



# PICKING THE PRESIDENT

*understanding the electoral college*

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**EDITED BY ERIC BURIN**

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Electoral College*

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# Table of Contents

Preface .....i

Introduction: A Brief History of the Electoral College  
Eric Burin ..... iii

## Section One

### The Electoral College in Comparative Perspective

Ancient States and Representative Government:  
Greek and Roman Models for the Electoral College  
William Caraher ..... 1

The Electoral College as American Aristocracy  
Donald F. Johnson ..... 5

America’s Rotten Electoral College System  
Manisha Sinha ..... 9

The South (or the North, or the West...)  
Will Rise Again, and Again, and Again:  
Viewing the Electoral College from  
the Perspective of Chinese History  
Andrew Meyer ..... 11

## Section Two

### The Electoral College in Historical Perspective

What the Founders Were Thinking:  
Why We have the Electoral College  
Andrew Shankman..... 17

Did Disenfranchisement Give the South an Electoral Advantage?  
Patrick Rael..... 21

Citizenship, Civil Rights, and Electoral Politics  
Cynthia Culver Prescott.....27

Quantifying a Candidate’s Advantage in the Electoral College  
Timothy Prescott.....31

**Section Three**  
**The Future of the Electoral College**

If the Electoral College Can Contradict the  
Popular Vote Sometimes, Why Would It Be  
Wrong for Them To Do It Every Single Time?  
Jack Russell Weinstein.....37

Electoral College is Fixable; Senate is Not.  
Mark Trahan.....47

Long Habits and Legitimacy  
Mark Stephen Jendrysik.....49

In Defense of the Electoral College  
Allen Guelzo and James H. Hulme.....53

Electoral College Alternatives: Tradeoffs  
Benjamin J. Kassow .....57

**Section Four**  
**Teaching the Electoral College**

“Empathy for the Unicorn”:  
Teaching About the Electoral College  
Brad Austin .....63

**Documents**

The Constitutional Convention .....	75
U.S. Constitution: Article II.....	101
<i>Federalist Paper</i> No. 68.....	105
<i>Anti-Federalist Paper</i> No. 68 .....	109
<i>Anti-Federalist Paper</i> No. 72 .....	113
Amendment 12 .....	117
Timothy Pickering Speech in Favor of the Twelfth Amendment.....	119
James Madison to George Hay .....	121
James Madison to John Hillhouse .....	125
Contributors .....	129

## **Preface**

The 2016 presidential election has sparked an unprecedented interest in the Electoral College. In response to Donald Trump winning the presidency despite losing the popular vote, numerous commentators have weighed in with letters-to-the-editor, op-eds, blog posts, and the like, and thanks to the revolution in digital communications, these items have reached an exceptionally wide audience. In short, never before have so many people had so much to say about the Electoral College.

This remains a high-stakes debate, and historians, political scientists, philosophers, and other scholars have an important role to play in it. They can enrich discussions about the Electoral College by situating the system within the history of America and other societies; untangling the intricacies of republicanism, federalism, and democracy; articulating different concepts of political morality; and discerning, through statistical analysis, whom the Electoral College benefits most. In spotlighting the Electoral College from various vantage points, this volume aims to empower citizens to make clear-eyed decisions about it.

If one of this volume's goals is to illuminate the Electoral College, another is to do so while many people are still focused on the topic. This project came together quickly. The entire enterprise went from conception to completion in a mere five weeks. That swiftness was made possible by working with The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, which embraces a cooperative, transparent model of publication with the goal of producing open-access, electronic works that can attract local and global audiences. Likewise, this volume came to fruition speedily because the contributors agreed to pen brief essays in short order. As a result, while their works have the hallmarks of scholarly articles, they do not constitute an exhaustive examination of the Electoral College. Indeed, many germane subjects are not addressed. Even so,

these learned ruminations can enhance the ongoing debate about the Electoral College.

Essays of this sort are much-needed, for the post-election dialogue about the Electoral College has been warped by partisanship. Republicans who reckon that Electoral College benefits their party usually have defended the system. Conversely, Democrats, smarting from the fact that in a span of sixteen years they have twice lost the presidency despite popular vote triumphs, typically have denounced it. This mode of assessment is unfortunate, for it impairs our ability to analyze the Electoral College on its own merits, as opposed to how it affects one party or another. Put another way, the Electoral College is an inherently political institution, but appraisals of it need not be invariably partisan.

To facilitate and expand the conversation about the Electoral College, this volume offers short essays that examine it from different disciplinary perspectives, including philosophy, mathematics, political science, communications, history, and pedagogy. Along the way, the essays address a variety of questions about the Electoral College: Why was it created? What were its antecedents? How has it changed over time? Who benefits from it? Is it just? Should we alter or abolish the Electoral College, and if so, what should replace it? In exploring these matters, *Picking the President* provides timely insights on one of America's most high-profile, momentous issues.

# 4

## **The South (or the North, or the West...) Will Rise Again, and Again, and Again: Viewing the Electoral College from the Perspective of Chinese History\***

Andrew Meyer

On July 20, 1842, during the Opium War, British soldiers and warships captured the garrison town of Zhenjiang, at the juncture of the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal in the Qing Empire's Jiangsu Province. When news reached the Daoguang Emperor (r. 1821-1850) in Beijing, he authorized his emissaries to treat for peace. Though Qing resistance up to that point had been robust, the capture of Zhenjiang gave the British control of a fatal fracture point in the larger imperial edifice.

With the Grand Canal blocked, little tax revenue could flow from the southern reaches of the empire to the capital. Two-thirds of the population of the Qing empire lived south of the Yangzi, and the economic disparity south-to-north was even greater than the demographic one. The per capita GDP of the agriculturally and commercially rich southern Jiangnan region was nearly twice that of more arid, sparsely populated northern districts like Qinghai and Gansu. The revenue system of the Qing, which drew tax receipts into the capital on the North China Plain, served as a wealth-transfer mechanism from the wealthy south to the impoverished north. Disrupting that flow for any length of time could cause the precarious social contract holding the empire together to unravel.

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\*A version of this essay appeared as Andrew Meyer, "The South (or the North, or the West...) Will Rise Again, and Again, and Again: Viewing the Electoral College from the Perspective of Chinese History," *Madman of Chu* (blog), November 22, 2016, <http://madmanofchu.blogspot.com/2016/11/the-south-or-north-or-west-will-rise.html>

In the wake of the Opium War the worst fears of the Qing government were realized. In Guangzhou (Canton) in 1837, the young scion of a southern gentry family, Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864) had for the second time sat for and failed the imperial exams that were the surest route to political, economic and social success. The pass rates on the exams were extraordinarily low throughout the empire, but the odds were made even worse for southerners like Hong by the imposition of quotas favoring candidates from disadvantaged northern regions. His rage and frustration at this second failure induced a nervous collapse: he fell into a feverish state in which he had prophetic visions. After the Opium War he came to understand these visions as a divine calling and began to gather followers. The movement that he began eventually threw the Qing Empire into civil war, with large parts of southern China breaking away to form the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom from 1850 to 1864. Unity was only restored after conflict that left as many as 20 million people dead and the economy of the empire shattered.

The Taiping Rebellion is only one (though admittedly among the worst) of the many instances of cataclysmic breakdown experienced within the Chinese empire over the 2+ millennia of its history that were, in part, induced by inter-regional tensions and conflicts. Successive imperial regimes struggled to hold together an expansive domain throughout which social and economic capital was unevenly distributed. Though Chinese leaders developed and maintained redistributive mechanisms to offset regional disparities (for example, the quotas favoring northern candidates in the imperial exams), these were not generally elastic and responsive enough to relieve the persistent centrifugal forces driving the component regions of the empire apart. The problem, moreover, remains an urgent concern today, as attested by the recent unrest over Beijing's refusal to allow two secessionist legislators to be sworn in as members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

This history poses lessons for those of us contemplating the issue of the Electoral College in the wake of the 2016 election. Not only has the Electoral College subverted the results of the popular vote for the second time in less than twenty years, but the 2016 race has yielded an unprecedented disparity between popular and

electoral vote outcomes. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.86 million votes (a 2.1% lead) and lost the Electoral College by 74 votes (a 23% deficit). That the relative differential between the two vote tallies should be so wide understandably creates a sense of profound unfairness—the impression that the democratic will of the people has been effaced by an arcane institution.

Though there will be renewed calls for the abolition of the Electoral College, the historical experience of China should give us pause to wonder at the wisdom of such a course. Like China, the United States is a vast and diverse domain in which social and economic capital are unevenly distributed and the interests of different groups vary widely from region to region. The 2016 election has starkly highlighted the regional tensions straining our social fabric, with voters in the industrial Midwest and rural Appalachia mobilizing to deliver an electoral result that radically undermined conventional expectations. Donald Trump would not have won this election unless poor- and working-class voters in states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina and Wisconsin had defected from the Democratic Party in favor of his disruptive campaign, and that movement would not have resulted in a Trump victory absent the auspices of the Electoral College.

This being the case, as predictably as there is and will remain pressure to dismantle the Electoral College, there will be strong resistance to any campaign in this direction. To understand why, it is useful to contemplate what a presidential campaign would look like if such contests were decided purely by the popular vote. Candidates would focus almost entirely on the densely populated coasts to the exclusion of the interior, and on urban centers to the exclusion of more sparsely settled rural districts. By giving disproportionate leverage to more rural and sparsely populated states, the Electoral College forces candidates to wage truly national campaigns and to float policies that can win the votes of more marginalized citizens.

The 2016 election provides an object lesson in these redistributive dynamics. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in California by 4.26 million votes. Thus if one eliminates California's total from the national tally, Donald Trump wins the national popular vote

by 1.4 million votes. This is a reflection of the fact that the Electoral College weights the popular vote of smaller and less densely populated states heavily, such that a vote cast in West Virginia is worth three times that of a vote cast in California. While that disparity might seem strangely arbitrary, to citizens in West Virginia, which has a per capita GDP of \$38,567, it no doubt feels very fair that their votes should count more than those of their compatriots in California, who enjoy a per capita GDP of \$61,924. In light of these facts we can see that in the 2016 election, the system as currently constituted has (or at least will be perceived as having) delivered a shocking victory to rural and industrial working-class voters over coastal elites; one that they would never have achieved in the absence of the Electoral College. For this reason, any move to eliminate this institution will be perceived as an attempt at the kind of “rigging” so loudly decried by the more acrimonious rhetoric of the recent campaign.

As votes continue to be counted and Hillary Clinton’s lead in the popular vote widens, anger at the mechanics of the Electoral College will no doubt increase. In contemplating the situation, however, we must clearly understand that the elimination of the Electoral College cannot be taken for granted as an obvious “fix” to a quaintly arcane and obsolete institution. Reversion to the popular vote to decide presidential elections is and would be a drastically radical change to our larger social contract, one that materially impacts the interests of millions of citizens and significantly redistributes power across the political terrain. There are good philosophical arguments to be made against the “unfairness” of the Electoral College, but the historical experience of China demonstrates that there are likewise good practical and even ethical arguments on the other side of the issue. We must acknowledge and account for all of the consequences of changing the current system as we debate the issue moving forward, and undertake any such discussion in a spirit of extreme sensitivity to the interests of *all* groups that would be affected by any reform.