KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY
COLES COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
Bagwell Center for the Study of Markets and Economic Opportunity

Commentary

Title:

"Presidential Elections: Electoral College versus National Popular Vote$

Author(s):

Timothy Mathews
James Boudreau
Brett Katzman
Jesse Schwartz

September 2024

Introduction

With the upcoming Presidential election on November 5, 2024, discussions about election format are bound to resurface. Why do we have the Electoral College instead of a national popular vote? Wouldn't the latter more directly reflect the *Will of the People*? This debate took off in 2016 after Donald Trump won the presidency via the Electoral College even though Hillary Clinton received more popular votes. It escalated to the point where Representative Charles Rangel (D, NY) submitted H. J. RES. 103 that would, "abolish the Electoral College and to provide for the direct popular election of the President and Vice President of the United States."[1] (Krieg, 2016).

In this light, we consider a national popular vote as an alternative to the Electoral College, critiquing some arguments made by others and offering some fresh perspectives. Our purpose is not to advocate for one voting system over another. Rather, we seek to stimulate a thoughtful debate based on logical reasoning (as opposed to emotional reactions to lost elections).

The Will of the People?

What constitutes the *Will of the People*? Politicians and pundits often equate this to popular vote totals. But ascertaining the *Will of the People* is quite complex. It requires somehow aggregating the preferences of individuals into a single notion of collective will. It is not some well-defined notion just waiting to be revealed by an election. In fact, three quarters of a century ago, Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow showed that such aggregation is "impossible." Although complex in derivation, the takeaway from Arrow's theorem is easily understood: no voting system is perfect.

Arrow's approach was to first specify a set of criteria that a reasonable voting system should satisfy. He then demonstrated that *no* voting system could simultaneously satisfy all of his criteria. For example, plurality voting (in which voters cast votes over multiple options and the one getting the most votes is chosen) would seem to be a very reasonable and fair process – but it violates Arrow's criterion of *independence of irrelevant alternatives*. That is, the inclusion of a candidate in an election that never has a chance of winning (i.e., an irrelevant alternative), can change the outcome of the election – a phenomenon sometimes called the spoiler effect.

Consider a simple, generic example of a race between three candidates: a Democrat (D) an Independent (I), and a Republican (R). Three types of voters participate – their preferences and their proportion of the electorate are as follows:

Voter Type (% of Electorate)	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
Type A (40%)	D	I	R
Type B (49%)	R	I	D
Type C (11%)	I	D	R

Under plurality voting (i.e., each voter submits a vote for one candidate and the candidate with the most votes wins), if voters vote according to their true preferences the Republican wins with 49% of all votes, the Democrat gets 40%, and the Independent gets 11%. However, if the Independent candidate had not been in the race at all, Type C voters would vote for the Democrat, so that the Democrat would win with 51% support.

Real-world instances can be found in U.S. presidential elections. Evidence from the 2000 race suggests that if Ralph Nader had not been on the ballot in Florida, Al Gore would have carried

---

[1] See "It's official: Clinton swamps Trump in popular vote," by G. Krieg
(https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/21/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final-count/index.html).

the state and won the election.[2] Donald Trump could have carried Arizona and Georgia in 2020 (and won the election) if Libertarian Jo Jorgensen had not been on the ballot in those states.[3]

For the voter preferences in the above table, which candidate truly represents the *Will of the People*? As we saw, with all three options, the Republican candidate is the plurality winner. However, given a choice between only the Democrat or the Republican, the Democrat is supported by a majority. Moreover, the Independent could be considered more of a consensus pick since the Independent is not ranked last by any of the voters. The answer is that there is no "right" or "obvious" answer to the question of which candidate *should* be chosen.

Possessing a basic understanding of these types of results leads to a more intellectually honest and accurate debate of election systems (and may save people from sounding uninformed when advocating for a particular election system). The fact is that the voting system used and the apparent *Will of the People* are inextricably linked: in choosing a specific voting system, we are in part influencing what that election reveals to us, because different election formats can produce different winners, even when voters have the exact same preferences. The consequence is that the winner of the popular vote no better represents the *Will of the People* than winners in other formats. Still, if we are to elect representatives in our democracy, we must choose some method. We next address some of the flawed logic being peddled in the debate over the Electoral College.

Faulty Logic: the World Series and the Electoral College

We begin with a bit of sports history. The Pittsburgh Pirates won the 1960 World Series four games to three over the New York Yankees. After game seven, many sportswriters and fans were aghast when the Pirates were handed the World Series Trophy. You see, despite losing four of the seven games, the Yankees scored 55 runs in the seven-game affair compared to only 27 scored by the Pirates. Surely people would see this massive scoring disparity and insist the 1960 Yankees be awarded the title World Champion despite only having won three games.[4]

Baseball fans are now doubting our sanity because they know that nobody made the argument that the Yankees should be World Champions in 1960. Such an argument is ludicrous because each team was playing by rules which dictated that the team winning four games first would be declared World Champions. Astute fans would also point out that if the rules were different and total runs were all that mattered, then the teams would have strategized differently to win the run differential without worrying about winning individual games.

Returning to elections, Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential Election with 304 Electoral College votes to 227 over Hillary Clinton. After the election, political writers and Clinton supporters were aghast when Trump was handed the Presidency. You see, despite Clinton losing the electoral vote, she received nearly 66M popular votes compared to the fewer than 63M received

---

[2] Magee, C. (2003). "Third-Party Candidates and the 2000 Presidential Election," Social Science Quarterly, 84(3), 574-595. Herron, M. C., and Lewis, J. B. (2007). "Did Ralph Nader spoil a Gore presidency? A ballot-level study of Green and Reform Party voters in the 2000 presidential election," Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 2(3), 205–226.

[3] Cervas, J., and Grofman, B. (2022). "Why Donald Trump Should Be a Fervent Advocate of Using Ranked-Choice Voting in 2024," PS: Political Science & Politics, 55(1), 1-6.

[4] Several pundits have offered similar sport analogies. Newt Gingrich alludes to college football (see: Nelson, L. "Trump claims he could have also won the popular vote, if he wanted to." Politico, 21 Dec. 2016) and Charles Lane ("Griping About the Popular Vote? Get Over It." Washington Post, 14 Dec. 2016) uses 3-point shots in basketball. However, neither's analogies are structured to show the fundamental logical flaw as clearly as in our example of the 1960 World Series.

by Trump. Surely, the American people would see this massive disparity and insist that Clinton be awarded the Presidency.

A careful comparison of the World Series paragraph and the one about the 2016 election reveals they are logically equivalent. Each is structured as follows: One side won based on an observable, measurable standard that was set forth in advance. The losing side then complained that they should have won by some alternative measure. The only real distinction between the stories is that no right-minded baseball fan argued in favor of the Yankees, but numerous political pundits and politicians did argue in favor of Clinton. Some went so far as to suggest that electors act unfaithfully and switch their pledged votes from Trump to Clinton to right this "wrong."[5]

Moreover, it is fundamentally flawed to claim that Clinton would have received more popular votes had the popular vote total been the "measuring stick" from the start. The main problem with this claim is rooted in the difference between static and dynamic analysis. Static analysis erroneously assumes people would behave the same if the rules changed, whereas dynamic analysis correctly recognizes that people react to change and alter their behaviors. This point was popularized by another Nobel laureate, Robert Lucas, and is known in the economics literature as the Lucas Critique. In simple terms, if we change the rules, people will behave differently.

In the context of Presidential elections, when the goal is an Electoral College majority (and not a popular vote majority), campaigns will devote resources differently and voters will turn out differently than they otherwise would. For example, it is well established that Clinton made a serious misstep by not focusing enough on Wisconsin and other swing states while Trump poured massive resources into these states, getting several state level victories by razor thin margins. Had winning the popular vote been the goal, even Trump points out that he would have used his resources differently, spending them mostly in Texas, Florida, and New York, garnering more popular votes per dollar spent.[6]

To be fair, Clinton could have also allocated resources differently had maximizing popular vote total been the objective. Our point is not that one candidate would have benefited more or less than another because of this reallocation (that is unknowable). It is only that reallocation would have occurred and any comparison of popular vote totals in the actual election is irrelevant. This leads to the obvious question of why we tolerate such nonsense over something as important as our presidential election while dismissing it as ridiculous for sporting competitions?

Benefits of the Electoral College

Having established that no voting system is guaranteed to represent *The Will of the People*, it should be clear that a thoughtful comparison of two voting systems should consider the pluses and minuses of each. To date, most discussions have identified minuses of the Electoral College, but here we point to some pluses. Again, we are not championing the Electoral College, we would simply like it to receive a "fair shake" in an informed debate.

First, by localizing "misbehavior," the Electoral College reduces the potential impact of voter fraud. Consider a hypothetical state whose officials are willing to "stuff" ballot boxes for their preferred candidate. Under the Electoral College, that preferred candidate stands a better chance of winning the state's electoral votes, but the influence stops there. However, under national

---

[5] See: Washington Post Staff. "Should the Electoral College Stop a Trump Presidency? Depends Whom You Ask." Washington Post, 15 Dec. 2016.

[6] See: Helmore, Edward. "Kellyanne Conway Mocks Clinton Supporters for Rejecting Election Result." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 24 Nov. 2016.

plurality, the state's bad behavior would be farther reaching by directly inflating the popular vote without bound, giving the cheating state more influence over the outcome than honest states.

Second, localization becomes more important when recounts are necessary. If there were a call for a recount under a national popular vote, we would have to undergo a costly, lengthy, nationwide recount because every vote counts towards the total. Under the Electoral College, recounts are not necessary in states with a wide margin of victory and while statewide recounts are expensive, they are far less expensive than a national recount.

Finally, recent events point to a third benefit of the Electoral College. On December 19, 2022, Colorado's Supreme Court disqualified Trump from being on the state presidential ballot (an action later reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court). Such state influence would cause a drastic shift in a popular election as Trump would receive zero popular votes from Colorado (excepting potential write-in votes), a tremendous advantage for his opponent in the popular vote total.

Looking at the results of the 2016 election, nationwide, Clinton got 2,868,686 more votes than Trump, a difference that is considerably less than the 4,504,975 votes that Clinton got in Florida and the 3,877,868 votes that Clinton got in Texas (two states that Trump won). If Trump operatives could have kept Clinton off the ballot in either of these states, the nationwide popular vote could have easily swung in his favor. As with ballot box "stuffing," the apparent effects of removing a candidate in a single state are lessened under the Electoral College system by confining its effect to the state level.

Conclusion

Intellectual honesty compels us to look beyond political platitudes about the *Will of the People*. It also requires objectively comparing all positives and negatives of different voting systems, something that quite simply has not been afforded to the Electoral College in recent debates. We hope that our points allow for a more productive discussion.