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THE GREAT MISTAKE: THE DYSFUNCTIONAL ELECTORAL  
COLLEGE AND THE DIRECT-VOTE ALTERNATIVE

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May 15, 1972

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter One

## Introduction

The process by which the American people select their Chief Executive has two distinct aspects: the highly visible, popular campaign experienced by millions of citizens, and, at the same time, the almost invisible workings of the constitutional mechanisms for election, which go unnoticed by the vast majority of Americans. In most elections the Electoral College manages to mirror the popular will, but there is always the danger that the popular choice for President will be rejected by the Electoral College.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of the party system and increased political participation by the general populace has transformed the Electoral College from its original function as a deliberative body with aristocratic overtones into a non-thinking, automatic mechanism for election with which many are less than content.

The American public has expressed itself as being in favor of electoral reform on at least eighteen different occasions.<sup>2</sup> The closeness of the 1968 Presidential election, coupled with widespread concern that a George Wallace might prevent an Electoral College majority, thus throwing the election into the House of Representatives, led to an increase of the public majority in favor of abandoning the Electoral College to an all-time high of 81 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neal R. Peirce, The People's President (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Gallup Poll, reported in The New York Times, November 23, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Robert MacNeil, The People Machine: The Influence of Television on American Politics (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 193.

The need for electoral reform has been evident throughout American history, but the problem becomes more crucial as the responsibilities and powers of the Presidency increase more rapidly each decade. It seems more important than ever that the President, whose every move is under the close scrutiny of the mass media, enjoy a genuine mandate of popular election.

The mass media have undoubtedly played a major part in the increased clamor for electoral reform:

The sense of simulated involvement in the American political process that has been induced through exposure to televised politicking has begun to be translated into the reality of sentiment. More and more Americans appear to be expressing the view that if they are in fact participants in the political process, which before television was merely an abstraction to most, they want more actual participation than was afforded to them previously.<sup>4</sup>

Despite overwhelming mass support for reform; despite numerous debates, proposals of reform, and the inescapable fact that on three occasions the candidate with the greatest number of popular votes was denied the Presidency, the Electoral College remains essentially unchanged since the passage of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804.

Charles O'Neil, a nineteenth-century student of the American political system, concluded a study of the Electoral College with words indicative of the long-standing repugnance political scientists have felt toward such

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Mendelsohn & Irving Crespi, Polls, Television, & the New Politics (Scranton, Pa.: Chandler Publishing Co., 1970), p. 311.

<sup>5</sup> Charles O'Neil, The American Electoral System (New York & London: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1895), p. 247.

a method of election. The quotation is worthy of note only because it first appeared in print in 1877:

. . . the electoral system still remains,  
with no reason for its continuation in  
present form. <sup>5</sup>

The Electoral College represents more than an isolated and archaic bit of political Americana. An understanding of the Electoral College has highly significant implications because as Sorauf puts it:

. . . its form continues to set the major rules of the game of Presidential politics and its influence marks all steps in the quadrennial pursuit of the Presidency. So important is the Electoral College as an influence that the entire range of Presidential politics makes little sense to those who fail to understand it. <sup>6</sup>

Effective reform must necessarily be preceded by an understanding of the institution in need of reform. This paper represents a first step toward understanding why the Electoral College exists in its present form and what can be done to make it a more representative institution. Specifically, it will be the purpose of this paper to do the following:

1. Examine the development of the Electoral College, from a historical viewpoint and within the framework of William Riker's theory of political coalitions.
2. Attempt to explain the Electoral College's seeming invulnerability to change.
3. Examine the implications of the direct-vote alternative to the Electoral College.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank J. Sorauf, Party Politics in America (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1968), p. 261.

The relevant hypotheses which I hope to substantiate are the following:

A. William Riker's model of political behavior is essentially valid when applied to the American electoral system. That is to say, rational political actors seeking the Presidency for their party will attempt to form minimal winning coalitions composed of the larger, more populous states and will ignore the less influential states. Under the rules of the Electoral College, the basic unit for coalition formation is the state; however, all states are not of equal value to coalition-builders, and we can expect the outcomes of Presidential elections to turn on the outcomes in "pivotal" states. Should the Electoral College fail to provide a winner in the general election, we can expect that rational political behavior in the House of Representatives demands winning as the principal value. We can expect considerations of party ideology, Presidential personalities, and abstract concepts such as "justice" or "equality" to play only a secondary role.

B. Assuming Riker's theory to be valid, the direct-vote method of Presidential election is a practical and theoretically defensible alternative to the present electoral system. That is to say, rational political actors will still attempt to form minimal winning coalitions, but the basic unit of electoral coalition-building would change from the state to groups of people, should the direct-vote method be implemented.

Much of the paper will deal with historical and empirical data, but at least <sup>one</sup> ~~the~~ normative assumption underlies that which follows. The assumption is that the method of electing the Chief Executive of a nation which considers itself to be a representative democracy should rest upon national, rather than federative principles; that is, the principle of equal individual representation as set down in the one man — one vote decision of the Supreme Court (Baker vs.



Carr) should ideally govern the election of the President. Lucius Wilmerding expressed this feeling by asserting that the electoral system verges upon being unconstitutional:

. . . the Constitution means now what it meant in the beginning: that the election of the President is not a state but a national question; that in determining it, all the people of the Union are to stand upon the same footing; that the interests of every equal mass of persons entitled to one Elector, are to have a full and efficient voice.<sup>7</sup>

It has become popular to advance political theories which emphasize the elitist element of the American political system.<sup>8</sup> Such theories speak of various bases of elitism — wealth, position in government, social status, talent, and so forth. Although such theorists present evidence which indicts American society as being less than a "pure" democracy, their bases of reasoning are, to a certain degree, logical. It is at least comprehensible to the common man that those with greater wealth, intelligence, or talent generally exercise a greater influence upon political decision-making.

The Electoral College, on the other hand, seems to exemplify a ludicrous "elitism by geography". Given the various weights attributed to the different states by the Electoral College, when an individual in Utah or Alaska complains that his vote for President is worthless, who can claim that his assertion is not rational and essentially valid ?

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<sup>7</sup> Lucius Wilmerding, Jr., The Electoral College (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (London, Oxford, & New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); G. William Domhoff, Who Rules America? (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Thomas Dye & L. Harmon Zeigler, The Irony of Democracy (Belmont, California: Duxberry Press, 1971).

It is perhaps too easy to find fault with any system of choosing leaders. As Theodore White has pointed out:

For two thousand years. . . men have tried to find a perfect system of leadership. . . In the last century of American history, no less than 513 resolutions have been introduced into the Congress of the United States for revising our Presidential electoral laws; and none has been accepted because there are no perfect solutions to the problems of leadership. . . Perfection is impossible.<sup>9</sup>

Although perfection may be impossible, improvement seems crucially necessary and important. During a period in which Americans have become increasingly alienated from the political system, it would seem worthwhile to investigate any area in which the responsiveness of leaders to the desires of those being led can be enhanced.

The present Presidential electoral system is the Great Mistake given to us by the Founding Fathers: it is dysfunctional to such genuine political responsiveness. Until the Electoral College is reformed or abolished, it remains not only a potential source of instability and governmental chaos, but also a reminder that such concepts as a true "democracy" and "the will of the majority" are merely political myths in the pejorative sense.

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1968 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), p. 508.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RIKER'S  
COALITION THEORY

Chapter Two

What the rational political man wants, I believe, is to win, a much more specific and specifiabile motive than the desire for power.

— Riker

## The Theoretical Framework: Riker's Coalition Theory

William H. Riker and political scholars of his theoretical bent have attempted to do for political science what the behaviorists have attempted to do for psychology — bring an element of empiricism and quantification to a field of study which has previously been overwhelmingly normative.

In The Theory of Political Coalitions, Riker accepts David Easton's definition of politics as "the authoritative allocation of value". Interpreting "allocation" as referring to the social process of deciding how a physical process shall be carried out, he therefore considers decision-making as the appropriate subject for study by political scientists.

Those decisions made consciously by groups are both more significant and more interesting to Riker than those made by individuals or by groups in a quasi-mechanical way (such as economic decisions made within the semi-automatic market and price system):

The interesting thing about conscious decisions by groups is that, if groups are more than two persons, the process of making them is invariably the same. It is a process of forming coalitions. <sup>9</sup>

Utilizing the Von Neumann- Morgenstern theory of n-person games as a basis, <sup>10</sup> Riker attempts to establish a viable model of political behavior.

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<sup>9</sup> William H. Riker, The Theory of Political Coalitions (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> John Von Neumann & Oskar Morgenstern, The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947)

Revising and refining previous game theories, he posits several axioms of importance. Among these are: the condition of rationality, the zero-sum condition, the size principle, and the information effect.

#### The Condition of Rationality

One of the major failings of the Von Neumann- Morgenstern game theory as applied to economic behavior was that it rested upon the dubious assumption that rational behavior could be expected of all participants; i.e., no one would prefer less money to more. As Riker points out:

We all know of instances in which persons behave . . . irrationally, such as employees who refuse promotion to better paying jobs . . . or consumers who out of friendship buy from a seller who charges higher prices than his neighboring competitor. <sup>11</sup>

Riker avoids the trap by asserting that it is not necessary to assume that all behavior is rational; it is only necessary to suppose that some behavior is rational, and that this possibly small amount is crucial for the construction and operation of economic and political institutions. <sup>12</sup> Stated formally, the condition of rationality becomes more defensible:

Given social situations within certain kinds of decision-making institutions (of which parlor games, the market, elections, and warfare are notable examples) and in which exist two alternative courses of action with differing outcomes in money or power or success, some

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<sup>11</sup> Riker, Theory of Political Coalitions, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

participants will choose the alternative leading to the larger payoff. Such choice is rational behavior and it will be accepted as ..definitive while the behavior of participants who do not so choose will not necessarily be so accepted. <sup>13</sup>

While admitting that Western morality places a certain amount of restraint upon individuals seeking to maximize and win for personal gain, he points to the fiduciary relationship as a peculiar situation in which there is only one overriding moral standard: Promote the interests of the beneficiary. The fiduciary agent is commonly felt to have a duty to behave rationally, and many of the cultural limitations against individual gain are relaxed. The significance of this dual morality is that most political decisions are made by persons acting in a fiduciary relation. This leads one to the conclusion that rational behavior is the general case in most areas of public life. <sup>14</sup> Those who choose to behave irrationally cannot be expected to long remain in positions of great influence within the political system.

#### The Zero-Sum Condition

The zero-sum condition is simply the requirement that the gains of the winner(s) be exactly equal to the losses of the loser(s). That which one group of participants loses, the opposing group(s) win.

Applying the zero-sum condition to political decision-making requires that common advantages be ignored; i.e., the social situation must be abstracted so that only direct conflict among participants is considered:

The justification for ignoring such mutual advantages is, of course, that by abstracting only conflict it is pos-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-27.

sible to concentrate on one important and precisely stated problem, namely, how to win. <sup>15</sup>

Victory in a Presidential election is commonly perceived as an indivisible unit. One candidate becomes President; the others do not. The mutual gain achieved by abiding by the rules of the game — the preservation of society — is assumed to be constant for all participants. Thus, the zero-sum condition is appropriate to the study of Presidential elections.

#### The Size Principle

This represents a fundamental axiom in Riker's model of political behavior:

In n-person, zero-sum games, where side payments are permitted, where players are rational, and where they have perfect information, only minimum winning coalitions occur. <sup>16</sup>

Applied to political situations, this means that political parties attempt to maximize votes only up to a certain point — the point of subjective certainty of winning. Having reached that point, parties will attempt to simply maintain their position as a minimum winning coalition.

This contradicts the common notion that political parties attempt to be "all things to all men" in order to attract the highest possible vote. If such a notion is carried to its logical extreme, each political party would have as its ultimate goal the formation of a coalition of the whole.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

Riker suggests that this would be pointless:

When a coalition includes everybody, the winners gain nothing simply because there are no losers . . . It must be assumed that the members of a winning coalition have control over additional entries into their coalition. If they have no such control, all losers could invariably join the winners and thereby produce a valueless coalition of the whole and nullify the winners' victory. <sup>17</sup>

In support of this concept, Riker presents historical evidence concerning three periods in American history when one of the two major parties substantially disappeared: the "era of good feeling" (ca. 1820); the period after 1852 when the Whig party dissolved; and the period around 1872 when the Democratic party almost disappeared from Presidential politics. In each instance, Riker is not interested in the causes of the demise of the disappearing party; he focuses on what happens to the oversized coalition of the whole which is left. Invariably, such oversized coalitions did not last long. Splinter groups multiplied until the oversized coalition trimmed itself to a minimum winning coalition, or a formerly losing coalition recruited enough new members to win. This diminution of the oversized coalition is a direct result of the fact that every coalition has internal conflicts over the division of spoils:

When pressure from an opposing coalition is great, so great in fact that the opposition may win and thereby deprive the coalition of any spoils to distribute, these internal conflicts are minimized. But when pressure from the outside

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 39.



diminishes, there is less urgency to settle the internal conflicts amicably simply because they are not so dangerous to the oversized winner as to the minimal winner. <sup>18</sup>

### The Information Effect

Riker's model assumes, up to this point, that all participants have perfect knowledge; that is, they know the exact number of members in their own coalition as well as the exact number of members in opposing coalitions. This, of course, does not correspond to political reality, and Riker adjusts his model accordingly;

The greater the degree of imperfection or incompleteness of information, the larger will be the coalition that coalition-makers seek to form and the more frequently will winning coalitions actually formed be greater than minimum size. Conversely, the nearer information approaches perfection and completeness, the smaller will be the coalitions that coalition-makers aim at and the more frequently will winning coalitions actually formed be close to minimum size. <sup>19</sup>

In support of the information effect, Riker cites the work of various political scholars <sup>20</sup> who make use of the concept of "critical elections". A period of critical elections is assumed to be a period in which the amount of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> V.O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections", Journal of Politics, 17 (1955), pp. 1-18. See also, Duncan MacRae & James Meldrum, "Critical Elections in Illinois: 1888-1958", American Political Science Review, 54(1960), pp. 669-683.

information in the system declines:

When voters previously loyal to one party switch to another, information is decreased in at least two ways: First, by the very act of switching, the changelings destroy information about themselves, for their loyalty to any party is in doubt until they have proved it in several elections. Second, the reception of switching voters into their new party may occasion the departure of some of its previously loyal adherents. . . . Regardless of the precise causal influences at work in a critical period, however, it is clear that such a period is characterized by a decrease in the amount of information. If the information effect is a valid proposition then, on the average, elections in the noncritical period display closer margins between the parties than those in the critical period. <sup>21</sup>

Riker admits that more extensive investigation is necessary before one can have a great deal of confidence in the information effect, but the research already completed tends to at least partially support Riker's hypothesis. For example, Benson <sup>22</sup> found that there was a tendency for the major parties to gain strength during a stable phase in counties where they were weak and lose strength in counties where they were strong. This is in keeping with what the hypothesis asserts, as is the casual observation that very close votes in legislatures are also votes with a high degree of information.

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<sup>21</sup> Riker, Theory of Political Coalitions, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Benson, The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 126 forward.

### The Dynamic Model

Riker's model of political behavior involves a decision-making body of  $n$ -members (such as the Electoral College), operating under the rules of an  $n$ -person, zero-sum game with side-payments allowed. The rule of decision with respect to any point at issue can be expressed mathematically:

. . . a coalition with weight  $m$ ,  
 where  $m > 1/2 \sum_{i=1}^n w_i$ , and where  $w_i$   
 is the weight of a member,  $i$ , can  
 act for or impose its will on the  
 body as a whole. . . No decision  
 can be taken in such a way that losers  
 would prefer to resign rather than  
 acquiesce. . . what we perceive as zero-  
 sum situations are those in a continuing  
 body where, presumably, the losers of  
 today continue to participate in the hope  
 of becoming the winners of tomorrow. <sup>23</sup>

Riker makes a distinction between the term coalition, which he considers an end product of coalition-building, and the term proto-coalition, which he defines precisely as "any subset of  $I$ , when  $I$  is partitioned into three or more disjoint subsets such that no subset has the weight of  $m$ ". <sup>24</sup> These proto-coalitions change size as the result of individual acts of joining or resigning from proto-coalitions until the stage is reached where there is a winning coalition or two blocking ones.

Coalition-building begins with a leader, who attempts to assemble a group of followers in the face of a particular issue for decision. The leader attracts followers by offering side-payments — a term which refers

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<sup>23</sup> Riker, Theory of Political Coalitions, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

not only to payments of money, but all artifacts and sentences (such as promises on policy) that can conceivably have value for the participants in the decision-making body. Among the various kinds of side-payments at the leader's disposal are:

1. The threat of reprisal.
2. Payments of objects the value of which can be reckoned in money.
3. Promises on policy.
4. Promises about subsequent decisions.
5. Payments of emotional satisfaction. <sup>25</sup>

Explicit in Riker's model is the assumption that political "movers and shakers" are aware of abstract considerations of strategy in the growth of proto-coalitions, and that anticipations about necessary strategy in the final stages of coalition-building condition the actions of proto-coalitions in the earlier stages of development.

Riker exhaustively analyzes the relative positions of proto-coalitions in the final stages of coalition-building, and finds that certain proto-coalitions or prospective coalitions can be expected to possess a unique advantage in terms of bargaining power. Surprisingly, Riker found that the smaller proto-coalitions could be expected to hold uniquely advantageous positions more frequently than the larger or weightier ones:

The fact that one coalition or proto-coalition often has an advantage suggests that this model has a bias toward decision. . . . the notion of equilibrium. . . is precisely what this model does not have because of the existence of unique advantages. Its dynamic is toward the upsetting of any

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-114.

balance that might temporarily exist. . . . The notion of an equilibrium has played so important a part in contemporary social theory partly because an equilibrium is felt to be desirable in fact. . . . And to say that this model lacks equilibrium is to say that the social processes it purports to describe are also unstable — that the political society itself is in fact unstable.<sup>26</sup>

Riker's model thus emerges as representing an essentially unstable political system in which the most significant decisions are made by rational men acting to build minimum winning coalitions in a zero-sum game.

Such a model can be applied to various aspects of the American electoral process. In the general election, the basic unit for coalition-builders is the state, with each state's influence in the outcome directly proportional to the number of electoral votes it is allotted. The strategy of Presidential candidates accords very well with the strategy which Riker's model would predict:

. . . . presidential candidates generally pick a group of states which they feel they can carry and then devote their time to them. Presidential campaigns have tended to be concentrated as a result in the close, two-party states, with the candidates largely avoiding each other's areas of strength.<sup>26a</sup>

It is not that the voters of each state bargain with Presidential candidates; it is rather that Presidential candidates bargain for individual states which generally cast their electoral votes as a unit.

If the Electoral College does not decide a winner, the election goes into the House of Representatives. Riker's model applies equally well here; it is only the basic unit of coalition formation which changes.

With Riker's theoretical framework in mind, we now turn to an historical examination of this particular zero-sum game — the election of the President through the Electoral College.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 147-148.

<sup>26a</sup> Sorauf, Party Politics in America, p. 293.

THE GREAT MISTAKE : THE ELECTORAL  
COLLEGE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Chapter Three

If the motives of the founding fathers in devising the electoral system were of the highest, it must be said that their grasp of political realities . . . failed them in this instance. Of all the provisions of the federal Constitution, the electoral system was the most unrealistic — the one provision not based solidly on practical experience and precedent. It was in the nature of an academic invention which ignored experience in the vain expectation that, in this one instance for this high purpose, politicians would cease to be politicians, would divest themselves of party prejudice and class and sectional bias, and be all for the time being noble Brutuses inspired solely by pure love of liberty and the public good.

— Carl Becker (1945)

### The Great Mistake : The Electoral College in American History

The American people are confronted with the fact that the weakest point in their plan of government is the method of choosing a President. The United States Constitution has functioned surprisingly well for nearly 200 years, yet the problem which the Founding Fathers faced remains today : How should a nation choose its leader ?

Perhaps the members of the Federal Convention of 1787 should be partially excused from blame. Never were a body of men charged with greater responsibility, or confronted with greater difficulties.<sup>27</sup> At the time of the drafting of the Constitution the social-political system of America was entirely different from that of the present. It is indeed remarkable that a document drafted by men from thirteen predominantly rural states is presently workable in an industrialized nation that covers a continent.

Most of the Constitution works well. This does not, however, hide the fact that part of it does not work well. The great mistake of the Federal Convention of 1787 — the method of Presidential election — has demonstrated

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<sup>27</sup> Charles O'Neil, The American Electoral System, p.8.

its inadequacy almost from the moment the Constitution went into effect.

### The Federal Convention

The group of men who came to Philadelphia in 1787 to rewrite the Articles of Confederation were a varied lot:

Nothing like unanimity prevailed. Plans widely differing in character were presented to the Convention, ranging from the monarchical to the popular. . . The history of past ages afforded them no real substantial aid in their arduous labors. Undoubtedly, they had learned the great danger of making the Executive dependent on the legislature. . . yet, notwithstanding the earnest opposition of some of the best men, an election by the legislature seemed inevitable, mainly from the inability to agree upon another mode. 28

Hereditary monarchy held no great charm for the majority of the members of the Convention, but neither would they tolerate the idea of allowing the entire population to take a direct part in the election.

The main obstacle to agreement upon a method of election, however, was the dread of consolidation. The theory of state sovereignty was assumed to be true and valid:

A sovereign nation and a limited national government were thought impossible. . . Jealous opposition to the granting of too much power to the general government led them to oppose a plan of electing a President which would make him the representative of the whole nation. . . one reason, purely sectional, existed which made a popular election impossible. . . The Southern States with their system of slave labor, would be threatened with the loss of their relative influence in the nation, because a large portion of their population could not be trusted with the ballot. 29



Certain options were simply not available to the framers of the Constitution. They drafted the best Constitution they could agree upon, given the social and political climate in which they operated. Wilmerding has pointed out the problems involved in popular election of the President during that period and suggests the primary rationale upon which the adoption of that part of the Constitution dealing with Presidential election was to rest:

In the first place, it seemed improbable that there would be a general concurrence of the people in favor of any one man. The people in each state would probably vote for one of their own citizens, and the largest state would have the best chance for the appointment. In the second place, the right of suffrage was much more diffusive in the Northern than in the Southern states, and the latter could have no influence in the election on the score of the Negroes. Put the two difficulties together, and the large Northern states, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, would have an advantage over all the rest. <sup>30</sup>

Such were the difficulties to be resolved. Although popular election was approved in principle even by its opponents <sup>31</sup>, compromise was necessary and inevitable. The method of election was agreed upon and is set out in Article II, Section 1.2 of the Constitution:

Each State shall appoint, in such manner as the legislature thereof may direct, a number of electors, equal to the whole number of senators and representatives to which the State may be entitled:

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28 Ibid., p. 8.

29 Ibid., pp. 2-4.

30 Lucius Wilmerding, Jr., The Electoral College, p. 11.

31 Mason, for example, "favored the idea" of popular election, but felt that it was impracticable.

but no senator or representative, or person holding an office of trust or profit under the United States, shall be appointed an elector.

The electors shall meet in their respective states, and vote by ballot for two persons, of whom one at least shall not be an inhabitant of the same State with themselves. And they shall make a list of all persons voted for, and of the number of votes for each; which list they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and the House of Representatives, open all the certificates, and the votes shall then be counted. The person having the greatest number of votes shall be the President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of electors appointed; and if there be more than one who have such majority, and have an equal number of votes, then the House of Representatives shall immediately choose by ballot one of them for President; and if no person have a majority, then from the five highest on the list the said House shall in like manner choose the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by States, the representatives from each State having one vote. . . a majority of all the States shall be necessary to a choice. In every case, after the choice of the President, the person having the greatest number of votes of the electors shall be the Vice President. But if there should be two or more who have equal votes, the Senate shall choose from them by ballot the Vice President.<sup>32</sup>

The smaller states were thus assured of protection against the domination of the larger, more populous states. The device of plural voting meant that the larger states would generally have the first nomination of the persons voted for as President, but the smaller states would play an important part in the eventual election. The disadvantage to the Southern states was obviated by requiring the people to cast their votes by states through the agency of

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<sup>32</sup> Constitution of the United States, Article II, Section 1.2 (New York: Barnes & Noble, reprinted 1972), pp. 43-44.

intermediate electors. The difficulty arising from the disproportion of qualified voters in the several states could be ignored.<sup>33</sup>

In the heated debates over ratification which followed, it is surprising how little the Presidential election system was attacked by opponents of the new Constitution. Despite the fact that the role of the electors was not clearly defined — were they to represent the will of the voters of their respective states, or were they to serve as an independent decision-making body ? — those portions of the Constitution dealing with the election of the President were almost universally approved:

Perhaps the issue lacked importance in the minds of many, since it was universal knowledge that George Washington would be picked as the first President with the virtually unanimous support of his countrymen.<sup>34</sup>

Seemingly oblivious to the possibility of an emerging system of political parties, notable men ignored or applauded the mode of election. Alexander Hamilton, who should have known better, maintained that the electoral system would prevent the "heats and ferments. . . tumult and disorder. . . cabal, intrigue, and corruption" which might well accompany a Presidential election, claiming that no corruption would be possible because of the "transient existence" and "detached situation" of the electors.<sup>35</sup>

The most basic reason that the Electoral College emerged in the form that

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<sup>34</sup> Neil R. Peirce, The People's President, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

it did was simply that the Convention was deadlocked on simpler schemes like direct election or choice by Congress, and thus invented a system that could be "sold" in the context of 1787.<sup>36</sup> This pragmatic view is supported by John Roche:

The Electoral College was merely a jerry-rigged improvisation which has subsequently been endowed with a high theoretical content. . . The future was left to cope with the problem of what to do with this Rube Goldberg mechanism.<sup>37</sup>

#### The Twelfth Amendment

Within a few short years the Electoral College found itself in difficulty. The election of the President via the College functioned smoothly only so long as an overwhelming majority throughout the nation was agreed upon who should be the Chief Executive:

Each Elector had two votes for President. In practice he wrote the names of two persons, both constitutionally qualified to be President, on a piece of paper called a ballot and put it in a box. He was not permitted to distinguish between them; he could not say, I want A for President and B for Vice President. . . Insofar as the Constitution was concerned he had cast two indiscriminating votes for President.<sup>38</sup>

The difficulty was that the electors did not in fact vote for two equal men as President. They made a discrimination in their minds between the man

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Roche, "The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action", American Political Science Review, December 1961, p. 811.

<sup>38</sup> Wilmerding, The Electoral College, p. 29.

they wanted for President and the man they wanted for Vice President.

The first great Electoral College fiasco occurred during the Presidential election of 1800:

The Republicans. . . put up two men — Jefferson and Burr — and gave them equal votes in the Electoral College. Presumably, therefore, they would have been satisfied to see either of them put at the head of the government. But this was not the case. When the House of Representatives was called upon to break the tie, the Federalists exhibited a marked preference for Burr. . . Did the Republicans permit Burr — their own candidate for President — to become President? They did not. They fulminated, stormed, and threatened civil war if the will of the people were thus to be thwarted. <sup>39</sup>

It became plain that party politics had introduced the designating principle into the system of electing a President and Vice President and that the system had become unworkable. Presidential electors needed some new means ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> not only win the election, but also to have their candidates finish in the proper order.

The Twelfth Amendment was the patch applied to the already-defective electoral system. During the summer of 1804 ratification was completed. Henceforth, the electors were to vote for one man as President and another man as Vice President, indicating their choices in distinct ballots. If no candidate for President had a majority, the House of Representatives, voting by states, was to choose a President from the persons having the three highest numbers of electoral votes. If no candidate for Vice President

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<sup>39</sup> Wilmerding, The Electoral College, p. 31.

had a majority the Senate, voting by heads, was to choose a Vice President from the persons having the two highest numbers of electoral votes. If the House could not decide upon a President by the date when the President was to take office, the Vice President would be authorized to act as President.<sup>40</sup>

The Twelfth Amendment abolished the double voting system, but it left unrestricted the power of the several state legislatures to fix the manner of appointing the Presidential electors:

The nature and tendency of that power is nowadays not very well understood, for the state legislatures. . . have established by parallel laws a uniform mode of appointment and have long since ceased to exercise the faculty of change. But the faculty of change remains. If at any time a state legislature should see fit to 'interpose' in the interests of a particular candidate for the Presidency by changing the mode of appointing Electors, it could not be prevented from doing so... Indeed — insofar as the Constitution is concerned — there is nothing to prevent it from investing that power in a Board of Bank Directors — a turnpike corporation — or a synagogue. <sup>41</sup>

The almost universal trend today is the general ticket system, but prior to 1836 the methods of selecting electors were varied and unsteady:

In the election of 1824. . . twelve states voted by general ticket, six by the legislature, four by districts, and two by a compound of districts and general ticket. . . The evils of this system, or lack of system, were very apparent to the politicians who suffered from them. In every election the distribution of electoral votes among the several candidates for President

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

was determined almost as much by the mode of election as by the sense of the people. <sup>42</sup>

### The Election of 1824

The diverse methods of appointing electors only added to the problems which faced the American political system in 1824-1825. The "corrupt bargain" of 1825 is of interest not only because it was the first election in which the candidate with the greatest number of popular votes was denied the Presidency, but also because it represents a striking example of Riker's model of political behavior.

In 1824 there were four major candidates: William H. Crawford, Monroe's Secretary of the Treasury; John Quincy Adams, the Secretary of State; Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House; and Andrew Jackson, the military hero.

1824 was the first year in which anything resembling a national popular vote count was possible. When the ballots were in, Jackson had a commanding lead in popular votes, but lacked the necessary majority of 131 in the Electoral College:

	RESULTS OF THE 1824 ELECTION <sup>43</sup>			
	Popular Votes	% of Popular Vote	Electoral Votes	Majority in States
Andrew Jackson	152,933	42.2 %	99	11
John Q. Adams	115,696	31.9 %	84	7
William H. Crawford	46,979	13.0 %	41	3
Henry Clay	47,136	13.0 %	37	3
Jackson Plurality:	37,237			

The election went to the House of Representatives where, according to the Twelfth Amendment, each state's Representatives were entitled to one

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> Source for these and other figures concerning the election of 1824: Riker, Theory of Political Coalitions, Chapter 7, and Peirce, The People's President, Appendix A.

collective vote. Clay was eliminated from consideration, despite receiving more popular votes than Crawford, because only the top three contenders by electoral votes were permitted.

With each state casting one vote, it was necessary for the winning candidate to gain the support of at least 13 of the 24 states. In Riker's terminology, the minimum winning coalition possible was 13. As of December, 1824, the weights of the various proto-coalitions were:

		<u>Weight of Proto-coalition</u>
Jackson:	11 states	11/24
Adams:	7 "	7/24
Crawford:	3 "	3/24
Clay:	3 "	3/24

According to Riker's model, Jackson's proto-coalition could be expected to be strategically weak — the largest proto-coalition, but not quite a minimum winning coalition. The appropriate strategy for some of the members of the Jackson proto-coalition would be to desert, particularly if time allowed extensive bargaining. 44

This was precisely what happened. Jackson's support dissolved — Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina, and Louisiana left him — and as the session of Congress opened, Jackson had become the underdog:

		<u>Weight of Proto-coalition</u>
Adams:	9 states	9/24
Jackson:	7 "	7/24
Crawford:	4 "	4/24
Clay:	4 "	4/24

Then Missouri deserted Clay for Adams, leaving an alliance of Adams and Clay as the only possible minimum winning coalition:

		<u>Weight of Proto-coalition</u>
Adams:	10 states	10/24
Jackson:	7 "	7/24
Crawford:	4 "	4/24
Clay:	3 "	3/24

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44 Riker, p. 152.



For Clay to have joined with Crawford to elect Jackson would have been irrational — the spoils of victory would necessarily have been divided among three groups instead of two. In fact, the Kentucky legislature had instructed its Representatives to throw their support to Jackson, but the legislature had no constitutionally binding power.<sup>45</sup>

Had Clay followed instructions, the supporters of Crawford would have been placed in a uniquely favored position, enabled to drive a very hard bargain:

		<u>Weight of Proto-coalition</u>
Adams:	10 states	10/24
Jackson:	10 "	10/24
Crawford:	4 "	4/24

For Clay to have thrown his support to Crawford would have been similarly irrational; it would not have resulted in a winning coalition and would have taken away Clay's bargaining position. Clay's only rational course of action was therefore alliance with Adams.

As the March 4 deadline drew near, the New York proto-coalition began to waver:

		<u>Weight of Proto-coalition</u>
Adams:	12 states	12/24
Jackson:	7 "	7/24
Crawford:	4 "	4/24
New York,	1 "	1/24

If New York had abstained, or ended in a tie, no candidate would have received a majority, the election would have been delayed, and John C. Calhoun would presumably have become Acting President. This ludicrous political situation almost came to pass — it seemed probable that the Representatives from New York would end in a tie-vote. If anyone was to be elected, however, the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

New York vote had to go to Adams; nothing would be gained by supporting either Jackson or Crawford. At the last instant, Adams received the necessary vote of one Representative from New York, Stephen Van Rensselaer, which gave him the state's vote and the Presidency. Thus, one man's vote was all that prevented the election of 1824 from turning into a political nightmare.

This was the "corrupt bargain" of 1824. Supposedly for his rational alliance with Adams, Clay was made Secretary of State, at that time a stepping-stone to the Presidency. Historians tend to explain the election of 1824 in highly personal terms; what is ignored is the fact that in each crucial series of actions — Jackson's loss of support, Clay's support of Adams, and Stephen Van Rensselaer's vote for Adams — the participants behaved precisely as Riker's model would have predicted:

. . . it was not so much custom or prayer that determined conduct as it was the intuitive perception of the abstractly 'best' strategy. . . calculated from the model. It is not, of course, that the participants made calculations such as these but rather that in the concrete problems they perceived the concrete advantages of minimal winning coalitions and acted accordingly. 46

It is an avoidance of the problem to blame the difficulties of the election of 1824 on "corrupt" politicians. Riker's model demonstrates that the participants involved behaved rationally, given the rules of the game.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.157.

Even Adams was not content with the electoral system that had given him the Presidency. Replying to the committee which notified him of his election, he alluded to the circumstances under which he was elected and expressed his will to decline the office and submit the question again to the people. But as he said:

The Constitution itself had not so disposed of the contingency which would arise in the event of my refusal. <sup>47</sup>

The basic inadequacy of the electoral system was not rectified by the events of 1824. Instead, Clay and Adams suffered for their rational behavior:

Losing no time, the Tennessee legislature in 1825 nominated Jackson for the Presidency in 1828. As the campaign approached, the Jacksonians harped increasingly on the basic issue given them by the 1824 election: that Jackson had won the most popular votes and had been the choice of the people, but the House of Representatives had frustrated the will of the people. This simple, emotional appeal was more than Adams could withstand, and the 1828 election results would show an overwhelming triumph for Jackson, both in popular and electoral votes. <sup>48</sup>

#### The Election of 1876

Fifty years later no alteration had been made in the electoral method, and once again the will of the people was denied. The two major contenders

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<sup>47</sup> O'Neil, The American Electoral System, p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 86.

in 1876 were the Democrat Samuel J. Tilden and the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. It was an exceptionally bitter campaign:

For the first time in twenty years the Democrats had a reasonable hope of winning a presidential election, and they bore down hard on Republican corruption in high places and misrule in the South. Their opponents countered with bloody-shirt oratory, charging that the Democrats were sympathetic to the rebels and attacking Tilden's personal integrity. <sup>49</sup>

When the ballots had been cast, it became apparent that Tilden was the popular vote winner, but he lacked only one vote in the Electoral College to achieve a majority. The election was not sent to the House of Representatives for resolution, however, because double sets of elector returns were sent to Congress from four disputed states. By either the Democratic or Republican count, Tilden had the most popular votes <sup>50</sup>:

#### RESULTS OF THE 1876 ELECTION

	Popular Votes	
Republican Count	Democratic Count	Final Number of Electoral Votes
Samuel J. Tilden(D)	4,285,992	184
Rutherford Hayes(R)	4,033,768	185
Others	94,935	

Source: Neil R. Peirce, The People's President, Appendix A.

This was the first time in United States history that a decision would have to be made on differing sets of elector returns which would determine the outcome of a Presidential election. The problem was exacerbated by the fact

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<sup>49</sup> John Blum, Bruce Catton, et al., The National Experience (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 394.

<sup>50</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 87.

that the House of Representatives had recently come under Democratic control, while the Senate retained a majority of Republicans. There was a genuine fear in the country that civil war might again erupt.

Since no clear precedent existed, the leaders of both political parties quickly agreed to compromise. The result was the Electoral Commission Law, which was to apply only to the count of the 1876 electoral votes:

. . . both houses would have to agree to reject the electoral votes from any state for those votes to be disqualified. A special blue-ribbon commission of 15 members — five from the Senate, five from the House, and five from the membership of the Supreme Court — was established to judge those cases in which more than one return from a state had been received. The decisions of this Electoral Commission would be final, unless overruled by both houses of Congress. <sup>51</sup>

It was clearly understood that there would be seven Democrats and seven Republicans on the Commission. It was generally understood that the fifteenth member would be a political independent — Justice David Davis. On the very day the commission bill was passed, however, news arrived that the Illinois legislature had named Davis to the Senate. As Eugene Rosebloom put it:

. . . fortune seemed to reserve her smiles for the Republicans during these years, but in this case asinine blundering by the Illinois Democrats would seem to be a more logical explanation. <sup>52</sup>

The replacement for Davis was Justice Joseph P. Bradley, who was ostensibly

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp.89-91.

<sup>52</sup> Eugene H. Rosebloom, A History of Presidential Elections ( New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), p. 247.

independent, but in fact a Republican. On every disputed vote before the commission, he took the Republican side — giving the Republicans an 8 to 7 edge and bringing about the election of Hayes. There were 20 disputed electoral votes. Tilden needed only one, but the Electoral Commission handed them all to Hayes.

Tilden thus lost the Presidency within the framework of the inadequate Electoral College because the Democrats did not behave rationally when the rules of the electoral game were changed. In this one peculiar election, the basic unit of election changed from the state to the individual member of the Electoral Commission. Although the basic unit for coalition formation changed, Riker's model is still applicable: a minimum winning coalition of eight members of the commission was needed. If it can be assumed that the Democrats of Illinois would have profited from the election of a Democrat to the Presidency, they irrationally gave up their only hope for an impartial decision-making body when they removed Davis from consideration.

When it became apparent that Hayes would be declared the winner, compromise was again reached. Some Democrats in the House had suggested launching a filibuster that would block resumption of the joint sessions and the count of votes beyond inauguration day — with unpredictable consequences. The crisis fortunately did not develop that far:

. . . negotiations had already been under way between associates of Hayes and a number of Southern conservatives. Under the terms of the agreement, the Democrats would permit the electoral count to proceed without obstruction. In return, Hayes would agree to a number of concessions, the most important of which were the withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the end of Reconstruction. In return, the Southerners pledged that Negro rights would be respected.<sup>53</sup>

The compromise eased the tension, but it did not erase the fact that one

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<sup>53</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 91.

man — Joseph P. Bradley — decided who was to be President. Had not the Democrats so much desired freedom from the burden of Reconstruction that they were willing to give up the Presidency when they had a legitimate claim to it, American history might well have recorded a second civil war. Once again the transference of leadership and the maintenance of the Union were accomplished in spite of the Electoral College, not because of it.

#### The Election of 1888

Between 1876 and 1900 the country experienced one extremely close Presidential election after another:

In 1876 the shift of one state — indeed, the shift of one electoral vote — would have altered the outcome. Single state outcomes also dictated the results in 1880, 1884, and 1888. Strategically placed shifts of less than 75,000 popular votes would also have altered the outcome in 1892, 1896, and 1900. <sup>54</sup>

The issue of the tariff was paramount in the campaign of 1888. Grover Cleveland, the incumbent Democrat, went against the advice of party leaders and launched an all-out attack on the prevailing tariff rates. The Republicans chose Benjamin Harrison of Indiana as their candidate. His chief attractions were that he came from a doubtful state and that he was the grandson of former President William Henry Harrison. Harrison was a strict protectionist.

The Democrats had achieved control in the South, and the question was

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<sup>54</sup> Peirce, p. 92.

whether the Republicans could prevent enough Northern defections to overcome the solid South:

The election turned on the doubtful states of Indiana and New York. Cleveland lost Indiana, and crucial New York also went to Harrison -- by a margin of 13,373 votes out of the 1,321,877 cast in that state. Had Cleveland carried New York, he would have won the election. <sup>55</sup>

Cleveland obtained 95,096 more popular votes than Harrison, yet was denied the Presidency:

#### RESULTS OF THE 1888 ELECTION

	<u>Popular Votes</u>	<u>Electoral Votes</u>
Benjamin Harrison (R)	5,445,269	233
Grover Cleveland (D)	5,540,365	168
Others	404,205	---

Source: Neil R. Peirce, The People's President, Appendix A.

#### Since 1900

Benjamin Harrison holds the dubious distinction of being the last President chosen by the Electoral College over the candidate whom most of the people favored. The possibility still remains, however, and the nation has come perilously close to such an unjust outcome several times.

In the election of 1916 a shift of 1,903 votes would have made Charles

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<sup>55</sup>  
Ibid., p. 93.



Evans Hughes President instead of Woodrow Wilson:

The solid South held steadfastly Democratic, and Wilson won Kansas, most of the border states and all of the mountain states. Finally the outcome hinged on California and her 13 electoral votes. . . . the electoral count stood at 264 for Wilson, 254 for Hughes. . . . the California vote was finally tallied and Wilson found to be the victor. But Wilson had carried California by only 3,806 votes out of almost a million cast in the state. A shift of less than one-fifth of one percent of the California vote would have elected Hughes, despite Wilson's national popular vote plurality of well over half a million votes. 56

In 1948, Strom Thurmond's States' Rights Party almost threw the election into the House of Representatives, despite the fact that Harry Truman had captured more than two million more popular votes than his closest competitor, Dewey:

Truman's electoral vote margin was deceptive . . . a shift from Truman to Dewey of only 24,294 votes in three states (16,807 in Illinois, 8,933 in California, and 3,554 in Ohio) would have made Dewey President instead. The election would have gone into the House of Representatives for final resolution with a shift of votes of only 12,487 in California and Ohio. 57

In 1960, there was no major third party with which to contend. The election was very close; so close that it is debatable whether Kennedy actually had a popular vote plurality. Without counting the votes of Alabama, where

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

difficulties arose in determining the popular vote, Kennedy led by 32,505.

According to the state laws of Alabama, the names of the individual candidates for Presidential elector appeared separately on the ballot. Alabama voters were allowed to vote for as many or as few of any electoral slate as preferred. Alabama was entitled to eleven electoral votes; therefore, each electoral slate consisted of eleven men:

All the Republican electors were pledged to vote for Nixon, and the highest Republican elector received 237,981 votes. . . . There had been stiff competition in Alabama to determine who would be placed on the ballot as Democratic electors. . . . A Democratic primary and runoff had resulted in the selection of six unpledged and five loyalist elector candidates to compose the 11-man Democratic elector slate in the general election. . . . On election day the highest unpledged elector on the Democratic slate received 324,050 votes while the highest loyalist or Kennedy elector received 318,303. The national wire services chose to credit Kennedy with the highest vote cast for any Democratic elector in the state -- the 324,050 that one of the unpledged members of the Democratic slate received. The wire service accounts made it appear that no unpledged elector votes at all were cast in Alabama. <sup>58</sup>

Such a misrepresentation of the popular vote is open to criticism on two fronts: it counts more than 6,000 votes for Kennedy that were actually cast against him, and it ignores the unpledged elector vote, even though it was higher than Kennedy's.

The manner in which the 1960 election has been customarily recorded is to give the vote for the highest Kennedy elector (318,303) as part of his national count and the vote for the highest unpledged elector (324,050) as part of the national unpledged elector vote. Such a method gives Kennedy a

nationwide plurality of 112,827, but it actually records the votes twice of those citizens who supported Democratic electors — once for Kennedy, once for unpledged electors.

An alternative method of reporting the popular vote was developed by Congressional Quarterly:

. . . take the highest vote for any Democratic elector in Alabama — 324,050— and divide it proportionately between Kennedy and unpledged electors. Since loyalists held five of the 11 spots on the slate, they were credited with 5/11ths of the party total — 147,295. The unpledged electors, holding six elector spots, were credited with 6/11ths of the Democratic vote — 176,755. This procedure, while somewhat arbitrary, had the virtue of avoiding any double count of the Democratic votes in Alabama. The state totals would now read: Nixon 237,981; Kennedy 147,295; unpledged electors (Byrd) 176,755. But when these totals were added to the popular vote results from the other 49 states. . . Kennedy no longer led in the national popular vote at all. Instead, Nixon was the popular vote winner by a margin of 58,181 votes.<sup>59</sup>

As Kennedy was clearly the winner in the Electoral College and the issues involved in the Alabama count were complex, little public debate took place. The relevant point to be made is that, given the rickety mechanism of the Electoral College, it made no difference how Alabama counted its votes. Had all eleven of Alabama's electoral votes been credited to Nixon, he would have nevertheless lost the election. Alabama voters might just as well have stayed home.

If the Presidency had been decided by popular vote, however, the vote-counting problems in Alabama would have assumed national importance. It could be argued that the Electoral College thus saved the nation from chaos,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

but such an argument rests on shaky ground since it implies that it is acceptable that the half-million votes cast by Alabamans had no influence whatsoever upon the 1960 election.

#### RESULTS OF THE 1960 ELECTION

	<u>Popular Votes</u>	<u>Electoral Votes</u>
<u>Standard Method</u>		
John F. Kennedy (D)	34,220,984	303
Richard M. Nixon (R)	34,108,157	219
Harry F. Byrd	638,822	15
Minor Parties	188,559	—
Kennedy Plurality: 112,827		
<u>Alternative Method</u>		
John F. Kennedy (D)	34,049,976	303
Richard M. Nixon (R)	34,108,157	219
Harry F. Byrd	491,527	15
Minor Parties	188,559	—
Nixon Plurality: 58,181		

Standard Method counts split Alabama elector slate both for Kennedy and unpledged electors. Alternative Method divides votes for Alabama Democratic elector slate proportionately according to its composition. Byrd was accorded the votes of 14 unpledged electors from Alabama and Mississippi, plus one vote by a Republican elector in Oklahoma. <sup>60</sup>

In 1968, the United States was once again faced with the very real possibility that the election would be thrown into the House of Representatives. Speculation was rampant that should George Wallace obtain enough electoral votes to deny either Nixon or Humphrey a clear majority, some unpleasant political bargaining would take place.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

A study conducted about a month before the election by Congressional Quarterly<sup>61</sup> calculated that Nixon's lead in the North was well above the five percentage point mark at which Electoral College majority would be threatened. They suggested that only when the election is extremely close is there a serious chance that the candidate who wins the popular vote will lose in the Electoral College, or if there is a third party in the race, that the election will be thrown up for grabs in the Electoral College or go to the House.

Nevertheless, both Nixon and Humphrey were called upon to calm the fears of the nation. Nixon told reporters that he would not bargain with Wallace under any circumstances,<sup>62</sup> and Humphrey vowed similarly to avoid any "deals" with Wallace.<sup>63</sup> In the House, Representatives Charles Goodell and Morris K. Udall organized a group pushing for legislation in the event that Wallace's candidacy were to throw the election into the House. Their proposal would have required that House members and the candidates agree in advance of the election to vote for the candidate with the most popular votes nationally, if there were no majority in the Electoral College. Wallace — logically, in terms of Riker's theory — denounced the proposal, and it never got off the ground.<sup>64</sup>

Fortunately, Nixon won by a handy enough margin in the Electoral College to obviate the necessity of dealing with Wallace. He won by carrying the great majority of Western and Midwestern states, and by winning close contests

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<sup>61</sup> Congressional Quarterly, September 20, 1968, p. 2501.

<sup>62</sup> Congressional Quarterly, July 19, 1968, p. 1818.

<sup>63</sup> Congressional Quarterly, July 26, 1968, p. 1998.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 1998.

in seven states surrounding the deep South. Crucial in his election were the pivotal states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and California. Only in the East did Humphrey show impressive strength, while the deep South went to Wallace.<sup>65</sup>

RESULTS OF THE 1968 ELECTION

	<u>Popular Votes</u>	<u>Electoral Votes</u>
Richard M. Nixon	30,041,582	302
Hubert H. Humphrey	29,817,585	191
George C. Wallace	9,242,950	45
Minor Parties	79,032	—

Source: Congressional Quarterly, November 8, 1968, p. 3071.

It is interesting to note that Richard Nixon won the Presidency in 1968 with some four million fewer popular votes than he obtained when he lost in 1960.

The Electoral College in Perspective

It should be apparent at this point that the Electoral College has developed into a structure which few of the Founding Fathers would recognize. What was designed as a deliberative body of notables, so constructed as to give the smaller states protection against the more populous ones, has become in fact an automatic mechanism which favors the larger states.

Remarkably, the notion still persists that the voters of smaller states enjoy an advantage disproportionate to their actual numbers because of the structure of the Electoral College. The logic is that by casting all of the state's electoral votes for one candidate, even if he should win by only one popular vote, the state has a greater influence on the election.

This view has been repeated as recently as 1968 by Judge Albert V.

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<sup>65</sup> Congressional Quarterly, November 8, 1968, p. 3071.

Bryan of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Bryan wrote the decision for a unanimous three-judge dismissal of a suit which sought to end the practice of awarding all of Virginia's electoral votes as a unit to the Presidential elector slate which wins a plurality in the state's vote. He admitted that once the elector slate is chosen it speaks only for the largest element of voters and is, in a sense, a discrimination against the minority voters. In defense of the decision, however, he argued that one reason the statewide unit rule was adopted in Virginia, at the urging of Thomas Jefferson, was to insure that the state would have maximum impact on the national election. "This contention is no less true today," he said.<sup>66</sup>

Judge Bryan is quite simply wrong. The Electoral College presently perpetuates the power of the larger, more populous, and politically doubtful states. There is a large body of empirical evidence to support this contention.

Joseph Kallenbach of the University of Michigan, for example, exhaustively analyzed Presidential voting patterns to determine the ranking of the states in terms of the relative weights of individual popular votes therein as measured against a national norm of 1 for each of eight elections. Kallenbach views our present electoral system as a "species of gigantic gerrymander", the true dimensions of which can be measured by taking into account the factors responsible for the varying weights of individual popular votes. These factors include the manner in which electoral votes are allocated, the relative extent of popular participation in a Presidential election in the several states, the number of electors a voter may participate in choosing, and the relative closeness of the popular vote for President in the various states. Utilizing a formula<sup>67</sup> which takes all of these factors into consideration, he demonstrates

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<sup>66</sup> Congressional Quarterly, August 9, 1968, p. 2111.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph E. Kallenbach, "Our Electoral College Gerrymander", Midwest Journal of Political Science, 1961, pp. 162-185.

in statistical terms the proposition that the outcome of Presidential elections regularly depends upon the voters in a number of states in the Northeastern and North Central parts of the country, plus California, even though these states have only about half of the total number of electors:

HIGH VALUE VOTE STATES				
<u>State</u>	<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u># of Elections Above National Norm</u>	<u># of Elections Below N. Norm</u>
Illinois	19.436	2.227	8	0
New York	32.273	3.187	8	0
Ohio	60.483	1.311	8	0
Pennsylvania	10.810	2.104	8	0
California	50.525	.709	7	1
Massachusetts	27.451	.833	7	1
Michigan	55.544	.601	7	1
New Jersey	13.950	.834	7	1
Connecticut	11.591	.462	6	2
Indiana	9.537	.800	6	2
Iowa	2.423	.374	6	2
Missouri	80.484	.529	6	2

Source: Joseph E. Kallenbach, "Our Electoral College Gerrymander", Midwest Journal of Political Science, 1961, p. 174.

So far as the individual voter is concerned, any relative advantage voters in the less populous or light voting states may have because of the awarding of electoral votes for senatorial seats or because of relatively low voter participation, is more than overridden when all factors are taken into account:

Popular votes cast in any of the 18 lowest value vote states are very unlikely to have a significant influence on the national result. Whether they vote as regular partisans or shift their allegiance from election to election, voters in these areas merely go along for the ride; they never actually determine the direction of the trip.<sup>68</sup>

A similar study undertaken by the RAND Corporation found that there was

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.176.



a systematic bias <sup>69</sup> giving an advantage in influence to the larger states.

As early as 1948, Louis Bean asserted that the slogan "As Maine goes, so goes the nation" was ridiculous in light of political reality; more accurate would be the following assessment:

As the nation goes, so goes New  
York. . . Pennsylvania. . . Illinois  
. . . Ohio. . . Michigan. . . California  
. . . and so goes almost any state  
outside the South. <sup>70</sup>

Scammon and Wattenberg offer a geographic strategy for Presidential election which takes into consideration the same populous, politically doubtful "swing" states:

. . . at least through 1968, the state has been the basic unit of Presidential politics . . . our geographic strategy is an elementary one called Quadcali... If one draws a quadrangle from Massachusetts to Washington, D.C., to Illinois to Wisconsin, and then adds in California, it includes a majority of Americans. Where Americans live, they vote. Where a majority of them live and vote is where Presidents are elected. <sup>71</sup>

Thus, the myth should be destroyed once and for all that the smaller, less-populated states obtain some sort of advantage by the present structure of

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<sup>69</sup> Irwin Mann & L.S. Shapley, "Values of Large Games, VI: Evaluating the Electoral College Exactly", The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California, Memorandum RM-3158-PR, May 1962, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Louis H. Bean, How to Predict Elections (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 106. <sup>71</sup> Richard Scammon & Ben Wattenberg, The Real Majority (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), pp. 68-70.

the American electoral system.

If Riker's model of political behavior can be assumed to have any validity, it would seem apparent that there is no rational reason why Presidential aspirants should expend scarce resources to secure the meager electoral votes of the smaller states.

As Presidential candidates are generally noted to be motivated by a strong desire to win, it can be assumed that they will attempt to form winning coalitions composed of the fewest states possible. This logically means the larger, "swing" states. Historically, we have seen that election after election depended upon the outcome in these states.

In the final analysis, the number of popular votes accorded to each candidate is meaningless — only the electoral votes are actually involved in the Presidential "game". The implications for election strategy are clear: in 1960, Richard Nixon campaigned in all fifty states and lost. In 1968, a careful reading of the New York Times' account of Nixon's campaign shows that he concentrated his efforts in the larger, more populous states. He carried enough of them to win.

It should thus be evident that the Electoral College does not contribute to a truly national campaign, nor does it necessarily elect a President who is the popular choice. The inadequacy and potential for political chaos of the Electoral College are obvious.

Proposal after proposal has been introduced in Congress in vain attempts to devise a plan upon which agreement by a sufficient number might be reached to submit it to the states for ratification. The direct popular vote is the method of election most often put forward. It is to an examination of the direct-vote alternative and the obstacles to electoral reform that we now turn.

THE DIRECT-VOTE ALTERNATIVE

Chapter Four

The plain and obvious principle of representation is that every voter should vote for himself and for no one else.

-- Sen. John Sherman (1866)

### The Direct-Vote Alternative

The simplest, fairest, and most easily comprehensible remedy for the manifest evils of the present electoral system is to abolish the Electoral College and let the choice of the President be made to depend upon the direct votes of the people in the nation at large:

That system would sweep away at once all the difficulties and evils that have been alleged against the present method. It would fix the election of the President on a uniform principle, not susceptible of alteration by the several state legislatures. It would make that principle national rather than federative. It would prevent the large states from consolidating their vote to the disadvantage and oppression of the small ones. It would protect the rights of minorities in every state. It would reduce the premium on fraud and accident. It would make the electoral power of splinter parties and pressure groups more nearly proportional to their numbers. . . . It would promote political activity in the so-called safe states — the states of homogeneous sentiment. It would affect the choice of candidates by the national conventions of the major parties, causing them to seek out the man of the people rather than the man of the great doubtful states. <sup>72</sup>

During Presidential election years it is commonly asserted that this or the other candidate will "unite the people" or will "bring us all together". Yet the tendency of the Electoral College and the general ticket system is to promote and strengthen sectionalism in our party arrangements. The direct vote, on the other hand, would inspire sentiments of nationality

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<sup>72</sup> Wilmerding, The Electoral College, p. 96.

among the whole body of people.<sup>73</sup>

It is often noted that, for many Americans, voting for a Presidential candidate every four years represents the full extent of their political participation. Such apathy is generally regarded as a sad comment about the character of the American people. The apathy is attributed to various causes — lack of education, irrational alienation from the political system, preoccupation with other aspects of day-to-day living, for example — but rarely is it suggested that, given our present system of Presidential election, the residents of many states are perfectly justified in staying home on Election Day. The act of voting represents nothing but an empty ritual for the citizen of a small state, whether he realizes it or not. Rarely, if ever, will the electoral votes of his state make any difference in the final outcome. His vote is similarly meaningless if he can count on the residents of his state to overwhelmingly support another candidate. The low voter turnout for Presidential elections is surprising only because it has been as high as it has.

Many arguments are made against the establishment of the direct-vote; most are without firm basis. The most consistently voiced objections suggest that, whatever the merits of the direct-vote, we would be substituting an unknown for a known variable. As Clinton Rossiter warns:

We should hesitate a long time before replacing a humpty-dumpty system that works with a neat one that will blow up in our faces.<sup>74</sup>

Such an argument comes very close to saying that whatever is, is right, simply

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>74</sup> Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency (New York:1956), p. 144.

because it is. To argue that the Electoral College will continue to mirror the popular will in the future simply because it has done so in the recent past is to place one's faith in the gods. It would be equally valid to argue that it won't rain tomorrow because it didn't rain today.

It has been said that the direct-vote would undermine federalism and our two-party system. The federalist system argument boils down to an argument over the fundamental principle of whether the election of the President should be determined by the votes of states or individuals. If one believes in the right of every American to equal representation, the federalist argument is immediately insupportable. Even if one believes that some sort of balance should be achieved between the large and small states, it has previously been demonstrated that the Electoral College discriminates against the smaller states. The whole argument of large versus small states is, in one sense, irrelevant:

Experience has shown no clear set of interests held by small states as opposed to large ones. None of the great battles of American political history — in Congress or in Presidential elections — has been fought on a basis of small versus large states. The arguments have been ideological, economic, and regional but never of the kind that neatly line up the small states on one side and the large ones on the other. The arguments over the years, starting at the Constitutional Convention itself, on the subject of big- versus small-state interests and advantages might well be termed the Great Irrelevancy. <sup>75</sup>

The argument that direct election of the President would lead to a great

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<sup>75</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 262.

number of ideologically-oriented splinter parties seems plausible only on the surface. It is argued that splinter parties would be encouraged because their votes would finally be reflected in the national vote count and it would be easier for them to qualify for places on the ballot. The implication of such an argument is that the two-party system is presently viable only because splinter parties are discouraged by the difficulty of winning a plurality of popular votes in any given state. Little serious thought is required to refute such a contention:

An extensive body of political research has identified many reasons for Americans' adherence to the two-party system: the electoral college is not among them. . . . Many institutional factors also discourage third parties, including the basic American system of elections -- electoral laws, campaign practices, social patterns, which make it extremely difficult for minor parties to attain even secondary nationwide influence. Contributing factors are the high cost of political campaigning, the statutory obstacles to getting on the ballot in many states, and the legal status of the major parties as supervisors of elections in many areas.<sup>76</sup>

It is sometimes maintained that it is a good thing that the outcome of Presidential elections hinges on the larger, more populous states. Such states, with their large metropolitan areas and high concentrations of ethnic groups, are said to provide a useful balance of liberal progressivism against the conservatism of the smaller and more rural states. It is argued that if the direct-vote were implemented, the large states would lose their pivotal influence and the nation would be governed by more conservative Presidents. Such a view is unnecessarily grim:

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 258-259.

In their capacity as states, they would lose the special pivotal power assigned to them today. The election of the President would no longer swing on the turn of a few thousand votes in California, Illinois, or New York. But this is not to say that the people of the big states would have anything to lose... Moreover, it seems certain that no Presidential candidate will ever risk ignoring the vital interests of citizens in the large metropolitan areas of the country which form the bulk of the big-state populations. 77

Minority groups — blacks, Catholics, union members, Jews — might possibly lose some influence in a shift to the direct-vote, but it is doubtful whether the loss would be significant. In the first place, the assertion that minority groups play a pivotal role in doubtful states is open to question. While it is true that a handful of voters can swing pivotal states in some elections, there are clearly limits to the ability of leaders of ethnic, economic, or religious groups to deliver all the members of their group to one party or the other. In a recent study by Robert Axelrod, it was found that while there are significant differences in the electoral coalitions of the two major parties — Democrats usually get major contributions of votes from blacks, Catholics, and union members, while Republicans tend to be white, nonunion, and Protestant — the party coalitions are very loose:

The coalition literature from game theory is of little help here because of its assumption that groups are unified actors. Each group is assumed to be able to turn out all of its members and deliver them with complete loyalty to the coalition of its choice. While this assumption is suitable for certain legislative bodies, it is a gross distortion when applied to a mass electorate whose turnout and loyalty are always less than complete. . . . Except for blacks, none of

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77 Ibid., pp. 281-282.



the twelve groups studied ever gave more than 80% of their votes to one party. Second, the coalitions are loose in the sense that group loyalties are not constant from one election to the next. Finally, when a group's loyalty shifts it is as likely to shift in response to a national trend as it is for reasons specific to the group. Indeed, again with the exception of blacks, each of the groups usually divided their votes no more than 15% differently than did the nation as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

It can thus be seen that it would be just as logical to argue that suburbanites or American Legionnaires or Episcopalians constitute the swing vote in the pivotal states and thus exert greater influence on Presidential elections than their actual numbers warrant.<sup>79</sup> The point is that small differences in voting patterns are magnified by the Electoral College in pivotal states. In a very close race, a handful of people from any group may swing a state's full number of electoral votes to one candidate or the other. While groups of people cannot be assumed to be unified actors, the structure of the Electoral College is such that states act as unified actors. Axelrod's survey was nationwide and therefore does not really concern itself with the pivotal role that any group can play in a doubtful state.

Another drawback to the argument that it is admirable that minority groups with progressive views hold pivotal positions in Presidential politics — assuming that we accept this assertion — is that it depends upon transient circumstances. At some point in the future a conservatively oriented group such as the John Birch Society might hold such a pivotal position. What such an argument really maintains is that disproportionate representation is acceptable as a means to an end — the election of a progressive President; such an argument is short-sighted at best.

One final reason why minorities would not significantly lose influence in a shift to the direct-vote alternative is that they would be able to amass a group on a national basis. Blacks, for example, are outnumbered in every state of the Union. Within the Electoral College they cannot hope to be represented in the election with

<sup>78</sup> Robert Axelrod, "An Analysis of Electoral Coalitions, 1952-1968", American Political Science Review, Vol. LXVI, March 1972, pp. 12-19.

<sup>79</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 282.

full force; i.e., their votes tend to be more than cancelled out, particularly in the deep South. The direct-vote would give blacks and other underrepresented minority groups a stronger voice in the election of the President.

American politics has become increasingly nationalized in recent years. Due to a great number of factors — among them, increasingly standardized levels of education, the mobility of the population, the impact of the mass media and more or less standard "middle-class values" — in many respects there is not a great deal of difference between the states. A basis exists for a truly national election of the President. Because the popular vote already corresponds closely to the way the American people think of the President as representative of all of the people, the implementation of the direct election of the President would not be likely to cause any major change in the political alignments of the country or in the manner in which Presidential campaigns are conducted:

In a series of interviews with national party professionals, men who had managed or advised in Presidential campaigns of the last decades, the author asked for their analysis of the impact that a direct vote might have. Almost without exception, they replied that they saw few if any substantive changes that might result in Presidential campaigns, and none felt that a direct vote would pose any special threat — or give any special advantage — to his party. <sup>80</sup>

If direct election and the abolition of the Electoral College would not significantly alter the structure of American politics, but would do away with the potential for electoral chaos, a pertinent question arises. Why has such action not been taken?

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<sup>80</sup> Peirce, The People's President, p. 276.

The answer is complex. First of all, not everyone in a position to alter the electoral system is convinced of the necessity or virtue of doing so. Second, even among those who agree that the Electoral College should be abolished, there is substantial disagreement about which method of Presidential election should replace it:

. . . the cause of electoral reform seems to be endangered by two age-old threats -- the unwillingness of reformers to agree on a single system and the insistence of some that they could reform the system for their own partisan advantage.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, even if everyone in the nation agreed that the direct-vote method of Presidential election should replace the Electoral College, considerable problems of implementation would have to be resolved. The major problems of implementation are in three areas: obtaining an accurate national vote count, determining the qualifications for voters, and the method to be used in the event that the popular vote does not determine a clear winner.

There has never been an official national popular vote count. Critics maintain that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent fraud. Theodore White, for example, warns that direct election:

. . . requires national surveillance of each of the approximately 167,000 voting precincts of the United States. And no national surveillance can work without the establishment of a national police system.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>82</sup> Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1968 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), p. 506.

The implication of such an argument is that fraud cannot as easily influence Presidential elections under the present electoral system. In fact, however, under the present system there is an even greater potential that a few thousand deliberately misplaced votes might determine the outcome. Consider, for example, the rewards for fraud in a pivotal state with several electoral votes in a close election.

The problems involved in the qualification of voters have been eased in recent years by the Constitutional Amendment lowering the age requirement to 18, and by increased registration of blacks in the deep South. In the event that a state attempted to deny the right of voting to certain citizens, it might be well to include in any proposal for direct election the power of Congress to intervene.

Finally, there is the problem of deciding how many popular votes are necessary to declare a winner. Should a majority or simple plurality be required, and what method should be implemented in the event that neither is achieved.

A proposed Constitutional Amendment for direct popular vote, drafted by three attorneys associated with the American Bar Association's Commission on Electoral College Reform, meets these problems. The proposal is very similar to one introduced by Senator Birch Bayh, and is presented here as the long-overdue solution to the problems and potential problems of the archaic Electoral College:

## ARTICLE —

Section 1. The President and Vice President shall be elected by the people of the several States and the district constituting the seat of government of the United States.

Section 2. The electors in each State shall have the qualifications requisite for electors of Senators and Representatives in Congress from that State, except that the legislature of any State may prescribe lesser qualifications with respect to residence and Congress may establish uniform residence and age qualifications.

Section 3. The persons having the greatest number of votes for President and Vice President shall be elected, if such number be at least 40 per centum of the whole number of votes cast for such offices. If no persons have such number, a runoff election shall be held in which the choice of President and Vice President shall be made from the persons who received the two highest numbers of votes for each office.

Section 4. The times, places, and manner of holding such election and entitlement to inclusion on the ballot shall be prescribed in each State by the legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by law make or alter such regulations. The Congress shall prescribe by law the time, place, and manner in which the results of such elections shall be ascertained and declared.

Section 5. Each elector shall cast a single vote jointly applicable to President and Vice President. Names of candidates shall not be joined unless they shall have consented thereto and no candidate shall consent to his name being joined with that of more than one other person.

Section 6. The days for such elections shall be determined by Congress and shall be uniform throughout the United States.

Section 7. The Congress may by law provide for the case of the death of any candidate for President or Vice President before the day on which a President-elect or a Vice President-elect has been chosen; and for the case of a tie in any election.

Section 8. This article shall be inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an amendment to the Constitution by conventions of three-fourths of the States within seven years from the date of its submission to the States by the Congress.

CONCLUSION

Chapter Five

## Conclusion

Utilizing William Riker's theory of political coalitions as a basis, an historical examination of the Electoral College was made in an attempt to prove that at least certain aspects of his theory are applicable to the functioning of the American electoral system.

Because political actors tend to be rational and because Presidential elections can be viewed as zero-sum games in the sense of Riker's model of political behavior, it has been shown that Presidential aspirants will seek to form minimum winning coalitions of the larger, more populous states. The rules of the Presidential "game" are such that any other behavior can be deemed irrational.

The evidence presented hopefully has convinced the reader that the Electoral College is no longer what the framers of the Constitution intended it to be. The inherent injustice of the Electoral College was demonstrated in the discussions of three elections — 1824, 1876, and 1888 — in which the popular vote winner was denied the Presidency, and it was pointed out that, because of the structure of the Electoral College, the popular votes of residents of some states are worth more than the votes of other citizens.

The direct election of the President was discussed as a viable alternative to the Electoral College, and some of the obstacles to electoral reform were examined.

Ultimately, the manner in which one views the present electoral system depends upon the acceptance or non-acceptance of the normative assumption with which this paper began : that the election of the President should rest upon national rather than federative principles; that each individual's vote should be of equal importance. So long as the state is the basic unit of Presidential politics, the implications of Riker's model of coalition formation ensure that the popular votes of individuals in some states will have greater influence on the outcome than others.

Only by abolishing the Electoral College and instituting the direct popular election of the President can this fundamental political injustice be undone. In this tense and troubled era of United States history, it is to be hoped that the American people do not wait for another deadlocked breakdown of the electoral system to occur before acting.



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