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The Practicality of the Electoral College

For better or worse, the Electoral College governs the strategy and tactics of presidential candidates. While critics seldom question the brilliance of the constitution, the Electoral College seems to be the exception. Critics of the Electoral College system often cite “the allocation of electors based on states, in violation of the principle of one person, one vote, and the possibility that the electoral college winner might diverge from the popular vote winner” (Ellis, 62). Advocates counter this argument by explaining the dynamic relationship between the Electoral College and our countries two major parties. However, both sides fail to understand the true necessity for this mechanism.

Burdett Loomis, a Kanasas Democrat, often critiques the Electoral College, and advocates for a direct election system. He explains that as a result of Kansas’s reliability, presidential candidates from both major parties do not feel the need to campaign there, because they “know full well that Kansas’s six electoral votes will almost certainly end up in the Republican column”(Ellis and Nelson, 33). Clearly, candidates understand that it would be counterproductive for them to waste their valuable time and resources on reliably red Kansas. However, this phenomenon is not limited to Kansas. In fact, according to Loomis, nearly every state is not competitive, and “ironically, the core inequity of the Electoral College involves neither the largest nor the smallest states, but the handful of states that are truly competitive –that is, are neither red nor blue” (Ellis and Nelson, 37). Not only does this small minority of states receive the largest share of presidential campaign attention, but the value of each vote cast in these states is magnified; therefore, making the most profound critique of the Electoral College is its failure to give each citizen an equal voice in the selection process.

In contrast, Byron E. Shafer says that the Electoral College is necessary, because it reinforces our country’s two party dynamic. He explains that “the moment the Electoral College is gone, however, this dynamic changes: aggrieved candidates for major party nominations would no longer need to withdraw” (Ellis and Nelson, 42). According to Shafer this would be a huge problem. Candidates who did not receive their party’s nomination would still be allowed to run for office. Additionally, third party candidates would flood the election race, and any established candidate standard that was set by the two major parties would be nullified. Shafer argues that alternatives to the Electoral College instead proceed on the theory that the plurality vote winner would become president. He explains that this would be a “safe assumption only within a system that is powerfully constrained by the Electoral College that is, it assumes that the two major parties will be creating the two main candidates and that this selection process will simultaneously be repressing major partisan alternatives, and that coronation of these alternatives will then be deterring independent candidates .Yet these parties guarantee their two major-party nominees and deter third, fourth exedra” (Ellis and Nelson, 43).

There is merit to both sides of the argument; however, both fail to address the Electoral College’s fundamental factors and the reasoning behind them. The most fundamental question being: does the Electoral College actually do what we want it to? While in theory a direct election sounds like the most democratic election system, further analysis illustrates major problems. Without a mechanism in place such as the Electoral College, the president would be selected either through the domination of urban areas over rural ones or more populated regions over less populated ones. In fact it’s because of this principle that presidential candidates are liable to select a vice-presidential candidate from a region other than their own, since no region holds an absolute majority over the 270 electoral votes it takes to win.

This forces presidential candidates to form a unified support structure from different regions of the country instead of exacerbating regional differences. Without this unifying mechanism, a country as large as the United States would have problems that parallel India or China. However, this unifying tendency makes it possible that the candidate who wins a slim majority of popular votes may not be elected president as we saw in 1888 and the 2000 elections. Yet this problem is a minor one, not only because it’s only happened twice, but because the popularity difference between candidates is so minor that it does not inhibit him or her from governing effectively. Therefore, it is clear that the Electoral College system actually does what the American people want it to do, and is more representative then a direct election system.

Another fundamental question that both arguments fail to analyze is: does the election system present enough hurdles for the “overly ambitious”- that is motivated, demagogues? Undoubtedly, the Electoral College provides hurdles for the overly ambitious, because it deters third party candidates from running for office. As a result of this deterrence, the Electoral College upholds our two party system in which candidates from both major parties must first win their nomination before running for office. In contrast the removal of this mechanism for a direct election system would enable scores of wealthy individuals to run for office, some of which would undoubtedly play off of the emotions of the general public. Moreover, presidential candidates would be held to a much lower standard, and would be able to run for office with no major party affiliation, which in turn would have a negative effect on the entire country.

An additional question that both sides fail to totally analyze is: how much change is possible in a particular election system? In a direct popular election there would be major incentive for an array of minor political parties and movements to band together in order to prevent the most popular candidate from winning. Consequently, candidates who managed to remain in the race, would be forced to take on extremist regional views to win the election. This would not only incite extremist political change, but it would also threaten the legitimacy of the race. Results of a direct popular election would likely be fragmented at best, and this jumble of political interests would undoubtedly lead to tedious vote recounts and political unrest.

While Loomis presents a valid argument on the behalf of a direct election system he fails to grasp the fundamental necessity behind the Electoral College mechanism. Without this mechanism in place each new presidential administration would be forced into enacting radical policies, which in turn would have devastating effects on our nation. Although Shafer is able to grasp the necessity of the Electoral College he does not fully explore how essential it is. There can be no doubt in the validity of the Electoral College, as it promotes a two party system and plays a major role in the political stability of the country. This is true because it clearly deters third party impassioned political movements and protects against political demagogues. Furthermore, the Electoral College has the tendency to assimilate impassioned political movements into one of the two existing major parties. This tendency keeps the American political system on an even keel, and prevents major policies changes from one administration to the other. Finally, the Electoral College is a tried and true election system that has produced a legitimate winner, since the founding of our country. Each presidential winner has reflected the majority vote in all but two elections. Therefore, diverging away from a system that actually functions the way it was intended, and the way in which American people want it, would be ludicrous.