Does your vote for president really count? If you’re a Republican in California or a Democrat in Texas, you might not think so. Millions of voters in each of those states every four years effectively cast useless ballots. How is that so? Unlike state elections for positions such as governor, senator and representative that use the popular vote, voting for president involves the archaic Electoral College. It’s a system that works on principle of winner-take-all instead of proportionality. This leaves the majority party with all the electors, the picked representatives that truly cast the vote for president, and the unfortunate minority with no say. You might say to yourself that this process isn’t fair or even democratic, and you might just be right. In fact, the current president Donald Trump tweeted after the 2012 election that “the electoral college is a disaster for a democracy” (Twitter). Critics would argue that it gives power to smaller states who wouldn’t have the voice otherwise, and they might be right. This system has worked mostly without hiccups over the last 200 plus years with popular votes matching electoral margins except for a handful of instances. The most notable and significant instance being the 2016 election. This chance for such a large disparity leads to the need for a massive overhaul of the Electoral College or abolishment in favor of the popular vote or another system.

The idea of the Electoral College dates back all the way to the original writing of the United States Constitution in 1787. Tallying of votes and getting people to the polls was much harder then than it is now in the modern era, and partly because of that, a system was put into
place to smooth the process. It was also partly because of reasons many of the founding architects of our country feared including a public that would not come together around a national candidate but instead choose people from their communities. These fears of splintering among regions led to a system that took the direct power of election from the hands of the public and put it into those of a select few. This original Electoral College used a system that gave the first-place winner and second-place winner the presidency and vice presidency, respectively. Introduction of fierce political party fighting among Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the election of 1800 led to electors voting against their state constituents’ will and for their own party instead. Disagreements among the opposing parties led to the writing and ratification of the Twelfth Amendment that created the system we recognize today. This system gives one vote to each elector and the number of electors is decided by the combined number of seats in Congress between the House of Representatives and Senate. Today that totals 538. A simple majority of 270 electoral votes wins the presidency. Most states are winner-take-all when it comes to electors, but in the case of Maine and Nebraska, the electors are split proportionally (Bowman 289-292).

After the presidential election of 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and the disparity between popular and electoral counts, new calls for the Electoral College to be ended or amended have begun. That disparity wasn’t a new occurrence. The winner of the presidency getting less votes than their competitor(s) dates back all the way to 1824 with the election of John Quincy Adams. Andrew Jackson won a plurality of the popular vote, but he didn’t have a majority of electoral votes, so the decision went to the Congress and they voted for Adams. 1876 saw the election of Rutherford B. Hayes despite him losing by 250,000 votes to
Samuel Tilden. 20 electoral votes were contested and Congress awarded them to Hayes after some shady backroom deals. Incumbent Grover Cleveland won 90,000 more votes than Benjamin Harrison in 1888, yet he lost the presidency. The system “worked” for over a century up until 2000. The election of 2000 was one of the most controversial events of American political history. It involved recounts, corruption, protests and utter chaos for several weeks. The election came down to the state of Florida where the margin of victory for George Bush was 537 votes. This slim margin activated a recount which was eventually denied by the US Supreme Court. The electors from Florida put Bush over the 270 needed. Al Gore ended up with roughly half a million more votes than Bush, but those 537 votes in Florida won Bush the top spot. The most glaring and obvious example of system disparity is the latest election between Trump and Clinton. Going into the election, most media outlets had the election going to Clinton. If they were going by popularity according to raw votes, they would’ve been right. Clinton ended up with 2.9 million more votes than Trump, but he ended up with 302 electoral votes. The 2016 election came down to three states – Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania – and roughly 90,000 votes between them (“Electoral College” 109-113)(“Electoral Votes in United States Presidential Elections, 1988–2016”). Those 90,000 people between three states had more power than 2.9 million when it came to choosing the leader of the free world. If that’s not enough to get you scratching your head, I don’t know what is.

There are many reasons critics have to upend our current system and it goes far beyond the popular/electoral vote difference. States with large populations such as Texas, California, and New York have political parties who effectively control the vote. In Texas, Republicans clinch the electoral vote in every modern election; meanwhile, in New York and California,
Democrats control the vote. This leads to many each party’s voters without deciding power (Davis). In fact, in states where one party dominates, the voter turnout and participation is lower than where the two parties are equal such as swing states (Cebula 309). This lowering of voter morale could creep into other important elections such as midterms since voters think their votes don’t count. Would you blame them though? The ratio of population to electoral vote is also another point of inequality for the critics of the system. In large states such as California, the ratio of population to elector is 615,848 to 1, while in states like Wyoming where the population is low, the ratio is 164,594 to 1 (Bolinger 180). In essence, the average citizen of Wyoming has the voting power of nearly 4 Californians. Between the Democratic control of California and the lack of “value” of your vote compared to other states, if you were a Californian Republican you’d most likely feel cheated. Another group of American citizens that might feel cheated are the people of the various territories. As Benjamin Bolinger puts in his review Point: Abolishing the Electoral College:

Californians at least receive a vote. Under the Electoral College system where votes awarded to states, many citizens get left out. Despite the fact that residents of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands are U.S. citizens, they are completely excluded from the Electoral College System. Puerto Rico alone has a population of 3,808,610. Upon adding this figure to the population of the other territories, one finds that over four million citizens are not represented in the Electoral College (180).

Imagine you’re a red-blooded American living in one of the many territories of the United States. You go the polls on election day, but you can only vote for local candidates for local
matters such as mayor or governor. If you were them, you might feel a little ticked off.

According to the Constitution, voting for president and representatives in Congress is reserved for the states only. This is not just an electoral problem but also a constitutional problem. This archaic system doesn’t just affect the voters but also the candidates. The country’s two largest parties -- Democrats and Republicans -- have a stranglehold on the electorate and when it comes to the presidential contest, it’s the most apparent. Third party or independent challengers have an almost impossible time winning even one elector because of the winner-take-all method. In relative recent history, an independent named Ross Perot won nearly 20 million votes -- almost a fifth of the popular vote – in the 1992 election. Despite those numbers, he won zero electors while the winner, Bill Clinton, took 370 electors with 45 million votes (Fresia). Inequalities are also apparent in how candidates treat certain states in our union. If you’re a resident of Alaska, good luck seeing either major candidate. Alaska’s miniscule three electors and overwhelming Republican populace make it a shoe-in for the Republican and a lost cause for the Democrat. If you live in a place such as Pennsylvania or Ohio, which are swing states, you’re going to very popular with both. This grab for electors leaves a large portion of America without attention.

There are many issues critics of our current system have that point to it being wrong for our democracy, but there still those that want it to remain in place. Recent polling after the 2016 election showed 47% of respondents wanting to keep the system the way it is (“Americans’ Support for Electoral College Rises Sharply”). The population is practically split in what it wants to do. Letting what modern Americans think of it go for a second, let’s look back at the original framers of this controversial system. The Founding Fathers didn’t want to create
a true democracy but instead a republic. Having representatives who vote for the public, this prevents what is called “the tyranny of the majority” which refers to a type of mob rule (Ross). These fears would be understandable for turbulent and troubled times especially after a revolution, but for a country of over 300 million, mob rule doesn’t seem like a valid fear in our current climate. As for another point for keeping the status quo, economist Walter E. Williams makes the case for smaller states benefitting from the current system saying “The Electoral College gives states with small populations a measure of protection against domination by states with large populations. It levels the political playing field a bit.” This “domination” is from the fact that the nine most populated states have over half the nation’s citizens. This current system of ours gives states such as Wyoming more power than simply going by popular vote (Williams). These points do have some merit and do need to be considered in the debate. The founders wanted to maintain a federalist system that prevented tyranny from an unruly majority. This system also gives an advantage to states that are often overlooked. Despite these arguments, the system as it stands can’t continue especially with the latest outing in 2016.

Over the course of its controversial history, many alternatives or tweaks to the Electoral College have been proposed. The most proposed alternative is a switch to the popular vote; although, that would require a constitutional amendment that would need a 2/3 majority in the Congress and 2/3 of states backing it. An alternative to the alternative is what is known as the “National Popular Vote” plan. It would keep the Electoral College and the winner of the national popular vote would receive all the electoral vote instead of it going state by state. This would bypass amending the Constitution, but it would first require states totaling 270 combined electors for the plan to be effective (Raskin). According to the Constitution, this is a
viable and legal maneuver, but congressional approval might be hard to obtain (Detweiler).

Another change to the current system is the proportional electors which Maine and Nebraska currently employ. This would avoid amending the Constitution, and it would also avoid the popular/electoral disparity seen in the past (“Electoral College Reform” 9).

Depending on who you ask, you’ll probably get an array of opinions on the Electoral College. On a none election year, you might even have people who don’t even have an opinion either way. It’s an archaic system that dates to the infancy of our country. Controversy plagues it, but there are many who still defend it vehemently. Polarization and tribalism in our political climate has made it a partisan issue. It shouldn’t be. It should be an American issue to be debated. The great disparity between how the people vote and the outcome of the electoral process lends to the need for an overhaul. Despite what our founding fathers thought about democracy, there’s a need for a fairer process.

Works Cited


Bolinger, Benjamin. “Point: Abolishing the Electoral College.” International Social Science Review, vol. 82, no. 3 /4, June 2007, p. 179-182. EBSCOhost, proxy-mansfield.klnpa.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=5&sid=dd9b8507-5e6c-4ab3-abfd-69e252d7a799%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNjb3BiIPXNdGU%3d#AN=28841571&db=bth


“Electoral College Reform.” *Congressional Digest*, vol. 96, no. 1, Jan. 2017, p. 8-32. EBSCOhost, proxy-mansfield.klnpa.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=e9df16c4-0a9e-4b34-b4af-58a57bba3742%40sessionmgr103


