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## Electoral College Watch

By Gary L. Gregg

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The Old College Save

Part 2: It serves good government.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of a three-part defense of the electoral college. The first part is [here](#).

In Federalist Paper #68, Alexander Hamilton wrote that the constitutional system for electing presidents "is almost the only part of the system, of any consequence, which has escaped without severe censure or which has received the slightest mark of approbation from its opponents." Such a situation would not last long. Starting almost immediately, challenges were raised to the Electoral College method of selecting the president and they have continued throughout American history. Opponents today worship at the alter of an abstraction called "one man, one vote" and a desire to nationalize all of our politics. Nothing short of a national referendum will suffice for these critics.

Those agitating for the abolition of the electoral college fail to see that the system has evolved and developed with the evolution of American politics. As our politics has democratized, so has the college. Democracy now reigns supreme in every state as the candidate with the most votes in each state gets the electoral votes of that state. Its 50 little democracies, not the unfair and undemocratic system critics contend.

Our electoral-college system is not just a neutral way of counting votes, however. It has real and tangible consequences for our political system that we ignore at our own peril. The former Democratic senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan said it most persuasively when he searched the globe for a more stable political system than our own and, finding none, traced the roots of our political prosperity to the salutary effects of the electoral college.

We start with the simple fact that the system works. It has never failed to give us a president and it has almost always produced decisive outcomes that have served the political system. As Walter Berns has argued, instead of arguing about "inputs," we should be arguing about "outputs." Opponents of the electoral college have the

burden of proof. If they can't show an alternative system can produce better presidents in a more clear and decisive manner, the current system should not be amended to serve an abstract goal of letting a "national voice" be heard.

In most elections, the system has served to exaggerate the margin of victory, thereby adding stability to our system. In 1980 Ronald Reagan won just 50.7 percent of the popular vote but won an electoral-college landslide with more than 90 percent of the electoral vote. In 1992, Bill Clinton only won 43 percent of the popular vote but won 70 percent of the electoral-college votes.

The electoral-college system has moderated and stabilized our political system. The "unit rule" whereby the plurality winner of the votes in each state get all the electoral votes of that state combined with the demand that a successful candidate achieve an absolute majority serve to support a broad and moderate two-party system. Radical third-party candidates are discouraged by the current system. If they cannot hope to win actual electoral votes, they cannot hope to have a meaningful influence on the election outcome.

Do I often wish my party was more pure and principled? Absolutely. But I do not pine for purity at the cost of a radicalization of our system.

Removing the electoral college would instantly have the effect of empowering radical elements of both left and right and encouraging them to run and thereby become influential in our electoral system. Two parties on the right would naturally face off against two parties on the left. The result would be a splitting of the national vote with the more extreme fringes having the potential power to control the electoral outcome.

In such a system, are we willing to let the president be decided by 40 percent of the vote? 35 percent? 30 percent? Unless we are willing to allow our president to be selected by as few as 30 percent of the voters, any attempt to nationalize our elections with a direct popular vote will have to include a provision for a run-off election. Are there any among us that really want to move to a national run-off for president?

The electoral college also serves to give us more diverse and moderate campaigns and candidates than would a national and direct popular vote.

Al Gore won the popular vote in 2000 by wracking up massive majorities in major cities and urban counties while losing almost everywhere else in the nation. Gore won just 677 counties compared to Bush's 2,434. Gore won the popular vote but could fly from

Pittsburgh to Los Angeles without ever passing over a county he was able to win.

A direct national popular vote would encourage candidates to settle down into major metropolitan areas with the aim of maximizing voter turnout in those areas. In such a situation, what candidate would ever again visit West Virginia, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, or Colorado? Would it be good for America to have candidates running on platforms that ignore rural values and interests in the service of wracking up majorities in urban areas? The current system puts a premium on spreading votes around urban and rural areas in a variety of states.

That diversity is good for America and serves as a stabilizing force in our democracy.