

Unequal Voices: The Impact of Larger States' Electoral Power in the United States Electoral College System

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Abstract

To ensure that both large and small states had equal representation among states with different populations, the Electoral College was created to contribute meaningfully to U.S. presidential elections. Yet, in practice, the system has led to significant disparities in electoral influence, with larger states often holding disproportionate power. This paper investigates the extent to which the Electoral College upholds or undermines its original purpose of equitable representation. Through an analysis of the system's structural biases, including the focus on swing states and the winner-takes-all method, the article reveals how these elements can diminish the voices of smaller states and concentrate power in a few populous regions. It also examines how this unequal distribution of influence risks fostering conditions that could lead to one-party dominance, particularly if certain large states consistently support a single party. The study concludes by examining the implications of these dynamics for American democracy and considers possible recommendations that might restore a balanced and representative electoral process. The study found out that the Electoral College fails to provide equitable representation, risks becoming a tool for one-party dominance and deviates from its federalist roots, effectively functioning as a flawed proxy for a popular vote system dominated by populous states. It's on this note the study, recommended that Electoral Vote Caps should be introduced for Highly Populated States: Capping the number of electoral votes that any single state can hold would reduce the excessive influence that large states like California and Texas currently have.

Keywords: Electoral College; Large states; One-party dominance; US presidential elections; Representation imbalance; Swing states

1. Introduction

In what has been described as a defining mechanism in the U.S. presidential elections, the purpose of the Electoral College system was to balance the power of states with and without large populations. However, the system's effectiveness

and fairness have been under scrutiny due to perceived imbalances in representation, particularly between larger and smaller states. This article examines the influence of larger states in the Electoral College and highlights potential structural flaws, including the risk of one-party dominance in scenarios where a few populous states hold disproportionate electoral power (Keyssar, 2020; Geruso & Spears, 2024).

In order to ensure that both populous and less populous states had a say in choosing the nation's president, the Electoral College was first created by the Founding Fathers as a compromise between electing the president by a vote in Congress and by popular vote. The original goal was to maintain a sense of federal balance among the states by preventing any one region from having too much influence (Bennett, 2006). Although the Electoral College remains a unique aspect of American democracy, its contemporary implementation has prompted serious concerns about its capacity to achieve these initial goals (Kogan, 2021).

One central criticism is that the Electoral College enables certain states, particularly large and competitive ones to wield more influence over the election outcome. The unequal influence granted to a few populous states opens the door to scenarios where a single party could dominate the presidential election by securing these critical states, sidelining the electoral power of smaller or less politically competitive states (McCarthy, 2020). Another significant issue arises from the fact that the majority of states employ the winner-take-all strategy, which gives all electoral votes to the candidate who receives the most votes in that state. As such, debates around the Electoral College often revolve on whether it truly reflects the collective will of the people or instead, grants undue power to certain states and voting blocs (Edwards, 2023).

In light of these concerns, scholars have proposed various reforms to address the potential weaknesses within the system, from shifting to a proportionate distribution of electoral votes in favor of implementing a national popular vote system. These potential solutions aim to foster a more equitable representation of all states and prevent any single region from exerting disproportionate control over presidential elections (Amar, 2005; Tilly, 2019). This article explores the structural concerns of the Electoral College, with a particular focus on the risks posed by a concentration of electoral power, examining both historical perspectives and contemporary critiques to provide a comprehensive understanding of this uniquely American institution.

2. A Brief Overview of the Electoral College

The Electoral College was established in 1787 during the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention as a middle ground between electing the president by popular vote and by a vote in Congress. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, along with other key figures like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, contributed to shaping this system. They aimed to prevent any one group from easily controlling presidential elections and to distribute power among states of different sizes. A majority of 270 of the 538 electors in the Electoral College is required to win the presidency. Depending on its congressional representation—which includes both senators (always two) and representatives in the House—each state is given a certain number of electors. Smaller states, regardless of population, are given at least three electors. This system results in a significant disparity in the weight of individual votes, particularly when comparing populous states like California to smaller states like Wyoming (Cott, 2022; Chen & Keating, 2024).

3. Literature Review

The U.S. Electoral College has long been a topic of extensive scholarly analysis, with many authors addressing its role, function, and alignment with democratic principles. Several prominent scholars have contributed to this debate, examining both the historical context and contemporary implications of the Electoral College (Lago, 2024). Their analyses often center on whether the system continues to fulfill its original purpose or if it hinders democratic representation in modern America.

Alexander Keyssar's work, *"Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?"* (2020), is a comprehensive exploration of the historical motivations behind the Electoral College and an examination of why it remains in place. Keyssar asserts that the system was originally designed to balance power among states with varying populations, preventing larger states from holding overwhelming influence in presidential elections. However, he argues that the Electoral College no longer effectively serves this purpose, and questions whether it accurately reflects the principles of a democratic society in which each vote is intended to carry equal weight. Keyssar (2020) investigates cases where the Electoral College has produced outcomes that contradict the popular vote, such as in the elections of 2000 and 2016, which saw presidents elected without majority support among voters. He contends that these instances highlight the system's failure to evolve in

alignment with the popular democratic mandate, a flaw he believes undermines the legitimacy of the system.

Another significant contribution to this discourse comes from Neal R. Peirce, whose book *"The People's President: The Electoral College in American History and the Direct Vote Alternative"* (1968) presents an early critique of the Electoral College's inequalities. Peirce was one of the first scholars to propose that the Electoral College could undermine democratic representation by giving disproportionate power to less populous states. He observes that, under the current system, smaller states have greater influence per voter due to the allocation of electors, which Peirce argues is both outdated and unfair in a democratic society. This imbalance, Peirce suggests, could be rectified by transitioning to a direct popular vote system, which would eliminate disparities among states and ensure that each voter has an equal impact on the presidential outcome. Peirce's (1968) work has become foundational for those advocating Electoral College reform, emphasizing that a direct popular vote would more accurately capture the will of the people.

George C. Edwards III, in his book *"Why the Electoral College is Bad for America"* (2023), builds on these critiques, providing an extensive examination of how the Electoral College distorts the democratic process by creating what he describes as a "swing state" phenomenon. Edwards (2023) argues that the Electoral College encourages presidential candidates to focus predominantly on a small number of swing states rather than the electorate as a whole. As a result, candidates prioritize issues relevant to swing states while largely ignoring states that consistently lean toward one party. This pattern, Edwards (2023) contends, leads to unequal voter influence and weakens the notion of a truly representative democratic process. The Electoral College encourages tactical campaigning, where candidates shape their policies around the interests of swing states rather than aiming to represent the broader interests of the national population (Edward, 2023).

According to Robert W. Bennett's book *"Taming the Electoral College"* (2006) presents a more moderate perspective, acknowledging the system's imperfections, but also emphasizing its strengths. Bennett argues that the Electoral College supports federalism by preserving the voices of smaller states, which he sees as a key element of the nation's constitutional structure. For Bennett (2006), the Electoral College helps to reinforce the principle of federalism by ensuring that each state, regardless of size, plays a role in electing the president. While he

concedes that reforms are needed to address certain inequalities, Bennett suggests that abolishing the Electoral College entirely could disrupt the federal balance that underpins U.S. governance. Bennett (2006) proposes reform options, such as proportionally allocating electoral votes within states, to reduce the focus on swing states while preserving the federal structure.

Judith Best, in her work *"The Case Against Direct Election of the President: A Defense of the Electoral College"* (1971), provides a robust defense of the Electoral College, arguing that it protects smaller states and prevents large metropolitan areas from overpowering rural regions. Best (1971), believes that the Electoral College encourages candidates to develop broad-based appeal, compelling them to reach out to diverse types of states rather than focusing solely on the most populous ones. According to Best (1971), the Electoral College preserves political diversity by giving less populous states an influential role in presidential elections. She argues that a direct popular vote would lead to a scenario where only a handful of states with high populations, or even just large cities, would dictate the outcome of elections. In her view, the Electoral College ensures a balanced distribution of power and helps prevent one-party dominance by requiring candidates to appeal to a variety of constituencies.

Another key contributor to the discourse on the Electoral College is Richard A. Posner, who in his article *"In Defense of the Electoral College"* (2001), presents arguments supporting the Electoral College as a pragmatic choice. Posner emphasizes that while the system is not without flaws, it brings several practical benefits. He notes that the Electoral College provides clear-cut election outcomes, reducing the likelihood of prolonged recounts and disputes, which are more likely in a direct popular vote system. Also, Posner (2001) highlights that the Electoral College discourages regionalism by motivating candidates to campaign in a variety of states across the nation. Posner sees the system as a stabilizing force in U.S. elections, helping to maintain political continuity and national unity despite its occasional misalignment with the popular vote.

In contrast, Amar (2005), a constitutional scholar, critiques the Electoral College from a legal and ethical standpoint in his book *"America's Constitution: A Biography"*. Amar (2005) traces the origins of the Electoral College to concessions made during the Constitutional Convention, including provisions that he argues disproportionately empowered slaveholding states. Amar (2005) contends that the system is a relic of historical injustices, suggesting that it has outlived its intended purpose. Amar (2005) advocates for a constitutional

amendment to replace the Electoral College with a direct popular vote, asserting that a direct vote would more accurately reflect the principles of equality and justice enshrined in the Constitution.

These scholars present a range of perspectives, each providing insights into the advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College. On one hand, proponents like Best, Bennett, and Posner argue that the system preserves the federal structure, encourages broad-based campaigning, and contributes to political stability. On the other hand, critics like Keyssar, Peirce, Edwards, and Amar argue that the Electoral College undermines democratic representation, distorts campaign strategies, and perpetuates historical inequalities. This range of scholarly viewpoints underscores the complexity of the Electoral College as both an institutional safeguard and a potential barrier to democratic equity.

4. Discussions

4.1 Weaknesses of the Electoral College System

There have been ongoing debates, particularly concerning its capacity to ensure balanced representation across states of varying population sizes. Focusing on large states like California or Texas for instance may seem advantageous for presidential candidates. However, the Electoral College encourages candidates to campaign in smaller, swing states to secure electoral votes. Again, the concentration of electoral votes in a few populous states can lead to a one-party system if those states consistently support a particular political party, diminishing the influence of smaller states (Schwarz, 2024). While it was initially intended as a compromise to balance the influence between large and small states, it now reveals structural weaknesses that affect the equity of presidential elections. The concentration of electoral votes in a few populous states could risk establishing a dominant party system, thereby compromising the democratic principle of fair representation (Hasan, 2021).

The structure of the Electoral College encourages presidential candidates to prioritize "swing states," or states with a fluctuating political alignment, rather than all states equally. These states, such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Florida, typically have significant numbers of electoral votes and are not consistently loyal to one political party. As a result, candidates focus their campaign resources on these states, concentrating advertising, appearances, and outreach efforts there in an attempt to sway voters who could potentially shift the election outcome. This focus on swing states reduces the encouragement for candidates to actively

engage with voters in states perceived as reliably "red" or "blue." For instance, a candidate might choose to forgo campaigning extensively in a state like California, which is Democratic, or Wyoming, a Republican stronghold, since they perceive these states' outcomes as largely predictable. This creates an imbalance, as candidates effectively overlook the interests and issues pertinent to voters in non-competitive states, which leads to what some critics describe as "battleground bias (Todd, Bram & Krishnamurthy, 2024; Edelstein, Thomsen & Ellis, 2024)."

The emphasis on large states or swing states not only affects campaign strategies but also influences voter turnout and political engagement in these states. According to some political analysts, voters in heavily contested swing states are more likely to participate in the election, recognizing that their votes carry substantial weight in determining the Electoral College outcome. On the contrary, voters in states with a strong, predictable party alignment may feel their votes have little impact, contributing to lower voter engagement and turnout in those areas. This disparity in voter influence undermines the principle of equal participation in democratic processes, which is foundational to representative democracy (Edelstein, Thomsen & Ellis, 2024).

Another notable weakness in the Electoral College system is its potential to promote a form of one-party dominance by concentrating electoral power in a few populous states. Large states like California, Texas, and Florida, which collectively hold substantial electoral power, could sway the election outcome if they consistently align with a particular party. This risk becomes especially pronounced if these states' political leanings remain stable over time (Pomante II & Schraufnagel, 2023). For example, California's solid Democratic alignment and Texas' strong Republican tradition have often played significant roles in determining the electoral landscape. If this trend continues or spreads to other populous states, it could enable one party to maintain an enduring advantage in presidential elections, regardless of shifts in the national popular vote. This scenario challenges the Electoral College's original intent: to prevent dominance by a single group and ensure that all states contribute meaningfully to the election outcome (Perrai & Krellzer, 2024).

Further complicating the system is the possibility that the Electoral College, in its current form, does not provide adequate checks against the erosion of bipartisan competition. When key states are predictably aligned, candidates of opposing parties may find it challenging to establish a foothold in these states, reducing the

competitiveness of presidential races. In some cases, this could discourage opposition parties from fielding strong candidates or investing campaign resources in certain states (Botvinik-Nezer, Jones & Wager, 2023). As political scientist George Edwards argues, this lack of competition not only limits voter choice but also risks transforming the electoral process into a cycle dominated by one party, which could weaken the democratic framework over time. A critical consequence of these structural issues is that they can render the Electoral College system increasingly similar to a popular vote system in practice, especially in situations where the larger states' electoral votes overwhelmingly influence the final outcome (Chen & Keating, 2024). In such cases, the distinction between the Electoral College and a direct popular vote begins to blur, as the votes of a few high-population states start to dictate the overall result. This undermines the Electoral College's purpose as a federalist safeguard, where each state would have an equitable role in electing the president, independent of population size (Botvinik-Nezer, Jones & Wager, 2023).

One example of this blurred distinction can be observed in the 2016 presidential election, where certain high-population states significantly influenced the election outcome despite the overall distribution of electoral votes. This situation led to renewed calls for reform, with critics arguing that the Electoral College's structural flaws disproportionately amplify certain states' political power while disenfranchising others. Ultimately, this challenges the notion that the Electoral College upholds the founding principles of federalism and balanced representation (Keyssar, 2020). The Electoral College also fails to account for demographic changes, which can shift the balance of power over time. As populations in certain states grow or shrink, the electoral distribution becomes increasingly outdated, reflecting the demographics of an earlier era rather than the current population landscape. For instance, the ongoing population growth in states like Texas and Florida has augmented their electoral influence, while states with stagnant or declining populations, such as West Virginia, maintain the same minimum representation regardless of voter count. This discrepancy highlights the Electoral College's inherent rigidity and its inability to adapt to shifts in the American electorate (Kogan, 2021) a flaw that further compounds the concentration of electoral power.

Although the purpose of the Electoral College was to safeguard the interests of both big and small states, its current implementation reveals several weaknesses that hinder its effectiveness in providing equitable representation. The

disproportionate emphasis on swing states and large states, combined with the risk of one-party dominance and the inflexibility in adapting to demographic shifts, suggest that the Electoral College system may be outdated. Without significant reforms to address these structural issues, the Electoral College risks failing to achieve its intended purpose, ultimately mirroring a popular vote system where a few populous states exert outsized influence over presidential elections (Posner, 2001).

4.2.The Potential for One-Party Dominance

The Electoral College was created by the founding fathers to distribute power among states of different sizes, aiming to prevent any one group of states from dominating the presidential election. However, the current structure reveals potential flaws that could skew this balance. Imagine the U.S. had only two groups of states in its electoral system. Although the U.S. does not have fifteen states with the population or electoral power of California, this scenario below illustrates the risk of disproportionate power if a significant bloc of populous states were politically aligned:

1. **Fifteen large states** (e.g., 15 “California-like” states, which are heavily aligned with one party) each having 54 electors.

Calculation: $15 \times 54 = 810$ (electors)

2. **Thirty-five smaller states** (e.g., states with significantly fewer electors, like Wyoming, Vermont, and Alaska), which align with the opposing party. Let's assume each of these smaller states has approximately 3 electors on average.

Calculation: $35 \times 3 = 105$ (electors)

Analysis of Electoral Advantage:

- The 15 large states collectively have 810 electors.
- The 35 smaller states collectively only have 105 electors.

Since the total number of electors between these two groups would be 915, the 15 large states alone would dominate, holding 88.5% of the electors (Author, 2024).

Implications

This concentration would allow a candidate to focus campaign efforts primarily on the 15 large states, essentially ignoring the 35 smaller states. In this hypothetical scenario, my argument is that there will be no significant difference

between the populous vote and the Electoral College as the larger states would determine the presidential outcome, leading to a near one-party dominance if these high-electoral states consistently leaned toward the same party. This situation underscores a potential flaw in the Electoral College, as it could undermine the principle of balanced representation among all states which was the original idea of the founding-fathers, allowing a small subset of highly populous states to have a disproportionately large impact on the election outcome (Van Wart, Hall, Baber & McIntyre, 2024; Edelstein, Thomsen & Ellis, 2024).

An additional structural flaw within the Electoral College system is the risk of disproportionate power when certain high-electoral states align politically. Like I have mentioned earlier, if a high-electoral state like California, which currently has 54 electors, were replicated across approximately 15 states with similar political alignment, this could result in a one-party system by concentrating significant electoral weight on one side. Such a situation could create a scenario where a single political party gains an overwhelming advantage, reducing electoral competition and undermining the principle of balanced representation across all states (Edelstein, Thomsen & Ellis, 2024).

The Argument for Equal Electoral Representation

A fairer approach would be to allocate electoral votes equally among all states, ensuring that each vote carries the same weight regardless of the state. This would prevent larger states from dominating the electoral landscape and compel candidates to engage with the electorate across the entire nation, thus fostering a more representative democratic process (Kogan, 2021).

By adopting a system of equal representation, each state's electoral votes would be distributed more uniformly, compelling candidates to engage with the electorate across the entire nation rather than concentrating their efforts on a select few battleground states. This would encourage a broader national discourse on issues that matter to all citizens, enhancing civic participation and fostering a more inclusive political environment. Kogan (2021) argues that such reforms could significantly increase voter commitment, as individuals would feel that their votes carry equal significance in the electoral process, motivating them to participate actively in elections.

The implementation of equal representation in the allocation of electoral votes would undoubtedly require a significant overhaul of the current electoral framework. However, the potential benefits for voter participation, equity, and

representation are profound. A more equitable system could diminish the entrenched political advantages held by larger states, facilitating a political landscape where diverse viewpoints are heard and considered (Cott, 2022). In this scenario, candidates would be encouraged to address the needs and concerns of all constituents, rather than catering primarily to the interests of voters in populous states or key swing districts (Tilly, 2019). Moreover, equal representation would help mitigate the risk of one-party dominance, as candidates would need to appeal to a broader spectrum of the electorate. This could lead to increased competition among parties, ultimately enriching the democratic process and providing voters with more choices. The notion that every citizen's voice should be equally valued is a powerful argument for reforming the Electoral College (Edwards, 2023) creating a system that reflects the democratic ideals of equality and fairness that the United States espouses.

5. Conclusion

The Electoral College system remains a complex instrument for balancing the diverse demographics of the United States. It is now clear that the unequal influence of highly populous states has significant implications for fair representation and electoral fairness. This imbalance suggests that the current system may benefit from reforms to ensure more equitable representation and prevent scenarios of potential one-party dominance, thereby preserving the original ideals of the Electoral College and democratic integrity of U.S. presidential elections. The foundational concept of the Electoral College was to balance the influence of states with varied populations, giving smaller states a voice alongside larger ones and promoting a more federated election process. However, without meaningful reforms, the Electoral College may drift closer to resembling a popular vote system, as candidates would only need to focus on winning over a few populous states. This outcome would undermine the original purpose of the Electoral College, diminishing its distinct role and making it functionally similar to a national popular vote. If these recommended reforms are not implemented, the system risks becoming ineffective in its mission to balance influence. The excessive power of large, populous states would allow them to dictate election outcomes, leaving the interests of smaller states underrepresented. This imbalance would defeat the foundational goals envisioned by the framers, effectively eliminating the distinctions between the Electoral College and the popular vote, which could erode confidence in the Electoral College system's fairness and democratic integrity.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations aim to reduce the dependency on a few large, politically aligned states, mitigate the potential for one-party dominance, and ensure a fairer distribution of campaign attention across both populous and less-populous states.

1. **Allocate Electoral Votes Based on Equal Representation:** To address the imbalance of influence between larger and smaller states within the Electoral College, a cap could be implemented on the House-based electoral votes, similar to the way the Senate is capped at two electors per state. Currently, while each state has two Senate-based electors ensuring equal representation, the allocation of House-based electors is disproportionate, favoring states with larger populations. By capping or equalizing the number of House-based electors across all states, the Electoral College can achieve a more balanced representation that respects both large and small states' influence in presidential elections. This reform would uphold the foundational intent of the Electoral College to prevent any single state or group of populous states from dominating national elections, ensuring that candidates address the needs and interests of the nation as a whole.

2. **Introduce Electoral Vote Caps for Highly Populated States:** Capping the number of electoral votes that any single state can hold would reduce the excessive influence that large states like California and Texas currently have. This would make it less likely for a few large states to solely determine the election, promoting more balanced campaigning across a wider range of states.

3. **Implement a Proportional Electoral Vote Distribution:** Instead of a winner-takes-all system in each state, electoral votes could be distributed proportionally based on the popular vote within that state. This system, already used in Maine and Nebraska, would ensure that even in large states, minority party votes contribute to the electoral outcome, encouraging candidates to address a broader range of voter concerns within each state, regardless of their size.

4. **Create Regional Electoral Voting Blocs to Balance Influence:** Organizing states into regional blocs with a combined influence on electoral votes could balance the weight of both larger and smaller states. Candidates would need to appeal to regions as a whole rather than focusing on individual large states, leading to a broader, more inclusive approach in national campaigns that takes into account a variety of state interests.

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