



PICKING THE PRESIDENT

understanding the electoral college

EDITED BY ERIC BURIN

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*Understanding the
Electoral College*

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Table of Contents

Prefacei

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. Kassow57

Section Four
Teaching the Electoral College

“Empathy for the Unicorn”:
Teaching About the Electoral College
Brad Austin63

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.

8

Quantifying a Candidate's Advantage in the Electoral College

Timothy Prescott

The Electoral College currently functions as a compromise between big states (who would like to see votes weighted proportionally to their population, as in the House of Representatives) and small states (who would like each state to count equally, as in the Senate). Nationally, there are about 600,000 people for each elector. But in the most extreme example of this weighting, Wyoming, there are just under 200,000, so that each Wyoming resident is about three times as powerful on the national stage.

Despite this, the biggest reason for the disparity between the popular vote and the Electoral College is the fact that every state, except for Nebraska and Maine, awards all of its electors to the winner of that state. This means that a candidate could hypothetically lose the popular vote 25% to 75%, but because they eked out victories in over half of the states, they could still win the Electoral College. In fact, by concentrating on less populous states (currently the 40 smallest), it is possible to push this down to winning with less than 23% of the popular vote.

This leads us to consider how candidates have historically done in the Electoral College as compared to the national popular vote (assuming all electors vote as pledged). As the national popular vote increases, we'll distribute the votes proportional to that candidate's eventual support in each state, with each state and its electors tipping one by one to the candidate's side when the distributed votes eclipses the opponent's eventual total. The state that finally provides the candidate with a majority in the Electoral College determines the election. We'll call that state the *clinching*

state, and the difference between the clinching state's margin of victory and the candidate's actual margin of victory their *electoral advantage*.

For example, in the 2016 election, Donald Trump won the Electoral College by 74 votes, but lost the popular vote by 2.09%. He could have lost Michigan and Pennsylvania and still won the Electoral College by 2 votes; it was Wisconsin with its margin of .76% that clinched the Electoral College. Therefore, Trump could have done .76% worse, lost the popular vote by 2.85%, and it would have been Wisconsin that clinched the election. We will say that this means Donald Trump had a 2.85% electoral advantage.

In contrast, in 2004 Bush won the popular vote by 2.46%. If he had done 2.11% worse in every state, he would have won the popular vote by .35%, lost Iowa and New Mexico, and the winner of Ohio would have clinched the Electoral College. We'll say that this means Bush had a .35% electoral disadvantage (or a -.35% electoral advantage). (In our hypothetical examples, the winning candidate had a 50% and 54% advantage.)

Over the last 26 elections (going back to Wilson's defeat of Hughes in 1916), there have been 9 elections where the difference in the popular vote was less than 5%, so that we find it meaningful to talk about a candidate's electoral advantage. Ranking them by the winner's advantage, those elections are:

Year	Winner	Electoral Advantage
2016	Trump	2.85%
1968	Nixon	1.58%
2012	Obama	1.51%
2000	Bush	0.52%
1960	Kennedy	0.35%
2004	Bush	-0.35%
1976	Carter	-0.38%
1916	Wilson	-2.74%
1948	Truman	-4.04%

We observe the following:

- Donald Trump had the best electoral advantage of any victor.
- Truman's surprise victory in 1948 is all the more impressive given that he overcame the worst electoral disadvantage.
- In these elections, the Republican candidate averaged a 1.10% electoral advantage.

This last point is worth further investigation. It is likely a combination of Republicans tending to do better in rural states (which tend to have more electors relative to their size) and Democratic candidates running up the score in more populous urban states (which helps with the popular vote, but not with the Electoral College).