



## The Importance of Elections and the Electoral College

By Jonathan J. Miltimore

As November presidential elections near, Americans will begin to increase attention on the candidates from the respective political parties. The hysteria and dire forecasts that will inevitably spew forth as we near Election Tuesday are predictable, as party machines and interest groups will do their best to convince us that doomsday looms unless their candidate is elected.

I don't mean to diminish the consequence of the upcoming presidential election. Elections matter and I, like most Americans, hope to see my preferred candidate elected. But if this chaotic nomination season has taught us anything, it should be that the *way* we elect our candidates also matters.

Americans often take for granted the brilliance of their electoral process. We seem to assume that the peaceful relinquishing of political power is an entirely natural phenomenon. One need only recall the *Revolt in the Vendée* of the French Revolution, the Ryutin Affair in Stalin's rise to power, or, for a more recent example, the *Terceristas* movement in Nicaragua, to realize that the bloody annals of history are besmirched by political wars as well as wars between nations.

The exceptional track record of the United States should not be taken for granted. Nor should we fail to understand *why* this has happened. It is through neither chance nor temperament that the United States has enjoyed — with only the occasional exception — its striking electoral success. The Constitution is what has made this success possible.

The Electoral College is derided as archaic and undemocratic in some circles today. Notwithstanding its success, many detractors would replace the Electoral College with a system “more democratic.” After all, who can be against democracy?

These democracy enthusiasts would replace the Electoral College with elections based solely on a popular vote. But, as columnist George Will has pointed out, the system created by the Framers does not simply seek majority rule “but rule *by certain kinds of majorities*.”<sup>1</sup>

The Electoral College forces candidates to appeal to a multitude of constituencies. The system rejects candidates that can appeal to only particular factions or enclaves (for relatively recent examples, think of the candidacies of Strom Thurmond, George Wallace, Ross Perot, or Jesse Jackson). The Electoral College buttresses the two-party system and nudges candidates to the political center. Essentially, it is a system designed to support those who can unite and lead.

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It is worth recalling that our Founders, like the Greek philosopher Plato, abhorred simple majoritarianism. James Madison warned that pure democracies “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention.”<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Rush called “simple democracy” one of the “greatest of evils.”<sup>3</sup>

The Electoral College is just one of the Constitution’s many checks and balances. It protects small, rural states from being swamped by highly populated urban areas and inhibits regionalism. With a direct popular vote, rather than the Electoral College, candidates could concentrate their campaigning in and tailor their message toward large urban areas, ignoring states like Iowa.

Legitimate elections are the bedrock of democracy. The U.S. Supreme Court recently reflected this sentiment when it upheld the constitutionality of an Indiana law that required citizens to present photo identification to vote. Critics of the law maintain that it presents voters with an undue burden and claim the absence of voter fraud prosecutions show that the law is merely a partisan plot to suppress voter turnout for the under-privileged.<sup>4</sup>

The extent of voter fraud in the U.S. is debatable, although it should be noted that an absence of prosecutions does not indicate an absence of crime. Often poor record keeping and a lack of resources make it impossible for municipalities to make a case in court even though a crime has been committed. The Court was correct that requiring voters to present photo identification is a “minimal and justified” burden.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in this age of cynicism the perception that elections are fair, honest, and legitimate is nearly as important as its actuality.

No matter who wins this November, the republic will persist, so long as the system does.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>George Will, “From Schwarzenegger, a Veto for Voters’ Good,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2006, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/11/AR2006101101597.html>> (May 25, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Spalding (ed.), *The Founders Almanac: A Practical Guide to the Notable Events, Greatest Leaders & Most Eloquent Words of the American Founding*, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup>L.H. Butterfield (ed.), *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, (2 volume set), Princeton University Press, 1951.

<sup>4</sup>Dahlia Lithwick, “Disarming our Demons,” *Slate*, May 24, 2008, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2190779/>> (May 30, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>David Stout, “Supreme Court Upholds Voter Identification Law in Indiana,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/washington/28cnd-scotus.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>> (May 29, 2008).

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