

Opinion: Understanding America's Electoral College

By Elizabeth Drew, Project Syndicate

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Anyone watching the United States' presidential race needs to understand that national opinion polls do not provide an accurate picture of how the election might turn out. Thanks to America's Electoral College, it's not who wins the most votes nationwide that matters in the end, but who wins in which states.

Each state is awarded a certain number of votes in the Electoral College, depending on the size of its population. The candidate who crosses the threshold of 270 electoral votes wins the presidency.

In almost every state, a candidate who wins 50.1 percent of the popular vote is awarded 100 percent of its electoral votes. (Only Maine and Nebraska don't follow the winner-take-all rule; they divide the Electoral College vote by congressional district.) As a result, the votes of millions of people who cast their ballot end up not counting. If you're a Republican in New York or California, which are dominated by the Democrats, or a Democrat in Wyoming or Mississippi, which are reliably Republican, you can forget about your vote for president mattering.

If no one wins 270 Electoral College votes, the election goes to the House of Representatives, where each state delegation casts a single vote, regardless of how many voters the delegation represents. Wyoming (population 585,000) and California (population 39,000,000) each get one vote. And the delegations aren't bound to vote for the candidate who won the most votes in their state.

Then, after the House elects the president, the Senate picks the vice president, with each senator getting one vote. It's theoretically possible that Congress could elect a president and vice president from different parties.

From the outset, America's founders were aware of the dangers of government by plebiscite. Alexander Hamilton worried about giving power to the people because "they seldom judge or determine right." Fearing "an excess of democracy," they interposed institutional buffers between the popular will and government decisions. Until 1913, senators were chosen by state legislatures, not directly elected by the voters. And they gave us the Electoral College.

Should we abolish the Electoral College?

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THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE is not going to be changed, and there are far more urgent and promising topics for reform of our presidential selection system.

It is true that the Electoral College no longer serves its original purposes, and that it creates a grave risk that a candidate not favored by a majority of the people will, from time to time, be elected president. There have been three: John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Harrison and George W. Bush. We survived. Not one was a first-rank president, but their selection did not seriously injure the democratic character of our system.

The founders opted for the Electoral College because the two leading alternatives, election by Congress and by popular vote, were thought to have serious defects. It gives a slight edge to candidates with broad-based support in many states over those who rack up huge majorities in just a few large states. That probably promotes a more national and less regional vision. It channels presidential politics into a two-party system, which is superior to multiparty systems where fringe factions can exercise too much leverage. It probably reduces the cost of presidential campaigns by confining television advertising to the battleground states (and spares the rest of us the tedium of endless repetitive ads). And it confines vote-counting disputes to just one, or maybe a few, states. Imagine a Florida-style recount in every precinct in America.

Still, the advantages are uncertain and relatively minor. Almost no one would adopt an Electoral College today if we were starting from scratch. But reforming the Electoral College does not rank high among our national problems. Given that a change would require a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress and three-quarters of the state legislatures, it is not going to happen. We should be talking about other things.

The great problems with our presidential selection system today stem from the haphazard way we choose the two major party presidential candidates. This year is the poster child for the need for reform. The two parties have chosen the same year in which to nominate a person whom large numbers of Americans, probably a majority, regard as unfit (though not for the same reason). Generally, we count on the Republican and Democratic parties to nominate not the best people, but candidates who combine a degree of popular support with the experience and temperament to govern. Not this year.

We need to think hard, and quickly, about how to reform three aspects of the presidential nomination process: the debates, the primary elections and the conventions. The current system is weighted too heavily in favor of celebrity appeal, demagogic displays and appeals to narrow special interests. The party structures—which, for all their faults, have a vested interest in candidates from the moderate middle who are able to work with Congress and other officials to govern—have been sidelined.

For almost the first half century of the republic, presidential candidates were chosen by the caucuses of the two parties in the House and the Senate. That system worked well until the two-party system briefly died with the Federalist Party. It was replaced by party conventions, which eventually were replaced (almost) with strings of single or multiple state primaries and caucuses. It seems to me that the original system may have been superior to what we now have. The elected officials of both parties have incentives to choose candidates with an eye toward popular electability and governing skill. Interestingly, the congressional caucus system is very close to the system the British used to replace Prime Minister David Cameron. Most Americans would breathe a sigh of relief, I believe, if we had a system capable of choosing the U.S. equivalent of Theresa May instead of Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. Now is the time for sober and spirited citizens from both parties to devise a new system for 2020.

Based on these two excerpts, should we be more concerned about the viability of the electoral college or the current presidential nomination process? Explain, using evidence from the text whenever possible: