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The Electoral College and its Electoral Impacts

The date is November 8th, 2016. Half of America sits shocked watching their televisions as Mr. Donald J. Trump is declared the winner of the 2016 Presidential Race. Many of them had watched comfortably for hours as Hillary Clinton’s numbers went up, then much less comfortably as the red states began to outshadow the blue as Trump began to overtake Clinton in the race. Truly, more than half of American voters are shocked by this because Trump was not actually voted for by the majority of the population, and yet-- he still won.

The Electoral College is what enabled him to accomplish such a feat. The Electoral College opens the opportunity to gain the Presidency while receiving far less than the majority of the popular vote. This irony poses the question of whether or not Americans have fair representation in their elective processes -- and if not, what Americans must do to remedy this dilemma. Needless to say, there is plenty of debate surrounding the United States’ Electoral College and its reform.

The College was formed in 1787 alongside and within the Constitution of the United States. Many beliefs circulate about the reasoning behind the forming of the College by the Framers, the people who wrote the Constitution. One such reason is to limit the decision of choosing the nation’s next president to the more educated men of the country. It is important to
note that the Framers did intend for those decisions to be made exclusively by the men of the country. The Framers did not want for the uneducated and unwise masses of the country to hold such an all-powerful sway over some of the most influential decisions in the world. Such is one belief as to why the Framers formed the Electoral College. Another reason, one more likely and more compelling to the logical mind, is to balance power between the people of the nation. Similar to the configuration used in the United States’ Congress, the Electoral College had to represent people from all areas and all walks of life as equally as possible (Amar 66). Early American leaders sought to provide equal say and power to the person in the densely populated areas in and around cities, as well as equal say and power to the voter in the sparsely populated rural plains. Thus the Electoral College emerged. To this day, College members are allotted in the exact same manner as Congress seats are. There are 535 seats in Congress, 100 in the Senate and 435 in the House of Representatives. The College members are divided by population, but no states may have fewer than 3 electoral votes, which mirrors the fewest number of Congressional seats a state may have-- two in the Senate, where every state gets two seats, and a minimum one in the House of Representatives, where seats are based on state population. The Framers intended to balance the power between types of people. This practice does, however, allow for a Presidential candidate to win the electoral college without winning over the most American voters.

This occurrence has happened multiple times through the nation’s history, most recently in the 2016 Presidential election in...
which Donald Trump won the Electoral College, but lost the national popular vote to Hillary Clinton. Other cases include the elections of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000 (Bolinger). Because of all five of these elections, specifically the most recent two, there has been an outcry for reform. The claim goes that the practice of the Electoral College is outdated, or even that it was a misguided and unwise decision in the first place. Regardless of the claim, many people are beginning to desire a change.

One argument amidst the outcry hearkens back to an issue at the heart of the very founding of the United States: representation. Benjamin Bolinger references two examples of this value that remain common practice in the culture: Congress and the idea of “No Taxation Without Representation.” He states that the Electoral College should be the same way. However, since the verdicts are strictly ‘winner-take-all’ in all but two states, there is a vast amount of “inequity,” and it “betrays American values of majority rule, equality before the law, and representative government” (Bolinger). He goes even further to explain the astonishing difference in representation between different states. Bolinger does the math and finds that there is a 4:1 ratio in favor of Wyoming based on electoral votes by population. In other words, an electoral vote from Wyoming is worth considerably more because it is representative of fewer people. Bolinger claims that “[w]hen the votes of some citizens count more than those of others, America has failed to honor its commitment to equal representation” (Bolinger[IT11] ). The Framers would not stand for off balance representation.
Bolinger outlines his plan for an election that does away entirely with the Electoral College and decides the President strictly based on the national popular vote. This practice would simply mean that whichever candidate receives the most votes of the actual American people would win the election. In the event that no candidate receives more than 50% of the national vote, he proposes that the candidate with the fewest votes be eliminated and those votes recast for the second choice of those voters, and so on until a candidate has received more than 50% (Bolinger).

A different, and likely more realistic, plan for change involves a more underhanded, backdoor route. There are those pushing for an agreement to bypass the College without actually having to amend it in the Constitution. These supporters seek to make a pact to give all of their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote, rather than the winner of the popular vote in their own respective states. This strategy does not require an amendment to the Constitution, and it ensures that the winner of the true majority of voters will win the presidency. Those involved call themselves the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, and they sit approximately two thirds of the way to reaching their goal of having enough states that they may fulfill the electoral-college-required number of votes without any outside assistance (Virgin 39-40). [IT13] Should they get to that point, there will be no stopping the national popular vote winner from winning the election (Virgin 39-40).

Another side to the argument exists, however. There are still many who believe that the Electoral College should remain, and it should remain exactly how it has stood since its creation.
over two centuries ago. The need for the College’s formation according to the citizens holding this point of view must first be understood [IT14] before one may understand their argument. The non-reformists believe that the Electoral College fulfills three goals, primarily. It preserves Checks and Balances, maintains the two-party system, and continues the requirement of a national president, or a president that is approved of by Americans [IT15] from all areas and all walks of life (McCollester).

According to these non-reformists, the Electoral College aids in maintaining Checks and Balances because it keeps balanced power between large and heavily populated states and small, lesser-populated states. The Framers sought to keep the voice of the person living in the country’s biggest cities such as Boston or New York equal to the voice of the person in the rural plains of the country’s central farm states such as Iowa and Kansas. They did this by proportionally distributing electors like they did for Congress. They did this by giving states power in the form of electors based on both population, for the big states, and based on statehood, for the small states to be able to compete. Branching from this belief, non-reformists hold to the idea that removing the Electoral College would lose a different foundational idea than the reformists do. That fundamental is Federalism, and more specifically Balanced Federalism. In her “Counterpoint” essay, Maria McCollester defines Federalism as the ability of distinct communities to join together without losing their distinctiveness (184). Non-reformists desire to keep this idea of Federalism [IT16] [IT17], to keep these districts together but still unique and independent. They seek to continue to allow these distinct
communities to vote for their national leader together, but for each individual area and culture to be represented accurately and fairly.

Another of the views held by the majority of the non-reformists is that the Electoral College aids in upholding the two-party system. Some may argue that the two-party system is not the most effective strategy for the United States and that the views of smaller third parties will never reach the surface and spark change. According to non-reformists this argument is not only untrue but also less important compared to the other issues surrounding the multiparty system. The non-reformist counter argument goes that the two-party system has created a political stability far beyond that of any other democracy that has yet shown its face in the span of history. Further, the argument shows that, historically, the multiparty has torn countries apart. It has divided countries, destabilizing them so much that the governments leading them have crumbled into shambles, incapable of functioning as they should. Even so, to add to their already-supported argument against a multiparty system, the non-reformists’ [MF19] claim that that system would make it considerably harder and less efficient to determine who actually received the majority of votes, because the multiparty system would inevitably result in far more candidates running for every election (McCollester 184).

The third function of the College, according to the non-reformists, is to continue requiring a “national president” (McCollester 184). According to McCollester, a national president is one required to appeal and attract everyone across the nation, rather than specific areas or specific groups of people. She goes on
to explain that if this were to change, a candidate would no longer have to campaign to and for every voter across the country. He or she would only need to campaign in enough places to get many votes in specific areas. McCollester finishes her argument, and simultaneously summarizes the core of the non-reformist opinion, by claiming that “without a national process for electing presidents such as the Electoral College, the voice of the ‘little person’ will simply vanish from the process” (McCollester 185). The Framers formed the College to preserve the “little person,” and the non-reformists seek to continue doing exactly that.

Removed from either side, Arnold Barnett, in his essay “Selecting the Nation’s CEO: A Risk Assessment of the Electoral College,” lays out all of the most extreme possibilities that the Electoral College could allow to occur, however unlikely they may be. Barnett focuses primarily on five elections to help show how the math of the College may factor into the debate. He explains that, hypothetically, a candidate may win the Electoral College, and the resulting presidency, despite a staggering loss at the polls, though it has never actually happened in American history (Barnett 448).

One case laid out by Barnett goes as follows. The candidate in question will win 50% of the state vote in every state he or she wins, along with a minimum of 35% in the states that he or she loses. Additionally, the tendency of demographically similar states to vote similarly is taken into account, along with the voting history of states and something Barnett labels the “Continuity Correction” (452). With all of these specifics, winning a maximum of 50% of the states won, and a minimum of 35% of the states lost,
a candidate may win the presidency with only 48.7% of the national popular vote (Barnett 455-56).

Now remove the aforementioned “Continuity Correction,” but let all of the other specifications remain. The maximum vote stays the same, as well as the minimum, and the history and voting tendencies are still considered. The candidate will win the presidency with only 45.2% of the national popular vote. Take away the voting history of states, and suddenly the President may win with only 42.7% of the national popular vote. Finally, take away the consideration of similar voting tendencies between states, and remove the voting minimum. No special considerations are involved. The winning candidate will take the states he/she wins with a very narrow 50% vote, and he/she will lose the other states with 0% of those states’ popular vote. Under these circumstances, a winning candidate may win the presidency with only 21.6% of the national vote (Barnett 449-55).

Barnett closes his essay with the claim that “any Electoral College reversal of the popular vote would be extremely modest if a Democrat wins and nonexistent if a Republican does” (Barnett 458). By the numbers, the Electoral College does not actually affect too much. History has only given five occasions in which the College and the popular vote have not aligned, and even then, they have only differed by fractions of percents. Still, the debate continues and likely will continue until the reformists achieve their goal -- be it by brute strength in numbers or by wearing down the non-reformists through a war-of-attrition style of working them down slowly. The argument will go on, and only time will tell the outcome and the impacts that may follow it. What if the Electoral
College had never existed, or it had been abolished long ago? Would Hillary Clinton have been named president? There would not have been any watching states. The entire country would either have been red, or blue, after a popular election and our country could look much different. [MF22] John Quincy Adams would not have been elected president. Rutherford B. Hayes would not have been elected president. Benjamin Harrison would not have been elected president. George W. Bush would not have been elected president. Most relevantly, Donald Trump would not have been elected president (Presidential Election History).

Annotated Bibliography


Amar argues against the commonly held viewpoint that the Electoral College was formed to help boost the less populated states. He claims that the Framers didn’t really seek to help the small states, and that the college was later revised to help boost the Southern slave states. Amar explains that Lincoln, in his 1860 Presidential election, only won 39.65% of the popular vote, but still won the College and, therefore, the election. He compares this result to those of the Bush v. Gore election as well as others and goes on to tell that he, as well as others, have sought after a better
solution. He explains that the current leading plan comes in the form of the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, in which the supporting states would agree to pledge all of their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote, rather than the statewide popular votes, which would effectively select the president via a popular vote, rather than the true Electoral College.


Barnett dives into the true extremes of potential outcomes of the Presidential Election, as well as some much more natural outcomes. He explains that, theoretically, a candidate could win the Electoral College but win much less of the popular vote. He lays out four different situations, each with their own circumstances. The first is the true extreme in which any state won was won by very small margins, and any state lost was lost in a staggering defeat in which the Presidential victor receives 0% of the popular vote. Within this situation, the winning candidate could manage to win the College with a minimum of 21.6% of the popular vote. Under a second situation with slightly realistic odds, in which won states are still won with small margins, but lost states are lost with roughly 35% of the
popular votes, the minimum popular vote required is nearly double the first at 42.7%. In a third situation in which the voting history of the states is considered, the minimum required raises to 45.2%. Finally, in a fourth situation considering all of the above and the gradual change of states political allegiances and changing viewpoints, the minimum popular vote required is 48.7%. He concludes by saying that, realistically speaking, “[a]ny Electoral College reversal of the popular vote would be extremely modest if a Democrat wins and nonexistent if a Republican does.


Bollinger opens his essay with a reminder of a core value of the American Ideology: representation. He points to historical examples such as “No Taxation Without Representation” and Congress. He then explains how the Electoral College is different. Rather than a gradient, partial support of candidates, it is winner-take-all per state and creates tension and poor equality as well as “betray[ing] American values of majority rule, equality before the law, and representative government.” This form and strategy allows for candidates to win just enough electoral votes to win the presidency, but lack the support of the majority of...
people and the popular vote. He explains via the numbers that different states are proportioned differently when it comes to electoral votes per capita. Through the math, he shows that Wyoming has a favorability of 4:1 compared to California based on the number of electoral votes by state population. He claims that, “[w]hen the votes of some citizens count more than those of others, America has failed to honor its commitment to equal representation.”

He also explains that multiple territories are not represented in the college, adding up to about four million citizens left unrepresented. He then proposes his idea for a run off popular election in which the winner is strictly selected based on the majority of the population. The winner is whatever candidate gains 50% or more of the popular vote and if no candidate obtains that the candidate with the least is eliminated and the votes for them recast as the voters’ second choice, and so on until there is a candidate with more than 50% of the vote. He closes by challenging readers to drop the system put in place to help stabilize the early United States, and adopt on that may better reflect the true views of the modern United States.

McCollester’s writing argues for the Electoral College. She clearly depicts her views and backs them with historical and logical evidence. She begins by claiming that; to truly understand the Electoral College, so that one may make a judgement upon it; one must first understand why it was formed in the first place. She continues, saying that the Electoral College is quite necessary because it maintains three main ideas. The first is Checks and Balances. The College is apportioned the same way that Congress is, so the balance between the larger, populated states and the smaller, less populated states remains consistent. The second is the two-party system. She first states the views of the opposition that believe that a multi-party system would allow for many new viewpoints and many new candidates to actually be considered in the presidential race, but immediately follows with her own counterviews. She believes that the two-party system has created a governmental balance unrivaled in other democracies across the world, as multiparty systems throughout history have seen divided countries that have destroyed governmental balance and stability. She also claims that a multi-party elections would be considerably harder to determine a true winner and that every race would be close enough to merit a recount, which lessens the aforementioned stability. The third is the idea of a “national president.” A national president is one supported by a broad majority of Americans, not a majority that consists only of a specific group of people or area. The Electoral College requires candidates to appeal to everyone across the nation, rather than those in highly populated areas in which many popular votes could be found. She claims that,
without this idea, “the voice of the ‘little person’ will simply vanish from the process” (McCollester 185). She ends her writing by reinforcing once more that the Electoral College is a core idea of the nation, and it helps to keep alive other core national ideas.


In his essay, Putnam outlines new plans to attempt to predict the outcome of presidential elections. He tells of models that have proven to be quite accurate in predicting previous elections. He explains that swing states can vary in importance and interest to candidates with each given year because the states views and support goes back forth between years. He goes on to give the only flaw and qualifier he knows of in these models, and that is that they are heavily reliant on polling data. The models are only as useful as the polling data that is given them.

Presidential Election History from 1789 to 2012 - 2012

This website provides a list of statistics surrounding every election in the history of the United States. Provided information includes, but is not limited to: the names of candidates and their running mates, the election year, and the political parties of each candidate. Additionally, the Electoral College votes and the popular vote information.


Virgin begins by retelling the events occurring shortly after December 7, 2011 in which Mitch McConnell first urged the Republican party to fight against the Democrats trying to make changes to the Electoral College. Virgin reminds that the Electoral College was formed with advantages to the less populous states as well as the swing states, so lawmakers from those areas have good reason to want to defend it. Virgin then begins to tell about the NPVIC, or National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which desires College reform. They seek to find a backdoor around a constitutional amendment by using the rights granted to the states. They plan to gain the support of enough states to win the Electoral College and agree to give all of their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote, rather than the statewide popular vote. Virgin supports their claims with quite specific data collected between the years of 2006 and 2014.