it's really hard to change the Constitution. The last time an amendment was made was in 1971, when the voting age was lowered to 18.

**Jane** [00:18:13] There's another idea for how to change the system that wouldn't require a constitutional amendment. It's called the national popular vote and it would basically be a deal that states agreed to, not the federal government, to have their electors vote for whoever wins the national vote. But not enough states have agreed to that idea for it to happen, at least not yet. So for now, we continue to have the Electoral College, and that's why it matters so much which states the presidential candidates win.

**Jane** [00:18:43] After the Electoral College votes, then there is an official decision about who the next president is, but I asked Ayesha what happens if Donald Trump still doesn't agree with the results after the Electoral College votes on December 14th?

**Ayesha** [00:18:58] Well, I mean, that has never happened before in the U.S. So I have to be honest and say I don't know exactly what would happen. And nobody really knows. But the idea is on January 20th at noon, you will have a new president, whoever won that Electoral College, and then that person would be in power. And then the Secret Service

and all of those people would now be working for the new president. They wouldn't be working for Donald Trump. And so in that case, it would be they would say, hey, you got to go.

**Jane** [00:19:34] Right. It's not up to you.

**Ayesha** [00:19:35] It's not up to you. Yeah. It's not up to you to decide.

**Jane** [00:19:39] Coming up, more of your questions about the recent election.

**Jane** [00:19:44] This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids? I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're answering questions about the 2020 presidential election in the United States with NPR political reporter Ayesha Rascoe. Here's a question from Caroline.

**Caroline** [00:19:58] And I'm six years old and I live in Connecticut. And my question is, how does the president talk to the people without being on the news?

**Jane** [00:20:11] So this is an interesting one, because you are in the business of the news and you help everybody understand what's happening and what the president says. But the president now, because we live in a time where there's all this technology, doesn't actually need to talk on the news to get a message out.

**Ayesha** [00:20:30] No, he doesn't. And so sometimes a lot of times when we hear from the president, we're hearing from him on Twitter or social media, definitely his his preferred social media is Twitter. So we will hear a message from him, that way. He can also put out messages just in writing so he can send an email out, usually to all the reporters. He'll send an email and he'll say, you know, whatever he wants to say and it'll be in writing. Sometimes he'll send other people out to speak for him, you know, his press secretary, who's basically kind of his spokesman, his spokesperson, and they'll speak on his behalf and say, this is what the president told me. And so we'll hear from him that way. And sometimes they do that on camera and then sometimes they do that behind the scenes or they'll do that, you know, they'll talk to a reporter and get the news out that way, or sometimes they'll put it in writing. And so that's how he can talk without giving a speech necessarily.

**Jane** [00:21:33] One of the important things about having trusted news sources, though, is that one of the jobs of a reporter is not just to say, here's what the president is saying, but to say, here's what the president is saying and here's what we know about whether that's true or not. And here's the other information that you might need to know. And here's what other people are saying about that. And the reason that's important is then it gives the people who are listening to the news or watching the news or reading it a better understanding of how to have a sense of why it's important what the president said.

**Ayesha** [00:22:10] Yes. So what we try to do is try to make sure that we are telling people, giving people information that they can use and that we are explaining it to them and explaining to them what's true and what we know to be true and what we know to not be true, and also telling people what we know and don't know. So we may not know exactly what the president is going to do next. So we try to, you know, be clear about that. Or sometimes the president says things or any politician or any person can say something and we know it's not true. And then we try to say that's not true, to explain to people that that this actually is not the case. And we know this because people have told us that or because we, you know, have scientists that have said this or we know because we were

there. So we try to to make sure that we're explaining what has actually happened. We're not perfect. We don't always know and we make mistakes. But as journalists, what we try to do is when we make a mistake, as we try to be up front about that and let people know that we've made a mistake because we want people to be able to trust us.

**Jane** [00:23:21] So we also have a question about the vice presidency.

**Senna** [00:23:25] Hi, my name is Senna and eight years old. I live in Arlington, Massachusetts. And my question is, if you've already been vice president, can you still be president twice?

**Jane** [00:23:38] So maybe we should explain how how many times you can be president and then, you know, whether a vice president has the same rules.

**Ayesha** [00:23:45] A person now can only be president twice. You can only be elected president twice, right? Yes. So you can only be elected president twice. There was a president who was president more than two times, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But after that, there was a change. And so now you can only be president twice. But I think he could be vice president as many times as you decide to be.

**Jane** [00:24:12] Oh, really? No. No term limits on the vice presidency?

**Ayesha** [00:24:15] No, I don't think there are any term limits on being vice president. And so I think you can be vice president as much as you like, but you can only be president twice. So you can be vice president two terms and then you can run for president and be president for two terms.

**Jane** [00:24:31] I don't know if this is why Senna is asking this, but maybe one of the things behind Senna's question is a lot of people are are talking about the fact that we have the first woman, Vice President Kamala Harris. She's also, the first African-American vice president and the first Asian-American vice president and a lot of people are saying that maybe she will someday become the president and we've never had a woman president. So that would be exciting to a lot of people. So maybe that's partly why is interested in this.

**Ayesha** [00:25:01] That may be. And so she so, you know, she would definitely be, Kamala Harris would definitely be able to be vice president even if she were vice president two terms she could then turn around and run for president and be president for two more, she could be president for two terms. So she can, that is totally possible. And there aren't any you know, there aren't any limits on that being vice president and then running for president.

**Jane** [00:25:30] Those were all the questions you have sent us since the election that we wanted to cover with Isha. But I know that many of you are hearing people talk about the election and President Trump and President-elect Biden a lot. And sometimes adults seem to be worried or angry or confused. So I asked Ayesha if there was anything else she thinks you should keep in mind, since she reports on the president every day for her job and she knows a lot about what's going on.

**Ayesha** [00:25:55] What kids should know is that voting does matter and that we live in a country where it does matter. The way we are set up is that you vote and your vote is supposed to count and then we elect people to represent us. And so even though there's a

lot of talk about what happened with the votes and things like that, really what we had in this election is we had more people participate and more people vote than we have in a really, really long time. And that's a great thing for a democracy to have people participate. And what should happen and what will happen is that the person who got the most amount of votes and got the most votes in the Electoral College, that person will be president. And that is the way our system is set up and designed to happen right now.

**Ayesha** [00:26:51] Even though there's a lot of talk, some of it is just talk, you know, just like some of it. You know, sometimes people just they they like to talk and there's time to talk, but it doesn't actually change anything.

**Ayesha** [00:27:10] And so I think that that's part of what I would tell kids is just look at what happens on January. Keep your eye on what's going to happen on January 20th, because a lot of what's happening right now is just people talking.

**Jane** [00:27:23] And if you still have questions, you should ask the adults you trust about what you're hearing or what confuses you. And of course, you can always send your questions to us. I hope you trust us. And we always want to make sure we're giving you the answers you need to understand the world around. You have an adult help you record your question on a voice recording app, then have your adult email the file to [questions@butwhykids.org](mailto:questions@butwhykids.org). We like to tackle questions on any topic. So whatever you're curious about is a good idea to send to us. That's it for this episode. Big thanks to Ayesha Rascoe for helping us out today, even while she's in the middle of reporting on all the things we just talked about. She's a White House reporter for NPR and part of the NPR politics team. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio.

[00:28:13] We're distributed by PRX and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.