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New research from the UTECS team provides the first answer to this question. Statistical simulations of the possibilities for Presidential elections show that inversions are very likely and always have been. This is especially true in elections decided by a margin of less than one percent of the vote. In 45% of such races, the popular vote winner will lose.

New evidence from UT-Austin economists shows that the Electoral College is much more likely than previously understood to elect the Presidential candidate who loses the national popular vote.

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few percentage points (which today equals a few million votes). The 2000 & 2016 inversions were not the results of extraordinary political circumstances or unique candidates. Instead, these were relatively likely outcomes. The only reason the US hasn’t experienced more inversions is that “sample” is small—just 25 Presidential elections per century, and even fewer close elections.

Electoral College inversions have been very likely since the 1800s.

Innovative data journalists and election forecasters have recently applied increasingly sophisticated statistical tools to analyze politics. These predict or explain the results of particular contests, such as Trump/Clinton 2016. But they do not answer the deepest questions about the Electoral College: how likely are inversions as an enduring feature of American political life, independent of two particular candidates or parties?

The UTECS team studied three eras of US politics from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries: from contests between Whigs and Democrats before the Civil War to today’s Republicans and Democrats. The research used hundreds of distinct statistical models to understand the extent to which modeling assumptions affected the results. The high rate of electoral inversions in close elections holds in all time periods, and under any plausible model of how elections unfold. The clear finding is that inversions have been likely through all of US history. Inversions are an enduringly fundamental feature of the Electoral College.

Almost all voters will eventually experience an inversion.

Over a voting lifetime, many Americans vote in 60 years’ worth of elections. How likely is it that at least one of these will be an inversion? If elections continue to be close as they have been in the last 30 years, the lifetime probability of voting in an inversion is at least 80%. Voting in an election where the winner loses the popular vote is a fact of political life for American voters.

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32% Probability of inversion in a race decided by less than 2% (2.6 million votes)

45% Probability of inversion in a race decided by less than 1% (1.3 million votes)

1 in 8 Fraction of elections since 1828 with a popular vote margin within 1%

90% Probability of experiencing at least one inversion over a voting lifetime

77% Probability that if an inversion occurs, it will be a Democrat popular vote majority and a Republican Electoral College win

The research uses hundreds of distinct statistical models, computed using data from three historical periods. All models agree that inversions are likely.

UTECS Brief No. 1. September 2019. All statistical results are from “Inversions in US Presidential Elections:1836-2016” by Michael Geruso, Dean Spears, and Ishaana Talesara of the University of Texas at Austin. Further results and full methodological details are presented in the paper, available at utecs.org.