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# From George to George: Path to the Presidency

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# From George to George

## Path to the Presidency

by Tom Mach, Ph.D.

**T**he great Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman once remarked, “If forced to choose between the penitentiary and the White House for four years ... I would say the penitentiary, thank you.” Sherman echoed the opinion of many before and many since upon realizing the immense responsibility of the office of the president.

For some, it was not the demands of the office that they found daunting; it was the impact it had on one’s life and relationships. Warren G. Harding, the 29<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, noted that it was not his enemies that concerned him as president, but rather it was his friends that kept him “walking the floors at night.”

For others, the moral responsibility was the hitch. Franklin Roosevelt, president during most of the Great Depression, noted that the presidency is “preeminently a place of moral leadership.”

Finally, and as has been evidenced once again in the current campaign, others shy away from the costs associated with obtaining the office. The nation’s founders would shudder at what has become of the process of selecting the president. They wanted to ensure a system that was largely incorruptible and one that was rather removed from the general electorate. But we are getting ahead of the story. Let’s go back to the beginning.

### How We Began

In the summer of 1776, the Declaration of Independence clearly articulated to Great Britain and King George III that American colonies no longer wished to be a part of the British empire. The Declaration noted the American disdain for centralized government, and since there was no

organized central government in the American colonies, the default was to leave power in the hands of the newly formed states. By 1787, this system was codified in the Articles of Confederation, which legitimized the Continental Congress as the legislative body of the land, but extended to it few powers.

The governmental difficulties of the era continued after the war and led some political leaders to begin to call for a new system. Economics was a chief concern as states had set up tariff barriers between themselves, limiting overall national economic growth.

In 1787, a group of men representing most of the states convened in Philadelphia to consider options regarding the structure of the central government. Those like Patrick Henry, who preferred a weak central government, came and realized they were badly outnumbered by those who sought change. The convention wrote a new document that became the Constitution of the United States.

The Constitution provided for a separation of powers between three branches of government. The executive and judicial branches of the federal government came into being, and the legislature evolved into two houses.

The founders believed that citizens should elect representatives who would then govern on behalf of the nation. The concern was that the masses were not well-informed enough to make important decisions and were too easily swayed by political rhetoric or some type of political bribe. As a result, the convention determined that the president would not be elected by the voters. Instead, each state would have a certain number of electors that would be chosen by an Electoral College.





The number of electors was determined by the total number of congressmen from the state. In most states, the state legislatures chose the electors. In effect, the party in power in those states was able to determine the slate of electors for the president. It is worth noting, however, that senators were to be selected by state legislatures at this time as well, and so this process was not entirely unique. Once convened, the Electoral College was to vote on whom should be president. Each elector was allowed to cast two votes. The person receiving the most votes became president, and the person receiving the second most votes became vice president.

George Washington was elected easily to his two terms and could have served a third if he had been willing. When the country came to the 1800 election, however, a problem in the Electoral College system surfaced. The nation had become polarized by this time into two political factions — the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans.

The Democratic-Republicans in Congress met together in what was called a “caucus” to decide who to support for the presidency. Based on their conclusion, the electors decided to cast one of their votes for Thomas Jefferson, whom they wanted to be president, and one of their votes for Aaron Burr, whom they wanted to be vice president. In the end, both men received 73 votes. That was a

majority vote, so the vote went to the House of Representatives, where it took 36 ballots to decide that Jefferson would be president.

Following this election, the Constitution was amended and the system changed to have separate balloting for president and vice president. The process changed again in the 1828 election. Andrew Jackson believed he had been deprived of the presidency in 1824 through political chicanery and desperately wanted revenge. He appealed directly to the American people in his campaign and sought to foster a more democratic and less republican system. He was successful both in obtaining the presidency and changing the system.

While the movement was already underway by this point, more and more states began to hold popular elections to determine how their electoral votes would be cast. State legislatures still have the constitutional authority to decide how electors to the Electoral College are selected, but the vast majority of states today use a winner-take-all method. Whichever candidate wins the popular vote in the state receives all of its electoral votes.

## How Far We've Come

As a result, some have questioned whether the system should be maintained. The debate rages because voters in low population states end up



having a slightly more valuable vote since each state is guaranteed at least three votes in the Electoral College. That might be a benefit for conservatives because those smaller states in the central and western regions of the country tend to support conservative candidates. Others worry about the undue influence of the larger states like California and Texas, which have burgeoning populations.

Over the years, the process of selecting the president has changed and has led to a more democratic process, meaning that the voters have a stronger voice in determining who is president. Interestingly, while the voters have a larger role, the participation of voters in the presidential election has tended to decline. While Gilded Age voters turned out at a rate of 80 to 90 percent during the 1890s, turnout fell below 50 percent by the 1990s.

Many factors have caused this decline. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans listened to three or four two-hour speeches in a single day. The issues were clearly delineated, and the average voter had a good handle on them. They knew what made their candidate distinctive. Today, the advent of television has resulted in shortened attention spans and image-conscious politicians. Americans get most of their impressions of candidates from 60-second commercials and 10-second sound bites on the news. Even the televised debates often give candidates only a minute and a half to address the most pressing issues of the day. The role of the

average voter has pushed candidates to the middle to try to appeal to the most voters. The end result is usually a campaign with two relatively moderate candidates and an electorate that knows little about either one.

When the change in how the president is elected is combined with the change in the role of government over 230 years, we see a disturbing development. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government took on a new role of creating a safety net for disadvantaged Americans, providing medical insurance and pensions for the elderly, and developing a series of entitlements that benefit virtually every cross-section of the population. As a result, politicians have much to offer voters beyond their own character or a pledge for good government.

The debate about entitlements is not the issue here; their use as political tools is. The founders did not want the president elected by the masses because they were fearful of what might influence their voting. Today, we have lost both the republican buffer between voter and the presidency and the limited role of government. As a result, presidential candidates can appeal to voters based on what they will provide for the voters if elected. In its most crass form, campaigning becomes little more than a *quid pro quo* — I give you something you want and you give me your vote.

When combined with the short attention spans of Americans and image-driven campaigns, the changes in the presidential election system are a cause for concern. Indeed, one wonders in more pessimistic moments how long the American system can survive. The notion of the common good appears to be lost in the shuffle. Yet, in Christ there is always reason for hope.

The increasingly democratic system, with all of its flaws, provides an opportunity for overcoming some of the setbacks. We must demand of our politicians that they clearly articulate what they believe and why their party and political positions make them distinct from their opponents. If the electorate does

not require this of their candidates, we will not be able to keep politicians adequately accountable or be well-informed enough to vote intelligently.

Evangelical Christians have an added imperative to be involved in the political system. Evangelicals can play an important role in maintaining the blessings we have in America. With much blessing comes much responsibility. The resources and people of this nation can help to support and expand the body of Christ in this world. They can also be a significant force for good in an international community racked with conflict and evil. It will take hard work, however, because some who came before us and who claimed the name of Christ did not use the best methods. Matthew 10:16 reminds us of the need to be charitable as well as shrewd. In

the end, Christians can improve our political system and our society by being informed, being involved, and keeping politicians accountable. [T]

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## Presidential Fun Facts

George W. Bush has had one of the highest approval ratings and one of the lowest approval ratings of any of the presidents during his terms in office (90 percent and 29 percent, respectively).

Attempts have been made to assassinate 10 presidents; four were successful.

- Assassinated: Lincoln, **Garfield**, McKinley, and Kennedy
- Attempts: **Jackson**, T. Roosevelt, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Ford, and Reagan



The order of presidential succession established by the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 makes the speaker of the House (currently Nancy Pelosi) third in line after the president and vice president.



Five pairs of presidents have been related:

- George H.W. Bush is the father of George W. Bush.
- John Adams was the father of **John Q. Adams**.
- William Henry Harrison was the grandfather of Benjamin Harrison.
- James Madison and Zachary Taylor were second cousins.
- **Franklin D. Roosevelt** was a fifth cousin of Theodore Roosevelt.



A presidential candidate needs 270 Electoral College votes to become president.

The next president will be paid \$400,000 per year in salary.

More presidents were Episcopalians than any other denomination. The second most common affiliation is Presbyterian.

The oldest president at the time of election was **Ronald Reagan**, age 69, while the youngest at election was **John F. Kennedy**, age 43. (At age 42, **Teddy Roosevelt** was actually younger when he became president, but he ascended to the White House upon the assassination of William McKinley.) **Note:** John McCain is 71 and Barack Obama is 46.



Four presidential candidates have won the popular vote but lost the election in the Electoral College:

- Andrew Jackson, 1824
- Samuel J. Tilden, 1876
- Grover Cleveland, 1888
- Al Gore, 2000



The president with the highest popular vote in American history was Ronald Reagan in 1984 with 54.4 million votes. He also had the highest electoral vote with 525 votes (carried 49 states).

One president served two non-consecutive terms: **Grover Cleveland** (1884 and 1892).

The lowest voter turnout percentage in American presidential election history was in 1992 with only 49.1 percent voting. That means that approximately 24.5 percent of the electorate put **Bill Clinton** into his first term as president.



**George W. Bush** defeated Al Gore for the presidency in 2000. The race came down to a single state and several hundred votes.



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