

Electoral College is best way to choose U.S. president

By JAMES W. INGRAM III | JAN. 13, 2017

The Electoral College is once again under siege. Critics arguing that it is obsolete and undemocratic have greatly overestimated the benefits of electing presidents by popular vote plurality.

One key reason the founders of the United States of America created the Electoral College was the possibility that once George Washington retired or died, no other candidate could garner majority support from such a diverse nation. Their concern was well-founded.

Of the 49 presidential elections the United States has held since 1824, when many states began allowing the public to choose electors, a full 18 contests have not given any candidate a popular vote majority.

The electoral vote has only reversed a popular vote majority once, in 1876, an election called into question by vote fraud. In 1888, when the person who won the electoral vote had a smaller share of the popular vote, no candidate won a popular majority.

Likewise in 2000 and 2016, the most recent elections in which critics claim the Electoral College subverted the people's will, neither Hillary Clinton nor Al Gore won popular vote majorities. Clinton won 48 percent compared to Donald Trump's 46 percent; Gore won 48.4 percent to George W. Bush's 47.9 percent. Clinton and Gore outpolled their opponents, but the majority supported someone else for president.

The Electoral College usually amplifies the people's voice, electing the candidate who wins most states and votes. This allows the winner to claim a mandate and lead the country.

Had the founders required presidents to gain a majority of the popular vote rather than of the Electoral College, over 30 percent of our presidential elections would have been decided by the U.S. House. In both 2000 and 2016, the Republican House majorities surely would have chosen the Republican candidate, the same one who won the electoral vote.

The problem with House selection is that this raises questions of legitimacy. In 1824, no one won an Electoral College or a popular vote majority. When the House chose John Quincy Adams over plurality winner Andrew Jackson, the latter denounced the "corrupt bargain," undermining Adams' presidency.

Every presidential election which lacked a popular majority featured significant third-party candidates. Gary Johnson in 2016, Ralph Nader in 2000, and Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 are prominent examples.

Third-party candidates highlight neglected issues, but increase the probability nobody wins a majority. The problem with electing the candidate who achieves only a popular vote plurality is that someone supported by a small minority of people and states could win, provided everyone else has even fewer vote.

By mandating an Electoral College majority rather than a popular vote plurality, the Constitution requires a presidential candidate to win more states. Since over half of the U.S.'s population lives in the nine largest states, plurality rules would instead allow presidents to win with only a small minority of states.

But since the nine most populous states have only 240 of the needed 270 electoral votes, the current system requires candidates to be competitive in more states. Clinton won almost 3 million more votes than Trump, but she won merely 19.75 states and D.C., while Trump won 30.25 states (they split Maine).

Alexander Hamilton defended the Electoral College in Federalist Paper No. 68, stating it was intended to ensure presidents would have "the esteem and confidence of the whole Union, or of so considerable a portion of it as would be necessary." Hamilton called it "unsafe to permit less than a majority" of the states' electors to select the president.

Our present system has only elected the candidate who won fewer states thrice, in 1824, 1960 and 1976. The two main candidates tied in the number of states won in 1848 and 1880, but both times the contestant with more popular support won the electoral vote. In every other presidential plebiscite, the winner carried a majority of states.

If presidents only needed plurality support, the victor might regularly be the candidate who won fewer states. This would weaken presidential leadership.

The Electoral College prevents smaller states from being ignored in presidential elections. The states' diversity should be just as fully represented as other dimensions of diversity in our multicultural republic.

Electing presidents by popular vote is a bad idea. The only big countries using this method are France, Mexico and Russia. Russia selected Vladimir Putin through popular vote majority. Are these three countries really better governed than America?

If our Electoral College mechanism for choosing presidents is imperfect, it is because human beings have never devised a perfect system. But in 11 score and 7 years we have chosen 45 presidents to lead our country. What isn't broken doesn't need fixing.