

Chapter 7: Close Up on Primary Sources

Reforming the Electoral College



The establishment of primary elections is only one of a number of electoral reforms that have been instituted since the founding of the republic. Others include the direct election of State governors and direct election of U.S. senators. These reforms have generally reflected an increased democratization of the electoral process. Perhaps the most radical reform of the original system, but one that has been suggested periodically over the years, is the elimination of the electoral college system.

Abolishing the Electoral College

Probably the most common argument for abolishing the electoral college is that under this system it is possible for a candidate to lose the popular vote and still win the election. In fact, three Presidents in United States history—John Quincy Adams in 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, and Benjamin Harrison in 1888—were elected even though their opponents won more popular votes. Since such an outcome in effect denies the will of the majority of American voters, some experts view eliminating the electoral college as the next logical step in democratizing the electoral system. Some people fear that if a candidate today were to lose the popular vote and win the presidency with electoral votes, damage to our democracy could be considerable. Estes Kefauver, who was a vice-presidential candidate in 1956, said of the system, “Every four years the electoral college is a loaded pistol aimed at our system of government. Its continued existence is a game of Russian roulette.”

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Maintaining the Electoral College

The arguments for maintaining the existing electoral system range from the value of providing a magnified majority for the winning candidate to reducing the chance of small factions splintering the election and denying any one candidate a plurality. Senator Orrin Hatch believes that the electoral college helps ensure a geographical balance in the election of a President:

The Electoral College prevents [the] unseemly anomaly of a regional president. Because the states are the focus of the electoral process, a presidential candidate is far less likely to become the captive of a single populous state or region.... The framers of the Constitution wisely built into our Constitution principles of federalism, separated powers and geographical balance to prevent rule by tyrannical majorities and powerful regional concentrations. The Electoral College has worked marvelously as a key feature of the Constitution’s protective umbrella.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Estes Kefauver mean when he says the electoral college is a “loaded pistol aimed at our system of government”?
2. What negative outcome does Orrin Hatch say the electoral college helps prevent?