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The American Electoral Process

By Mike Kubic
2016

In this article, Mike Kubic, a former correspondent of Newsweek, explains the history and function of the United States Electoral College. The Electoral College is a system that was designed by the founders of the U.S. and set forth in the Constitution as a compromise between allowing members of Congress to select a president and electing a president via a popular vote among citizens. As you read, take notes on potential pros and cons of the system the American people currently use to select a president.

[1] Every four years, when we Americans set out to elect our president, we complain about our electoral¹ system. We gripe that it's more complicated than the Rubik's cube; it takes too much time; it's too expensive; and it is unfair. And, in fact, it is all of the above.

The problem can be traced back to 1787, when our Founding Fathers neglected to create rules regarding the official role of political parties (which they did not trust); instead, they left it to individual states to shape the process by which we choose the chief executive of our government. By and large, the states took their time to rise to the challenge. In the first place, they did not grant the right to vote to women or African Americans.



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Over the years, the United States Congress and the states have repeatedly taken steps to do away with these obvious systemic injustices:

- In 1879, the 15th Amendment of our Constitution guaranteed the right to vote to male African Americans.
- In 1920, the 19th Amendment gave the same right to women.
- In 1971, the 26th Amendment gave the vote to all citizens over the age of 18.
- In 1965, Congress passed the historic Voting Rights Act, which protected the viability of the 15th Amendment by guaranteeing that the federal government would intervene if any state would attempt to deny a citizen his or her voting rights on the basis of race.

But after all these legislative reforms, in 2000, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush—who received fewer than 50.5 million votes—defeated Democrat Al Gore, whose popular support was just 103 votes short of 51 million. How could that happen?

1. Of or relating to elections

An “Applesauce” System?

- [5] The explanation is that, while our system does give all citizens over 18 the right to vote, the votes they cast are not equal. With the details of the electoral system left to be worked out by the individual states and by the political parties, we now have a system that Will Rogers, America’s funny man and social commentator, famously described as “an applesauce.”

One glaring shortcoming of our existing system is the bewildering labyrinth² of ways in which the individual states, the Democrats, and the Republicans, decide who to nominate for the White House. To get the party’s nod as the presidential candidate, a Republican must win the support of 1,237 delegates³ to the nomination convention; a Democrat must win over 2,382 of these party stalwarts.⁴

The processes through which these delegates are selected attests to the rule-making creativity of each party and state. Republicans generally prefer to choose their delegates through conventions and state-run primaries. These venues can be open (i.e., anyone can vote) or closed (i.e., only party members vote), and bound (i.e., the delegates are pledged to vote for the winning candidate) or unbound (i.e., the delegates are free to choose whomever they want). The number of delegates the candidate can win depends on whether their apportioning⁵ is direct, proportional, or winner-take all.

Democrats, in addition to primaries, also have caucuses, which are conducted by the party and (like the primaries) can be open, closed, semi-open, or semi-closed. The caucus rules trump⁶ the entire system. Typically, the participants assemble in a large hall and indicate their support for a particular candidate by standing in a designated area. A separate area may also be set aside for undecided participants.

Then, for about 30 minutes, the voters attempt to convince their neighbors to support their candidates of choice. Following that wheeling and dealing, the electioneering is temporarily halted, the votes are counted and the caucus officials determine which candidates—usually those with at least 15% of the votes—are viable.⁷ With that done, participants then have another 30 minutes during which they may throw their support behind a new candidate if they so desire.

- [10] Perhaps the most astounding aspect of this convoluted⁸ process is the dubious⁹ nature of the results it delivers. For one thing, 712 of the 2,382 Democratic delegates needed for the nomination are not elected in the primaries or caucuses. They are so-called “super delegates”—the party’s former governors, Congress members, and other top officials—who are appointed, and can vote for any nominee they want.

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2. **Labyrinth (noun):** something that is extremely complicated or difficult to understand; a maze or complicated network of passages or pathways
 3. A delegate is kind of like a middleman between the American voters and the political parties. He or she is a person – often a party official or politician, but technically anyone can apply – who is elected or chosen to support a particular candidate at either the Republican or Democratic National Convention. Delegates are supposed to cast their ballot in favor of the candidate who received the most votes in their state’s or district’s primary or caucus, but each party has their own rules and sometimes delegates are allowed to vote for whomever they personally prefer.
 4. **Stalwart (noun):** a loyal and reliable member or supporter of an organization
 5. **Apportion (verb):** to assign or allocate
 6. **Trump (verb):** to beat; to do better than; to be more important than
 7. **Viable (adjective):** capable of happening or succeeding; feasible
 8. **Convoluted (adjective):** very complicated and difficult to understand
 9. **Dubious (adjective):** suspect or unreliable; doubtful

The rest of the delegates, both Democrats and Republicans, who are selected by the primaries and caucuses generally pledge to support the winning nominee. In most cases, however, the pledge is good only for the first, or the first three ballots in the nominating convention. If the nominee fails to win during those early rounds, the delegates are free to vote for whomever they chose.

The Final Flaw

The final flaw of the system is that we do not vote directly for the presidential candidates (and the vice presidential candidates they chose) who won the Democratic and Republican conventions. We vote for members of an electoral college in which, under the Constitution, each state has the number of delegates equal to the total of its senators and members of Congress.

And therein lies potential unfairness of the system: because every state, regardless of the size of its population, has two senators, the voters in small states have—per capita¹⁰—greater electoral power than their big-state counterparts.

For example, the State of New York, with a population of 19.7 million, has 29 electoral delegates, or one for each 680,000 New Yorkers. Vermont, not very far away, has a population of 626,000 and 3 electoral delegates, or one each for about 209,000 Vermonters. When it comes to the choice of the U.S. president and vice president, one Vermonter's vote counts as much as the votes of three of his or her fellow citizens in New York.

- [15] This means that, to win the requisite¹¹ 270 votes, or 50 percent-plus-one of the 538-members of the electoral college—a total which is equal to 435 members of the U.S. Representatives, 100 U.S. Senators, and 3 electors from Washington, D.C.—the candidates have to focus on winning enough states, as well as enough voters. And that's what George W. Bush did in 2000 by winning 30 states with 271 electoral votes, while Al Gore, despite his greater popular support, carried only 26 states with 266 electoral delegates.

One consequence of our byzantine¹² electoral system is that it is extremely expensive and time-consuming. In 2012, for example, the presidential candidates spent \$2.6 billion and almost two years of intensive work before reaching Election Day on November 3. Another downside is that the complexity and uncertainties of the process tempt some would-be participants to try to win another way.

Two Failed Mavericks

One prominent attempt to bypass the process was made by Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt, a highly popular ex-president. After losing a bid for a return to power in the 1912 Republican convention, he started his own Progressive Party (nicknamed the “Bull Moose Party”). The result was that he split the votes for devotees of the Republican Party, which resulted in the nomination of the incumbent President William Howard Taft. Roosevelt won 27.4% of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes; Taft got 23% and 8 electoral votes; and Democrat Woodrow Wilson walked away with 41.87% of the vote—and the presidency.

10. Per person

11. **Requisite (adjective):** necessary for the attainment of a specific aim or goal

12. Of or relating to the Byzantine Empire; in this context, the word means “excessively complicated”

Another attempt at an insurgency¹³ was made in 1992 by Ross Perot, a successful businessman, who ran for the White House as an independent. He had a sensible populist¹⁴ program, campaigned in 16 states, made effective use of television, and spent an estimated \$12.3 million of his own money. Perot successfully debated with the two major party candidates, George Herbert Bush and Bill Clinton and, for a time, maintained a 39% rating in polls. In the election, he won 18.9% of the popular vote—but carried no states, and won no Electoral College votes.

What do these two failures say about our quadrennial¹⁵ discontent? Do we have an “applesauce” or a system of remarkable endurance?

- [20] Undoubtedly, reform is necessary. As Perot said, “Our founders did not know about electricity, the train, telephones, radio, television, automobiles, airplanes, rockets, nuclear weapons, satellites, or space exploration. There's a lot they didn't know about. It would be interesting to see what kind of document they'd draft today.”

But it's also true that, for all its warts, the system has served us well. It has helped create history's most stable, free, and affluent society, and it has had the consent of the governed—the bedrock of democracy.

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13. **Insurgency** (*noun*): a rebellion against an existing authority

14. A populist is a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people

15. Occurring every four years

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What does the author's language reveal about his tone toward the American Electoral College system? What rhetorical strategies does he use to justify his perspective? [RI.6]

2. PART A: Which statement BEST states the central idea conveyed in the text? [RI.2]

- A. It is inherently unfair that the votes of citizens from more populous states should count less than those of their small-state counterparts.
- B. The American Electoral College system – though somewhat effective – is flawed and excessively complex.
- C. The greatest flaw of the American Electoral College is that it forces presidential candidate to devote significant economic resources to their campaigns.
- D. The process by which we elect our president has been rendered irrelevant by modern technological innovations.

3. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answer to Part A? [RI.1]

- A. "We gripe that [the electoral system is] more complicated than the Rubik's cube; it takes too much time; it's too expensive; and it is unfair. And, in fact, it is all of the above." (Paragraph 1)
- B. "And therein lies potential unfairness of the system: because every state, regardless of the size of its population, has two senators, the voters in small states have—per capita—greater electoral power than their big-state counterparts." (Paragraph 13)
- C. "One consequence of our byzantine electoral system is that it is extremely expensive and time-consuming. In 2012, for example, the presidential candidates spent \$2.6 billion and almost two years of intensive work before...Election Day." (Paragraph 16)
- D. "Roosevelt won 27.4% of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes; Taft got 23% and 8 electoral votes; and Democrat Woodrow Wilson walked away with 41.87% of the vote—and the presidency." (Paragraph 17)
- E. "As Perot said, 'Our founders did not know about electricity, the train, telephones, radio, television, ... It would be interesting to see what kind of document they'd draft today.'" (Paragraph 20)
- F. "[The system] has helped create history's most stable, free, and affluent society, and it has had the consent of the governed—the bedrock of democracy." (Paragraph 21)

4. PART A: What does the word “gripe” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 1? [RI.4]
- A. to express a grievance about a concern or problem
 - B. to whine unnecessarily in a childlike way
 - C. to joke sarcastically
 - D. to declare aggressively
5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph BEST supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. “we complain”
 - B. “too much time”
 - C. “too expensive”
 - D. “unfair”

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What effect does paragraph 21 have on your reading of the text as a whole? Do you think it weakens or strengthens the author's points about the electoral system's flaws?
2. In your opinion, what is the most significant problem with the electoral system and why? Do you think the author of the text agrees with you?
3. What is the role of political parties in our government, given what is stated in the text? Do you think of them as a divisive force or as a way for likeminded people to come together to effect change?
4. What are some of the challenges associated with creating a truly "fair" procedure for electing a president of the United States? Are any of these obstacles specific to this country? In the context of this text, how is America unique?
5. Do you think the American Electoral College is a fair system? In the context of this text, what does it mean for something to be fair? Is it that which is in the best interest of the individual or that which serves the many? Defend your position using facts and figures from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history.