

Probing Question: Is the Electoral College an outdated system?

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Photo illustration: Chris Maverick

In the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore beat George Bush by more than 500,000 votes, yet the lasting image of that campaign is poll workers in Florida examining voter cards for hanging chads. At stake were Florida's 25 Electoral College votes. Because a slim majority of Florida voters chose Bush, those 25 votes all went to the Republican candidate, turning overall popular-vote winner Gore into the election loser.

According to Eric Plutzer, the Electoral College was initially included in the Constitution because the Founding Fathers were skeptical that democracy could actually work and wanted to limit the influence of voters. Continued Plutzer, professor of political science and sociology at Penn State, "Since that time, voters have played a direct role in electing U.S. senators and representatives, and in nominating presidential

candidates through primaries and caucuses. There is no longer a reason to insulate elections from the preferences of ordinary citizens."

It also distorts the way campaigns are run, Plutzer believes. "The Electoral College's 'winner take all' rule, used by 48 states and the District of Columbia, means that candidates trailing badly in a state don't bother to campaign there," he said. Each state is apportioned electoral voters based on its representation in Washington: two senators plus the state's number of representatives in the House. In presidential campaigns, said Plutzer, that means candidates tend to focus on the particular interests of voters in states with a large Electoral College vote and ignore the interests of small-state voters. That's why President Bush visited Pennsylvania and Ohio so often in 2004, he noted. "Political competition promotes citizen interest and civic participation," Plutzer continued. "In the last two elections, turnout rose, but only in the 14 or so so-called battleground states. Turnout elsewhere was unchanged."

While Plutzer feels the Electoral College has become an outdated system, he is quick to point out that the popular vote isn't a simple alternative.

"Remember what happened in Florida in 2000?" he asks. "If the final popular vote showed one candidate defeating the other by less than a million votes nationally, we would have to recount everywhere. Every state, every county, every precinct. Under the current system, when a candidate wins a landslide in California or Texas, it doesn't matter if we miss 100,000 votes. The outcome is unchanged. But if we went to a national popular vote, every vote would be important."

So, if the Electoral College is passe and the winner-take-all popular vote could create national chaos, is there a workable compromise?

Yes, said Plutzer. Under the Constitution, states have the freedom to

decide how their Electoral College votes are allocated. He points out primaries and caucuses as an example. Each state has its own rules for voting, and state party systems decide how delegates are divided.

In fact, two states -- Nebraska and Maine -- use an alternative system of allocating their electoral votes, called the Congressional District Method. Electoral College voters in these states are required by law to follow the popular vote within their district, rather than the statewide popular vote. Interestingly, neither Maine nor Nebraska has ever had to split its electoral votes, since statewide winners in a single party have consistently swept all of the states' districts during elections. But, according to Plutzer, it is a move in the right direction.

The popular vote is the most desirable way to count votes, Plutzer concludes, but "we're at least a decade away from having reliable voting machines nationwide. Until we do, it would be unwise to amend the Constitution." Until then, he said, encouraging all states to use the Congressional District Method is the fairest way to elect a president while making sure every vote is relevant.

Eric Plutzer, is professor of political science and sociology in the College of the Liberal Arts.

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