The Electoral College

The Electoral College is the presidential election process created to uphold the institution of democracy while also putting up a safeguard for the United States. It was established by the founding fathers as a compromise between a popular vote, where citizens directly vote for the president, and congressional vote, where members of Congress vote for the president. 538 electors are selected to represent citizens of the United States, and 270 electoral votes are required in order to be elected. Each state, including the District of Columbia, receives the same number of electors as number of members representing the state in Congress, which allows every state to have a voice and influence in the election (“What is”). Supporters of the Electoral College believe that distributing electoral votes based on population is a crucial aspect of this process because it helps prevent a few big cities from controlling the rest of the country; without this process, rural areas would not be able to have a voice in determining the leader of the country, which could possibly negatively affect those areas (Pruitt). Most states use the “winner-take-all” system where every electoral vote goes to the presidential candidate that won that state; however, Maine and Nebraska distribute the electoral votes proportionally based on the votes they received instead of using the “winner-take-all” method. To officially elect the president, electors meet after the presidential election, where they cast their vote for Congress to
count, and finally the Vice President announces the winner of the election (“What is”). While the electors vote the way their state does the majority of the time, there have been 157 “faithless electors” in election history who have chosen to vote against their state. Today, some states have formal pledges to ensure that electors will vote with their states, but 21 states do not require electors to vote with their states. One of the major flaws that opponents of the Electoral College point out is the fact that it is possible for a presidential candidate to win the majority of electoral votes and lose the popular vote. Many people believe this is not fair because the majority of voters did not elect the candidate, but this has only occurred five times in over 200 years (Pruitt).

There have been debates and controversies over the Electoral College since it was created, and there are both pros and cons to keeping this system of electing the president. Although there are some flaws, Alexander Hamilton wrote in No. 68 of the Federalist Papers, “if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent” (Pruitt). The Electoral College should remain intact because it distributes power to every state, creates a safeguard against uninformed and unintelligent voters, and delivers a certainty of the outcome.

The biggest reason that the Electoral College should remain in tact is because it allows every state to have a say in choosing the leadership for the United States. Although many opponents to the Electoral College would argue that giving small states extra power is an unfair advantage and makes those votes matter more than people in urban areas, it would be even more unfair for the four largest states, California, Texas, Florida, and New York, to heavily affect the outcome of the presidential election. In order for the U.S. Constitution to be ratified, the “Great Compromise” was agreed upon, which established the two legislative bodies in Congress and lead to the way the electoral votes are set up (Onion). The Great Compromise was brought forth
at the 1787 Constitutional Convention by the founding fathers in order to diffuse the large conflict between large and small state representatives; while larger states wanted representation that was proportional to the population, smaller states wanted equal representation as to not exist in the larger states’ shadows. Had the Great Compromise not been proposed, the U.S. Constitution may not have been ratified because every delegate wanted to get their way and would not accept the opposition to win the heated debate. The Connecticut Compromise, which combined Virginia’s plan that favored large states and New Jersey’s plan that favored small states, resulted in the House of Representatives and the Senate within Congress. The House of Representatives would appeal to the large states because representation is based on population; the Senate would appeal to the small states because every state receives two representatives which equalizes the playing field for small states. This idea of protecting small states in Congress also applies to the Electoral College because it distributes power in a more fair way (Onion). In addition to protecting small states, the Electoral College protects against a candidate without national appeal, but rather regional appeal. The idea of a candidate winning simply because they were popular in one or two of the biggest states is very unfair, and makes the rest of the states subject to what the biggest states decided on. For example, if during a popular vote election a candidate was extremely popular in California and New York but nowhere else, it is probable that they would win the election, even though most of the states did not vote them in. While this is not extremely likely, it is very important to protect the United States from few regional areas from controlling the outcome of a national election (Rotunda). Although some people would argue that allowing rural areas to have significant power in an election is a bad thing, this ensures that small states are not forgotten about and that minorities are not trampled by a potential tyrant
majority. Along with giving power to smaller states, the Electoral College also gives more power to minority groups, especially racial groups. This encourages equality and social justice because instead of drawing support solely from the white majority, candidates also find it important to appeal to minority groups and win their votes. Additionally, because large minority populations are found in urban cities, their votes are an important part in determining the electoral votes outcome, which gives minorities a voice and encourages them to vote (Rotunda). The Electoral College elevates small states and minorities to an equal platform as large states and majorities, and without this system, many states and people could be left without a voice and subject to the rule of the majority. Along with distributing power to every state, the Electoral College also protects against uninformed and unintelligent voters, which was very important in the 1700s and continues to be very important today.

One of the main reasons the founding fathers created the Electoral College was to give citizens a say in the presidential election, but not directly. Although it is unclear today of why exactly the founding fathers did not want a direct election of the presidency, the system they set up has worked fairly well at offsetting uninformed and unintelligent voters. In another section of No. 68 of the Federalist Papers, Hamilton described their fears of mass manipulation by a tyrant being resolved by the electoral system:

“A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations. It was also peculiarly desirable to afford as little opportunity as possible to tumult and disorder… But the precautions which have been so happily concerted in the
system under consideration, promise an effectual security against this mischief” (Schulman).

The founders did not believe that the general population would be capable of electing the right people, and feared that it would be easy for a candidate to manipulate citizens. By appointing intelligent electors to make the final decision, the founders thought that the best, most qualified candidate would be chosen; this takes the weight off of citizens needing to be extremely informed, and also protects against ignorant voters (Schulman). While in the early years of the United States ignorance may have come from lack of access to information, current ignorance may be a result simply from not caring, since the vast majority of the population has access to information about the election and candidates. Since there is little incentive to be an informed voter, it is easy for many citizens to vote blindly, which the founders knew would be an issue. They believed that ignorant voters could greatly jeopardize and affect election outcomes which is why they chose to have electors make the final decisions. Unintelligent voters arguably make it difficult for the government to truly represent what the majority wants and make it easy to be swayed by candidates, political organizations, elites, and other people. Although some people may argue that the Electoral College does not promote democracy, it’s protection from ignorant and uninformed voters is a democratic way of making sure the majority’s desires are carried out and not affected or swayed by others (Somin). Another thing that the framers were worried about are “soft” and “hard” demagogues, which are two different types of people that affect uninformed voters. Soft demagogues aimed to make voters rebel against the elites, where as hard demagogues feed into the tyrant majority idea and gather people in opposition to minority groups (Baylor). Demagogues were very prevalent during the time that the founders were writing the
Constitution, and they wanted to make sure that presidents would put their personal policies and agendas behind them, and have the country’s best interest at heart. Although the Electoral College helps prevent this, it does not entirely exterminate it. An article on The Washington Post describes President Donald Trump’s tactics as hard demagogue, because some people believe that he targets minority groups, such as women, Mexicans, Muslims, and other groups, as a way of gaining support from the majority (Baylor). The ignorant and uninformed voter may easily be swayed by demagogues and other elites without knowing what they think, but the electoral system aims to combat those votes. Besides creating a safeguard against uninformed voters, the Electoral College also creates a certainty of outcome that would be absent in a popular vote system.

Another key benefit of the Electoral College, and one of the reasons the founding fathers created it, was to allow for a certainty of outcome, meaning that every election would produce a winner of the presidential position. The certainty of outcome that the electoral process produces is often overlooked, but it is a crucial role in allowing for a somewhat smooth election and election outcome. Due to the winner-take-all system most states have, the margin of electoral votes the winner receives is generally greater than the popular vote margin would be. For example, in the 2012 presidential election, President Obama won 61.7 percent of the electoral vote while only winning 51.3 percent of the popular vote (Posner). This creates a certainty of outcome because it is easier to declare a winner when there is an obvious lead in votes; when the outcome of the votes are extremely close, there is often a delay in declaring a winner due to the desire and need to recount the votes. Although it is possible for the number of electoral votes received to be a tie, it is very unlikely, while it is more likely for the number of popular votes...
received to be too close to call an election. In President Obama’s case, if the election was based on the popular vote, it would have taken much longer to declare the winner of the election, because there most likely would have been many districts that would need to recount the votes in order to give a certainty of outcome (Posner). Additionally, the Electoral College allows for one candidate to win the majority and prevents instances in which no candidate wins the majority of the popular vote. In some elections, such as Nixon in 1968 and Clinton in 1992, neither candidate won the majority of the popular vote, but won the majority of electoral votes which prevented a run-off election from occurring and complicating the election process (Posner). If the Electoral College did not exist, there could potentially be many instances in which no candidate receives the majority vote, which would cause many problems and drag out the election. Today, while third parties are not mainstream popular, they are still prevalent and have picked up support in recent years. In the 2016 presidential election, for example, Donald Trump won 46.1 percent of the popular vote and Hillary Clinton won 48.2 percent of the popular vote; this two percent disparity may not have been enough to call the election, and neither candidate won the majority due to third party candidates, Jill Stein and Gary Johnson, picking up some of the vote. With a popular vote system, more third party candidates may gain more support and “take away” votes from the Republican and Democrat parties. Some people even suggest that the two main third party candidates took votes away from Hillary Clinton, which could have been a main factor in her losing the election. Although many people wanted to abolish the Electoral College after the 2016 election, this election demonstrates the necessity of the system and shows how it is an effective way of giving a level of certainty to the outcome of elections (Devine). Although it
is not a perfect system, it delivers a winner of the election every time and gives more credibility to the candidates in close popular vote elections.

While there are many good things about the Electoral College, it is also important to acknowledge what critics believe are the downfalls, while still recognizing that no system is perfect and this works the best. The biggest issue opponents of the electoral system argue that the winner of the popular vote does not always receive the most electoral votes, thus causing them to lose the election. This first happened in 1824 none of the four candidates received the majority electoral votes, so the House of Representatives voted for John Quincy Adams to become president. This caused a big debate, because although no candidate won the majority, Andrew Jackson received the most electoral votes out of everyone and was not elected. Along with the 1824 election, four other elections resulted in the winner having the most electoral votes but not the most popular votes (Pruitt). Many people deem this as unfair and not a true representation of the majority and democracy as a whole, but the popular vote may also result in no candidate receiving the majority. Another critique of the Electoral College is that electors are able to vote against their state, which throws off the election and does not fairly represent the majority; however, there have only been 157 “faithless electors” in the history of the Electoral College, none of which have changed the result (Pruitt). Another main reason why people believe the Electoral College should be abolished is because the amount of power it gives small states is unfair and allows for small states and low populations to influence the entire nation. As previously mentioned, the number of electoral votes comes from the numbers of representatives each state has in the House of Representatives and the Senate, meaning each state has at least three electoral votes. This means that electors for rural areas represent far less people than those
representing urban areas, which causes the people in rural areas to have a greater impact on the election (Onion). However, this still protects small areas from being controlled by a few large cities, and allows for minority voices in these places be heard. Although there are some flaws to the Electoral College, every system is prone to have flaws as it is impossible to create a perfect system that works one hundred percent of the time. The founders created the system knowing that is would not be perfect, but it has sustained elections thus far and have only caused major issues a handful of times. While many people believe that the Electoral College should be abolished, having a popular vote system could potentially result in even more issues than the current system produces.

As previously mentioned, many opponents to the Electoral College suggest using the popular vote to elect the president, and while this system seems to work well and be fair in theory, many problems would be created that the Electoral College helps prevent. The biggest issue that would rise is few large cities heavily influencing the vote and making the decision for the entire country. If a candidate could win several of the largest states in the U.S., they would be able to win the election even if every other state vote against them, which does not allow for other states with smaller populations to have a say in the national election. Additionally, it would be much harder to declare a winner, especially in recent year, because of the close races. Earlier, the need for a larger victory margin was discussed, which is important in solidifying the outcome of the election; with popular vote, elections are often closer which may demand for countless recounts of the votes which would greatly prolong the process. Finally, popular vote could cause many different parties to form and candidates to run, which could split the votes up and cause no candidate to win the majority. This goes against the majority rule aspect of democracy, because
there could be instances where the winning candidate could have less than fifty percent of the vote and still win the election due to the amount of candidates running and spread out votes. However, it is not likely for this to happen in the extreme way described, but it could still have an effect on the outcome of elections. While there are some aspects of the popular vote system that is good, there are also a lot of issues that the electoral system fixes.

After analyzing both pros and cons to the Electoral College and popular vote systems, it is clear to see that the Electoral College should remain intact because it gives power to every state, protects against uninformed and unintelligent voters, and produces a certainty of the outcome that the popular vote system may not be able to do. The founders wanted to create a system that would prevent small states from being looked over, which is why they used the number of representatives a state has in Congress to determine the number of electoral votes it receives. Additionally, the founders believed that uninformed and unintelligent voters could undermine the government or be easily influenced by tyrants, which is why they wanted the presidential election to not be entirely direct. Finally, the Electoral College gives a certainty of the outcome by always producing a winner of the election and usually creating a large-enough margin to credentialize the candidate who is declared winner. Although there are some drawbacks to the Electoral College, no system is perfect and this system has adequately sustained the U.S. thus far; this system has minimal issues, especially compared to other systems that could be used. Many opponents to the Electoral College call for a popular vote election, which may work some of the time, but has many problems associated with it. After weighing both systems, it is clear to see that the system the founders created is the best for the U.S., and the Electoral College should remain in tact.
Works Cited


Schulman, Marc. “Why the Electoral College.” *The Debate over the Bank*, 17 July 2018,