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Should the United States Keep the Electoral College?

By Lance Ledbetter

DONALD TRUMP'S election to the highest office in the United States has been controversial to say the least. Trump gained his victory by winning the electoral college but losing the popular vote by almost three million votes. This has led to cries, signs, and hashtags of "not my president." It has also led to a call for the abolishment of the electoral college as a system of choosing our president and instituting election by popular vote. This argument appeals to American values of democracy, but in my opinion is a dangerous proposal that undermines the federalism that is the foundation of our constitution, leads to a more reactionary democracy and distracts from far more serious issues that are plaguing American politics.

The electoral college was put into place by our founding fathers as an extension of the federalism that lies at the heart of our constitution by making the states' representatives essential to the election of the president. More words are used in the section detailing the electoral college than most other parts of the constitution, a testament to how important an issue this was to those that sat at the constitutional convention. By using the legislative branch in the election of the president they spread the responsibility of government over more people and kept the system of checks and balances intact. A popular vote bypasses this distribution of power and puts it directly into the hands of the people. They feared that this action of cutting the legislative branch of the government out of the electoral process could lead to tyrannical behavior by

the president and eventually a form of monarchy justified by a mandate to rule directly from the people.

Their fears may seem outdated to some but I personally believe that they are not. The expansion of the practice of unilateral action by the president is worrying. Even when they are pieces of legislation that I agree with, bypassing the legislative branch that was frustratingly blocking actions for partisan reasons made me nervous about the reach of the executive branch. That power combined with a popular vote election could lead to candidates ignoring swaths of American citizens and focusing only on population centers that could win them the election, promising to ignore congress and push through laws that cater to only regional interests and justifying their overreaching legislation by a mandate of the people. The electoral college prevents this by forcing candidates to appeal to the largest possible constituency as no region in the United States has enough electoral votes for a candidate to win the presidency.

While this system has produced candidates that have been more centrist in their politics and less apt to push for change it also mostly guarantees no large backlash against policies and governments leading to a more stable democracy. Many, myself included, applauded the Obama administration for pushing progressive agendas in the United States in the face of vehement partisan opposition, but it has become clear that many Americans did not agree with the policies and I believe the election of Donald Trump is a reaction against that. For as much as I and other Americans desperately want progressive

change to occur in the US it is apparent that we cannot simply ignore the opposition. An election by popular vote would not change this, in fact it would exacerbate it. We as Americans must realize that to have true change in America it is going to take hard work. We must act as individuals to educate and debate those with different views and keep open minds. We must stay abreast of issues and informed about elections from the lowest form of government to the highest and push people to vote in elections. We cannot simply push responsibility of progress to the Supreme Court or to huge electoral changes like instituting a popular vote. In the end the most powerful political tool in any democracy is an educated and motivated voting populace. To those that say they have not the time or energy I say you must find it. No one said living in a democracy is easy. It is your responsibility as a citizen and become a living part of the body politic.

All of this is not to say that there is no room for improvement within the system. I believe that the “all or nothing” nature of most states in the electoral college is a mistake and other issues like gerrymandering, voter restriction, and campaign financing are issues that need to be addressed immediately. A change in the way we elect the president solves none of these problems. A call for a popular vote is, in the end, a short sighted and reactionary call to undermine federalism that the United States is founded upon, would lead to a more reactionary government, and does not address deeper issues with the political system of the United States.
