

Choosing a President

The Electoral College and Beyond

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CHATHAM HOUSE PUBLISHERS
SEVEN BRIDGES PRESS, LLC

NEW YORK • LONDON

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Preface

SHOULD THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE be reformed? Should it be abolished? As professors of political science, we were frequently asked these questions in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election. Because the current rules and procedures of the Electoral College resulted in the elevation of George W. Bush to the presidency despite Al Gore's "victory" in the national popular vote, the students, friends, and reporters who asked these questions often presupposed an answer to them — the Electoral College is an anachronism that belongs in a museum rather than at the heart of the world's leading democracy.

As political scientists, we were not so sure. Despite our familiarity with the Electoral College, we had not viewed it as especially important in determining the outcome of a presidential election. Nor had we thought it one of the features of our political system most in need of reform. It was not clear that the discipline of political science had a conventional or consensual view of the merits and liabilities of the Electoral College. While political scientists had entered into debates on the topic, they could be found on both sides of the issue. Although scholars had conducted studies linking the Electoral College to various aspects of our political ideals and practices, no effort had been made to integrate these studies into an overall evaluation of the institution.

This book attempts such an evaluation. Our motivation in evaluating the Electoral College has never been to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Bush presidency. From the outset, we recognized that democracy requires not adherence to any particular set of electoral rules, but rather adherence to whatever rules have emerged from fairly constructed previous agreements. We understood that the U.S. Constitution, our country's most basic political agreement, establishes that the presidency be contested through the rules of the Electoral College. We firmly believed that whoever won under the rules of the Electoral College in 2000 had a legitimate claim to the presidency, regardless of who received the most popular votes nationally. Our motivation for evaluating the Electoral College has been to prepare for future elections — to ask whether the Electoral College or some alternative is the electoral system that is best suited to preserve and promote

American democracy in the years to come. To address that question, we compare the Electoral College to six alternatives.

Three alternatives would retain the Electoral College but change it in important ways. Each state would still be given a particular number of electors, according to rules specified by the Constitution and as determined by the census. However, under two of the reform proposals, all of a state's electors would not be given to the candidate winning the popular vote within the state using the "winner-take-all" or unit rule that is employed by every state except Maine and Nebraska. Under the proposed district plan, most electors would be awarded to candidates winning particular districts within states. Under a proportional allocation plan, electors would be awarded to candidates based on the percentage of popular votes that the candidates received in each state. A third reform would keep the electoral college system intact (including the winner-take-all feature), but it would give the winner of the national popular vote a bonus of 102 electoral votes. This reform would practically ensure that the winner of the national popular vote would win in the Electoral College.

Three alternatives would abolish the Electoral College and replace it with various national popular vote schemes. The popular plurality system would give the presidency to whatever candidate receives the most votes. The popular majority system would institute a contingent runoff election between the top two vote-getters if no candidate achieves a majority in the initial balloting. An instant-runoff system would also require a candidate to get a majority of votes, but a runoff election would be avoided by determining a majority winner through a computerized analysis of voters' rank-ordering of three or more candidates.

Various critics of the Electoral College have proposed each of these alternative electoral systems, but is any of these alternatives better than the existing system? Answers to this question may depend on how these electoral systems affect our broader political concerns. For example, would an alternative system produce more political stability than the Electoral College? Would some alternative be more effective than the Electoral College at encouraging voter participation? Would another system do a better job than the Electoral College at producing a president whose party platform is relatively inclusive of the various interests in our country?

To answer such questions, we asked thirty-five colleagues in the field of political science to join us in a project designed to bring to bear their expertise about political stability, citizen participation, party coalitions, and other important aspects of our political life on an evaluation of the Electoral College and its alternatives. Nine groups composed of three to five political scientists were formed to analyze the impact of various electoral systems on our federal system of government, the functioning of our national governmental institutions, the conduct of presidential campaigns, and other matters.

The first chapter frames the central concern of this book, and differentiates

our analysis from complementary analyses of other electoral problems, such as the errors in counting ballots, that became evident in Florida during the 2000 election. Here we make clear that our concerns are evaluative rather than explanatory. We are less concerned with why we have an electoral college system or why reform initiatives have so quickly receded from the public agenda than with reaching normative judgments about the Electoral College.

The second chapter describes the electoral college system, as it was initially conceived and as it has evolved. It also describes each of the alternatives to it. We also address analytical issues that must be resolved in reaching a collective judgment about a preferred presidential electoral system.

Chapters 3 through 11 provide the reports of each of the nine groups in the project. In these chapters, scholars use theories and findings from their areas of expertise to provide partial evaluations of the Electoral College. For example, in chapter 4 specialists in federalism consider how our federal system would be impacted by electoral reform. In chapter 8, experts on the media consider whether electoral reform would influence how television and newspapers report campaigns and the election. In chapter 11, specialists in racial and class issues in America consider how the electoral influence of minorities and other relatively powerless groups in our country is affected by the Electoral College, and how their influence might change under alternative arrangements.

Chapter 12 presents our collective judgments. After familiarizing ourselves with each others' findings and assessments, each participant in the project indicated their (degree of) support for the Electoral College and each alternative to it, and their votes have been compiled in various ways to provide quantitative measures of our overall support for each system. We also draw from each group's analysis to reach summary qualitative assessments of each system.

Unlike many scholars who write books, we didn't know what our conclusions would be until the project was nearly completed — until the various chapters had been received from each group, until we had assimilated each others' conclusions, and until we had voted. Many of the participants in the project are surprised by our results. Most of our acquaintances also have expressed surprise at the results. Our hope is that the results will prompt students, citizens, and public leaders to think more deeply about the matter than has often been the case.

We have incurred many debts in developing this project and producing this book. The Robert J. Dole Institute at the University of Kansas funded a useful conference at which we could discuss our findings. Our greatest debts are to our colleagues who have participated in this project. We appreciate their willingness to take time from their own research projects to participate in this collective endeavor. We hope the opportunity to participate in an issue of broad public interest and importance such as this is partial repayment on the debt that is owed.

Finally, we would be pleased to incur even more debts in the future, namely, to the readers of this volume. As teachers, we are interested in understanding

how students and citizens analyze the issues under discussion here. Accordingly, we have developed a website at <http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/~college>. After you complete this book, we encourage you to go to this website and express your judgments about the Electoral College and the various alternatives to it. Your participation will enable us to develop a deeper understanding of citizen attitudes about how we choose our president.