

Arguments for the Electoral College

Proponents of the Electoral College system normally defend it on the philosophical grounds that it:

- contributes to the cohesiveness of the country by requiring a distribution of popular support to be elected president
- enhances the status of minority interests
- contributes to the political stability of the nation by encouraging a two-party system
- maintains a federal system of government and representation.

Proponents argue that the Electoral College system ***contributes to the cohesiveness of the country by requiring a distribution of popular support to be elected president.***

Without such a mechanism, they point out, presidents would be selected either through the domination of one populous region over the others or through the domination of large metropolitan areas over the rural ones. Indeed, it is principally because of the Electoral College that presidential nominees are inclined to select vice presidential running mates from a region other than their own. For as things stand now, no one region contains the absolute majority (270) of electoral votes required to elect a president . . . Such a unifying mechanism seems especially prudent in view of the severe regional problems that have typically plagued geographically large nations such as China, India, the Soviet Union, and even, in its time, the Roman Empire. . . .

. . . the Electoral College system is designed to work in a rational series of defaults: if, in the first instance, a candidate receives a substantial majority of the popular vote, then that candidate is virtually certain to win enough electoral votes to be elected president; in the event that the popular vote is extremely close, then the election defaults to that candidate with the best distribution of popular votes (as evidenced by obtaining the absolute majority of electoral votes); in the event the country is so divided that no one obtains an absolute majority of electoral votes, then the choice of president defaults to the States in the U.S. House of Representatives. One way or another, then, the winning candidate must demonstrate both a sufficient popular support to govern as well as a sufficient distribution of that support to govern. Proponents also point out that, far from diminishing minority interests by depressing voter participation, the Electoral College actually ***enhances the status of minority groups.*** This is so because the votes of even

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small minorities in a State may make the difference between winning all of that State's electoral votes or none of that State's electoral votes. And since ethnic minority groups in the United States happen to concentrate in those States with the most electoral votes, they assume an importance to presidential candidates well out of proportion to their number. . . . Changing to a direct election of the president would therefore actually damage minority interests since their votes would be overwhelmed by a national popular majority. . . .

Proponents further argue that the Electoral College **contributes to the political stability of the nation** by encouraging a two-party system. There can be no doubt that the Electoral College has encouraged and helps to maintain a two-party system in the United States. This is true simply because it is extremely difficult for a new or minor party to win enough popular votes in enough States to have a chance of winning the presidency. Even if they won enough electoral votes to force the decision into the U.S. House of Representatives, they would still have to have a majority of over half the State delegations in order to elect their candidate—and in that case, they would hardly be considered a minor party. In addition to protecting the presidency from . . . third party movements, the practical effect of the Electoral College . . . is to virtually force third party movements into one of the two major political parties. Conversely, the major parties have every incentive to absorb minor party movements in their continual attempt to win popular majorities in the States. In this process of assimilation, third party movements are obliged to compromise their more radical views if they hope to attain any of their more generally acceptable objectives. Thus we end up with two large, pragmatic political parties which tend to the center of public opinion rather than dozens of smaller political parties catering to divergent and sometimes extremist views. . . .

Finally, its proponents argue . . . that the Electoral College **maintains a federal system of government and representation**. Their reasoning is that in a formal federal structure, important political powers are reserved to the . . . States. In the United States, for example, the House of Representatives was designed to represent the States according to the size of their population. . . . The Senate was designed to represent each State equally regardless of its population. And the Electoral College was designed to represent each State's choice for the presidency (with the number of each State's electoral votes being the number of its Senators plus the number of its Representatives). To abolish the Electoral College in favor of a nationwide popular election for president would strike at

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the very heart of the federal structure laid out in our Constitution and would lead to the nationalization of our central government—to the detriment of the States. . . . The fact is, they argue, that the original design of our federal system of government was thoroughly and wisely debated by the Founding Fathers. State viewpoints, they decided, are more important than political minority viewpoints. And the collective opinion of the individual State populations is more important than the opinion of the national population taken as a whole. Nor should we tamper with the careful balance of power between the national and State governments which the Founding Fathers intended and which is reflected in the Electoral College. . . .

Adapted from *THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE*

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