

Electoral College Should Stay

By Bala Prasad

More than two hundred years ago, the system of the electoral college was adopted by our founding fathers to elect the President of the United States. This was the best of all the systems they had considered. While the nay-sayers were howling against it from day one, it has withstood the test of time and done what it was designed to do.

In the electoral college system, delegates are elected by voters of each state. The number of delegates allotted each state is the number of congressional seats based on population, plus two, the number of senators in each state. The party that wins the simple majority of votes in a state takes all delegates. The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska where delegates are awarded proportionately based on the result of election in each congressional district.

While there were many reasons for the adoption of this system, the most important was to balance the power between smaller states and the more populous ones. Thus in the election of the President, South Dakota will have more say than its size would suggest, and New York less.

Not much had been heard about this system in modern times until the 2000 presidential election which was decided in the end by Florida's electoral college delegates. In this election Vice President Gore won the popular vote but lost to President Bush in the electoral college.

While the system of electoral college is an inviting target for critics, it works quietly as the founding fathers intended. Born in compromise, the system accommodates many conflicting necessities. It gives voice to regional concerns and amplifies the impact of minorities in an election. Under the electoral system African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and other minorities have more weight because they form significant blocks in electorally viable states. A strict popular vote will certainly dilute their importance. With no electoral college clout, perhaps no presidential candidate would campaign in South Dakota.

As in every situation, there is the iron law of unintended consequences. Historically most presidential elections have not been close, though popular votes have been close so many times. With the winner take all system in most states, the margin of victory is magnified thereby solidifying the country behind the new President. There are no better examples of this than the 1960 and 1968 presidential elections. In the former, President Kennedy led Vice President Nixon by only 0.2% in popular vote but by 15% in electoral votes. In the latter, Nixon led Humphry by less than 1% in popular vote but by 20% in electoral votes. It should be noted that between 1804 and 2000, for good or bad, only two presidential elections were decided by less than 20 votes. However more than 17 elections were decided by more than 200 votes in electoral college.

The electoral college system undoubtedly operates in a different society today than in 1787. Still it has shown an amazing ability to adapt to modern day America. With so many more challenges in society at every turn, it might be more relevant today than it ever was.

Keep It Simple - Abolish the Electoral College

By Musafir

The Electoral College has outlived its utility. This Electoral College system for choosing the president was decided in the 1787 Convention on the pretense that the public may not have the knowledge about various candidates necessary to make the right decision. The founding fathers also took into the account the poor literacy rate at the time. Times have changed since then. Almost all of our citizens are literate now and they have access to the 24-hour cable news, the Internet, cell phones, satellite radio and a global network of friends and opinion leaders! Now everyone can pry upon everyone else, let alone the candidates for the presidency. We, probably, know more about the candidates (including what is stored in their medicine cabinets and the kind of undergarment they wear) than we may be knowing about our own spouses.

Another argument given in favor of the Electoral College is that in a popular vote, the presidents will always be elected by the most populous states undermining the states that are sparsely populated. That is also a lame argument since all of the 538 members of the Electoral College are not equally distributed across all the states. For example, California has 55 Electoral delegates, Texas has 34 and New York has 31. Compare that to 4 from Rhode Island and 3 each from Delaware and Wyoming. To me, this does not seem to make enough difference to the end result.

Furthermore, whenever the candidate receiving the most popular votes has not been chosen to be the president, people have always questioned his legitimacy. It happened in 1824 when John Quincy Adams was chosen though Andrew Jackson had received more popular votes. The history repeated itself in 1876 and 1888 when Rutherford Hayes was chosen over Samuel Tilden and Benjamin Harrison was chosen over Grover Cleveland respectively. What happened in 2000 between George Bush and Al Gore is still fresh in our memories.

No matter how we dissect it, direct election is seen as more consistent with democratic principles than is the Electoral College system. The Electoral College may have been necessary when communications were poor, literacy was low and the voters lacked information. None of the above is true anymore. Therefore, let us change to the popular vote and keep the matter simple.