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Electoral College: serving us well, and as intended

By Steve Bakke  November 29, 2020



Like clockwork, we face quadrennial encounters with democrat outrage about our presidential selection process, the “Electoral College.” Win or lose, their complaints come fast and furious.

Two objections to the Electoral College seem prominent: The “three-fifths person” provision is proof that the system is steeped in racism and slavery. And, the Founders’ objectives for a non-proportionate electoral representation have become irrelevant over time.

Is the electoral process originally and forever bound up in racism? Were the Founders a group of old racist white guys? Try getting to know the Founding cast of characters by reading their comments in debates, official writings, and personal correspondence.

Here’s what President George Washington, a slaveowner, wrote to Robert Morris in 1786: “...there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery]...” To his credit, Washington provided for emancipation of his slaves after his death. I invite you to search out other Founders’ opinions. You’ll find much the same sentiment among many of them.

A concept known as “the three-fifths compromise” emerged from the Constitutional Convention. Southern states lobbied for slaves to be fully counted as persons in determining the states’ representation in the House of Representatives, but without giving slaves voting rights. In contrast, with an eye on reducing the influence of slave states, both in the House and in electors for selecting presidents, the northern states didn’t want slaves counted for determining representation.

The eventual agreement was a compromise that had a lot to do with influence and power, and little to do with promoting slavery. Without the compromise to count slaves as “three-fifths” persons for representation in the House, and thereby for selecting presidents, there would never have been a Constitution or a United States. And fortunately, partly because of limiting slave state influence, the Constitution set up an atmosphere that led to the eventual

abolition of slavery. Sadly, that didn't happen until Lincoln forced the issue almost "four score and seven" years later – and even then, racism remained.

A big objection to the Electoral College is that electors aren't allocated in proportion to a state's population. The number of electors equals that state's representation in the House of Representatives, which is proportionate to the population, plus the number of Senators, which is two for each state. The Founders' expressed a desire to improve the balance among diverse states. They didn't want large states to dominate America's governance.

That's virtually the same reason that's argued today. Proponents of the Electoral College don't want a highly populated state such as California to be as dominant in a presidential election as it would be under a direct popular vote process. If one party has total political control of a handful of high population states, that could collectively pre-determine the outcome of a presidential election if based on popular vote totals – virtually forever.

Hillary Clinton continually reminds us that, in 2016, she won the popular vote count. But removing only California from the results would have left Trump with a popular vote advantage of almost 1.5 million votes. And removing just nine democrat "population center" states leaves Trump with almost a 7 million popular vote victory – over 20% of votes cast in those remaining 41 states.

So what, you ask? Here's why. We must not minimize the needs of states with large area but lower population, often referred to as "flyover" country." Those states contain the bulk of our natural resources and produce much of our food. A voter in Queens, New York can't be expected to give rapt attention to the interests of a farmer in Iowa. Without this electoral system, no presidential candidate would bother seeing a corn stock or an Iowa hog.

The Founders weren't a group of old racist white guys, and they arrived at the three-fifths compromise purposefully, which reduced the representation and influence of slave states in legislation and presidential selection. The presidential electoral process had a goal of improving balance among diverse states, which remains relevant today. In fact, with today's preponderance of concentrated population centers, there's even a greater need for balancing.

The presidential electoral process continues to serve us well, and as intended.