

The American Election Process

Part 3 - The Electoral College

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Now, when the primary season and the conventions are over, the general election race begins. This is the time when the remaining candidates are on tour around the country in order to convince as many voters as possible to vote for them. During the democratic convention here in Boston, John Kerry was nominated the Democratic presidential candidate. He will compete for the president post against Republican George W. Bush, and the independent candidate Ralph Nader, and different third parties.

When the candidates have been nominated, they in their turn choose their vice president candidate. This choice could be very important for several reasons. Not only because they have to be able to lead the country if something happens to the president, but they could also be a strategic step in the election race. For example, some people may say that the choice of John Edwards as the Democratic vice president candidate can be seen as a way for John Kerry to win over Edwards followers and at the same time get access to his campaign money. Other may say that they complete each other in a way that suits America and the Americans. There has been some criticism of his choice. One is that Edwards is too charismatic and that he will draw attention away from Kerry. George W. Bush has nominated his vice president Dick Cheney for one more election period, and Ralph Nader's running mate is Peter Camejo.

November 2nd is the nationwide Election Day. Until then, all the candidates will do whatever is in their power to convince voters that they are the most suitable person to become America's next president. It is easy to think that the voters are participating in a direct election of the president. In some ways that is true, but technically they are voting for a certain party. The party then nominates a group of "Electors" to represent the voters and the party in the Electoral College. These Electors are pledged to the party's candidate and in December, they meet in their respective state capitals to cast their vote. To be elected requires 270 electoral votes. This may be a little bit confusing. Therefore, let us take it from the beginning.

Background

The Electoral College is a group of Electors who select the president after an election. These Electors are nominated by the party and are pledged to the candidate that the voters support. Today it may seem hard to understand why an Electoral College exists. Nevertheless, when it first was established, it filled an important place in the quest of choosing a president. Over time several changes have occurred in order to fit into the election procedure of today.

It is possible to see several similarities between the function of the Electoral College and College of Cardinals, within the Roman Catholic Church, in their procedure to select the Pope. The original idea was that the most informed persons from each state should select the president based solely on skills and without regards to state of origin or political party. The one main thing that has changed up until today is the influence of different political parties.

From the beginning and to this day it is up to each state legislature to determine how to choose Electors. As one can imagine, the methods varied from state to state. However, slowly a trend emerged towards what is called the "winner-take-all" system. In this system, the presidential candidate who gets the most votes within the state wins all of the state's Electors.

In the beginning the Electors were listed by each political party on the ballot, and the voters nominated Electors by voting for a certain individual. Some problems did occur with this system, for example, confusion and disloyalty to the party. Today, the Electors are rarely listed on the ballot. Instead, you might see in fine print "Electors for" in front of each set of candidate. Nevertheless, the voters are still actually voting for the Electors rather for the candidates themselves.

The procedure

The way the Electoral College is organized and functions today is the result of an evolution over the years. Things that have not been working in the past have been changed for something else and the organization has gone through several stages to be able to work properly.

Today each state is allocated a number of Electors according to the sum of its U.S Senators and U.S Representatives. The numbers of Senators are always two but the number of representatives may vary since they are determined by the population size within the state. The major political parties usually nominate their electors during the state party convention or through appointment by their state party leaders. Third parties and independent candidates mostly designate theirs.

The first Tuesday in November is the national Election Day. On this day, every American who is entitled to vote can do so for their party's electors and show who they want to be president and vice president. The one party whose electors get the most votes wins the total number of electors in that particular state. Maine (4 Electors) and Nebraska (5 Electors) are two exceptions. There are two Electors chosen by statewide popular vote and the rest by the popular vote within each Congressional district.

The Monday after the second Wednesday of December is the day when each state's Electors meet in their respective state capitals and cast their pledged vote for the president and vice president. Their votes are then sealed, and transmitted to the president of the Senate. On January 6, the votes are opened and read before both houses of the Congress.

If there is one president candidate and vice president candidate that get the absolute majority of vote (over 50% of the total number of electors) he or she will be declared president. If no one has the absolute majority of votes, each state will cast one vote and the U.S House of Representatives selects the president from the top three contenders. If the same happens in the election of vice president, the U.S Senate will select one from the top two contenders. At noon on January 20, the elected president and vice president are sworn into office.

Disadvantages

Those who are against an Electoral College argue four general reasons:

1. The possibility of electing a president who doesn't have the majority of votes.
2. The risk of Electors choosing not to vote for the candidate that he or she is pledged to.
3. The risk the actual opinion in the state is not represented correctly.
4. The Electoral College failure to reflect the national popular will.

There are three possible ways to elect a president who received a minority of the popular vote. One way is that three or more presidential candidates split the electoral votes among them in a way that no one can get an absolute majority. To solve this problem one candidate may give his or hers electoral votes to support another candidate, or the U.S House of Representatives selects a president according to the 12th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. In both cases, a minority president will be elected. Another way is, if one candidate's popularity is concentrated to a few large states, and these states give him or her exact number of Electors needed to win the election. In this case, the win may not be representative of the national opinion in general. A third way is if there is a third party or candidate that will win just enough Electoral votes so that no one of the top two parties get more than 50% of the electoral votes. A president who has received a minority of the popular vote has been elected to the presidency 15 times in the last century but seems to draw very little attention.

The second argument against an Electoral College system is the risk of faithless Electors. It is in fact possible for an Elector not to vote as he or she is pledged to do. This has happened but very rarely. Some Electors may, when they know that they can't change the outcome of the election, cast a different vote just to make a personal statement.

The third argument is that the Electoral College may not represent the nation correctly. There is a tendency for people in rural states to be overrepresented in the Electoral College. This because the number of Electors is based on the states number of members in the House of Representatives, and this is in turn based on the population size in the state. One problem with the winner-take-all system is that it makes it hard for small parties or candidates to win Electors. Even though a third party may have as much as 25% of all votes nationwide, it might still not have a single Elector representing them in the College, and even if he or she managed to win a few states his or her support elsewhere will not be reflected.

The last general argument against the Electoral College is that regardless of how many people votes in a state, it still gets the same number of Electors. Therefore, the state doesn't need to encourage voter to participate, and that can lead to a minority of people determining the outcome of the election.

Advantages

Others are for an Electoral College. They as well have based their arguments on four grounds:

1. An Electoral College contributes to a balanced and equal election.

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MIT Events

The Great Glass Pumpkin Patch@MIT Opening Reception

September 17 (5-7 PM Reception only, no sales)

September 18 (10 AM – 5 PM)

1,000 handblown glass pumpkins, created by artists from the MIT Glass Lab.

Proceeds benefit The MIT Glass Lab, where the MIT community can learn and practice the art of glassblowing. No sales at reception; pumpkins can only be purchased on Saturday, Sept 18.

Kresge Oval

617-253-5309

http://web.mit.edu/arts/pumpkins_release2004.html

Volunteer Opportunities at the MIT Museum

Interested in working with very curious, scientifically literate visitors, young and not so young? Would you like to work with some of the most interesting people around? Are you an engineer? teacher? or just a plain old or not so old curious person? Do you want to put your interests and talents to work in a museum? Want to learn more about science and technology, architecture, nautical engineering, or holography? At the MIT Museum, many opportunities await your energy and skills.

Volunteers assist Museum staff on both short-term and long-term projects. Placement is determined by matching your qualifications, interests, knowledge, and availability with staff needs. There are two basic types of volunteers at the Museum—those who work behind the scenes with our collections and curatorial staff, and those who work with educational staff on public programs.

Learn more at <http://web.mit.edu/museum/about/internship.html>

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2. Enhances the status of minority interests.
3. By encouraging a two-party system, it contributes to political stability.
4. Maintains a federal system of government and representation.

The first argument implies that an Electoral College system prevents an election where the president will be elected either through the domination of one region or through large metropolitan areas. The system also demands that a presidential candidate must select a vice president candidate from another state or region. As it is today, no state or region contains the absolute majority (270) of electoral votes required to elect a president.

The second argument for an Electoral College is that a system with Electors enhances the status of minority groups. The reason for this statement is that even small minorities can make a difference when it comes to winning all Electors in a state. In this way these groups become most important and the candidates need to pay attention to them.

A third reason is political stability. An Electoral College encourages and helps to maintain a two-party system, and therefore functions as a stabilizer within politics. This is true since it is most difficult for a new or minor party to win enough votes.

Finally, it maintains a federal system of government and representation. This means that an Electoral College is an important part of the federal structure that goes back in history and it is laid out in the Constitution. The argument is that this system has been “thoroughly and wisely debated by the Founding Fathers” (“A Brief History...” www.fec.gov/pages/ecmenu2.htm) and that state viewpoints are most important and these are best protected with the system that is in use today. Another argument is that an Electoral College is good for keeping the balance of power between the national and state governments.

Suggested reading

Federal Election Commission

<http://www.fec.gov/pages/ecmenu2.htm>

The US Electoral College Web Zine

http://www.avagara.com/e_c/

The Electoral College

<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/case/3pt/electoral.html>