

Arguments against the Electoral College

Those who object to the Electoral College system and favor a direct popular election of the president generally do so on four grounds:

- the possibility of electing a minority (someone not receiving the majority of votes) president
- the risk of so-called “faithless” Electors
- the possible role of the Electoral College in depressing voter turnout
- its failure to accurately reflect the national popular will

Opponents of the Electoral College are disturbed by the possibility of electing a minority president (one without the absolute majority of popular votes). Nor is this concern entirely unfounded since there are three ways in which that could happen. One way in which a minority president could be elected is if the country were so deeply divided politically that three or more presidential candidates split the electoral votes among them such that no one obtained the necessary majority . . . there are two possible resolutions: either one candidate could throw his electoral votes to the support of another (before the meeting of the Electors) or else, absent an absolute majority in the Electoral College, the U.S. House of Representatives would select the president in accordance with the 12th Amendment. . . .A second way in which a minority president could take office is if, as in 1888, one candidate's popular support were heavily concentrated in a few States while the other candidate maintained a slim popular lead in enough States to win the needed majority of the Electoral College. . . . A third way of electing a minority president is if a third party or candidate, however small, drew enough votes from the top two that no one received over 50% of the national popular total. Far from being unusual, this sort of thing has, in fact, happened 15 times including (in this century) Wilson in both 1912 and 1916, Truman in 1948, Kennedy in 1960, Nixon in 1968, and Clinton in both 1992 and 1996.

Opponents of the Electoral College system also point to the risk of so called "faithless" Electors. A "faithless Elector" is one who is pledged to vote for his party's candidate for president but nevertheless votes for another candidate. There have been 7 such Electors in this century and as recently as 1988 when a Democrat Elector in the State of West Virginia cast his votes for Lloyd Bensen for president and Michael Dukakis for vice president instead of the other way around. . . .

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Opponents of the Electoral College are further concerned about its possible role in depressing voter turnout. Their argument is that, since each State is entitled to the same number of electoral votes regardless of its voter turnout, there is no incentive in the States to encourage voter participation. Indeed, there may even be an incentive to discourage participation (and they often cite the South here) so as to enable a minority of citizens to decide the electoral vote for the whole State.

Finally, some opponents of the Electoral College point out . . . its failure to accurately reflect the national popular will in at least two respects. First, the distribution of Electoral votes in the College tends to over represent people in rural States. This is because the number of Electors for each State is determined by the number of members it has in the House (which more or less reflects the State's population size) plus the number of members it has in the Senate (which is always two regardless of the State's population). The result is that in 1988, for example, the combined voting age population (3,119,000) of the seven least populous jurisdictions of Alaska, Delaware, the District of Columbia, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming carried the same voting strength in the Electoral College (21 Electoral votes) as the 9,614,000 persons of voting age in the State of Florida. Each Floridian's potential vote, then, carried about one third the weight of a potential vote in the other States listed. A second way in which the Electoral College fails to accurately reflect the national popular will stems primarily from the winner-take-all mechanism whereby the presidential candidate who wins the most popular votes in the State wins all the Electoral votes of that State. One effect of this mechanism is to make it extremely difficult for third-party or independent candidates ever to make much of a showing in the Electoral College. If, for example, a third-party or independent candidate were to win the support of even as many as 25% of the voters nationwide, he might still end up with no Electoral College votes at all unless he won a plurality of votes in at least one State. And even if he managed to win a few States, his support elsewhere would not be reflected. By thus failing to accurately reflect the national popular will . . . the Electoral College reinforces a two-party system, discourages third-party or independent candidates, and thereby tends to restrict choices available to the electorate. . . .

Adapted from THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

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