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A Defense of the Electoral College

The Electoral College met this week in each of our 50 state capitals, and although you probably didn't even notice, it might do some good to look closely at that unique piece of our Constitution.

There are two major arguments against the Electoral College. The first is that the Electoral College system has permitted the election of three presidents who trailed their opponents in the Nation's popular vote. (John Quincy Adams 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes 1876, and Benjamin Harrison 1888.) Second, the foes of the Electoral College winner-take-all provision is said to be unfair, even undemocratic.

These two arguments are as persuasive as they are clear. However, let us examine a bit more this strange beast. After all, there must be some good reasons why thoughtful Americans have allowed the Electoral College to exist as long as the Nation itself.

Without the present scheme, how would we determine the winner in a presidential election? Simple, you might say. We'll just declare the candidate with more than one half (50 percent) of the popular vote as the victor. Unhappily, this would engender a whole set of new problems, because very often no one man receives a majority. America has had 49 presidential elections since 1789, and in 15 of those no candidate received 50 percent of the vote. Abe Lincoln received only 39.8 percent of the popular vote in 1860; Woodrow Wilson, 41.8 percent in 1912, Harry Truman, 49.6 percent in 1948; and John Kennedy had 49.7 percent in 1960 – to name a few. These men, however, did assume the presidency because all of them received a majority of the Electoral College vote.

The 1860 election is a perfect example of the role of the Electoral College. In a sense, it creates a majority for each president regardless of the margin of victory. The electoral vote system lends a sense of victory to the election of even a candidate with 39.8 percent of the vote as was the case with Lincoln. It legitimizes the winner's mandate no matter how close the election. Without the Electoral College, the people of 1860 might have dwelled on the fact that 6 out of 10 Americans did not vote for Mr. Lincoln. As it turned out, his was a victory in the Electoral College. Lincoln received 180 electoral votes. His closest rival, John Breckinridge, received 72. A clear victory, indeed.

What would happen to our present political system were we to abolish the Electoral College? For one thing, it would be a blow against our federal system of government. America is the Nation of States. Our whole legal and political system rests to a substantial extent upon the idea of a Nation composed of 50 socio-political communities called "states." Our 50 political communities, under the Electoral College plan, decide on our president community by community.

The Founding Fathers built a remarkable and successful national government with three branches. One, the Congress, is elected directly by the people. The second, the President, is elected by the people state by state,

and, the third, the Supreme Court is appointed jointly by the other two branches. These three departments of the federal government, because of their separate and distinct forms of selection from the same constituency, offer real balance and creative diversity found in no other government in the world.

The abolition of the Electoral College would put that great federal idea to question. It would make less vital the affairs and aspirations of our states because their importance in the political system would be less.

Further, it would rend less potent the role of our two-party system, a two-party system which has helped spare us the many problems that Western-European countries have had with multi-party situations. Our two-party system rests today upon the 50 individual state parties. Without the electoral vote scheme, presidential candidates would not campaign to win the votes of states as units. Rather, they would, more so than today, concentrate their efforts in urban, industrial regions. The Electoral College plan now has candidates going to smaller states, farming regions, and small-town America in a way that a straight popular vote system might not.

Finally, the Electoral College insures a national campaign. Regional and extremist parties and their presidential candidates can not win, nor make very much difference if they do not campaign all across the United States. The present system forces a man such as George Wallace or Eugene Debs to give speeches all over the Nation, not just to one region or one small group. The Founders gave thought to the possibility that one large state, region or group might control the presidency. The Electoral College reduces the chance by spreading the electoral votes out more evenly among the states and regions.

The Electoral College holds certain problems for our political system, but so does the alternative. All in all, it has served us well. Only 8 electors have not followed the wishes of the people of their state. That is only 8 out of 16,168 cast since 1820. And those 8 never changed the election results.

Our Constitution is the world's oldest and most successful written political document. We as people have chosen to amend it only 26 times in 200 years. The Electoral College is an important part of that document and of the political system it has created.

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