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Where has Democracy Gone?

On Tuesday, November 8th, 2016, I vividly recall staying up late with my father, eagerly anticipating the historic moment of witnessing the first-ever woman president in American history. I watched as the various news sources playing around me confidently predicted Hillary Clinton's future win as the next president of the United States of America. I woke up expecting it to be a revolutionary day for women everywhere, only to find Donald Trump president. Confused, I recall asking my dad if Hillary Clinton won, to which he replied "Clinton won the popular vote but not enough electoral votes." After some research, my ten-year-old self was so confused about how Clinton won the popular vote by over 2.8 million and why our system would elect such an important executive based on anything besides the sheer number of votes per candidate.

The Electoral College is addressed in Article II of the Constitution and the 12th Amendment. It serves in part as a settlement between Congressional votes and the popular vote of citizens. The Electoral College process is made up of the electors who vote for the president and vice president. There are 538 electors and for a president to win they must obtain a majority of 270 electoral votes.

The Electoral College system is one of the most debated problems in our nation. According to the Pew Research Center, 65% of American adults believe that electing the president should be based on popular vote ("The Majority of Americans"). This makes our current voting system an issue that must be addressed to avoid bipartisanship. Over 700

proposals have been introduced to Congress to eliminate or amend the Electoral College, making it the subject with the highest number of proposals (National Archives). Yet, the system remains one of the most controversial and remains unchanged.

Beginning, but not exclusive to, the 2016 presidential election, citizens have noticed the disparities between popular vote outcomes versus electoral vote outcomes, and are beginning to question the nature of how we elect our president and if that system is truly democratic. Although the Electoral College System was intended to ensure proper representation among the states and protect against overwhelming majority voices it must be reformed due to its unequal and undemocratic outcomes. The Electoral College system does not accurately represent the ideals of the nation. This system is based upon an institution of slavery that is embedded in the system, it favors voters in less populated states by allocating the number of electors based on representation in the Senate and puts all the power on states that could swing either way in the election. Instead, the fairest system serves as a compromise between the popular vote and the Electoral College, and that is National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPVIC).

Although slavery has been abolished its impact is embedded in our winner-takes-all system. From the 3/5ths compromise the South viewed slaves as $\frac{3}{5}$ of a person and counted their votes proportionally. Jim Crow Laws were enacted to segregate black individuals and maintain a racial hierarchy while disregarding their needs for political reform. Poll taxes were used to disenfranchise lower-income African Americans. The baggage from these events remains embedded in our political system. The Electoral College system was based upon the economic institution of slavery, as slavery was eliminated, the Electoral College failed to adapt. As we as a nation evolve,

we reevaluate the system and what it was based on, and that is exactly what's been happening in the last decade. Because of institutionalized racism, many minority groups are geographically concentrated in certain areas. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, "Because the concentration of black people is highest in the South, their preferred presidential candidate is virtually assured to lose their home states' electoral votes. Despite black voting patterns to the contrary, five of the six states whose populations are 25 percent or more black have been reliably red in recent presidential elections" ("The Electoral College's Racist Origins"). In other words, the Electoral College disenfranchises the black South by having their votes undermined. This is a highly desirable system to benefit the southern white population and dilute the black southern population, a similar pattern seen in the 1800s.

Along with the racism imprinted in our voting system, the Electoral College also overvalues the votes in smaller, rural areas over more populous, urban areas, and relies on a small cohort of officials to carry out the vote of the people, causing some votes to carry more weight than others. In the US there are an estimated 332 million people, yet only 538 people (electors) decide the fate of the election. How can the US be regarded as one of the most democratic countries in the world if we allow 0.000156% of votes to truly count ("The Electoral College – Top 3 Pros and Cons")? Each state in the US gets a minimum of three electoral votes, and each state's total number of votes is based on representation in Congress. Washington D.C. and Wyoming both have 3 electoral votes, though the population of Washington D.C. is 712,816, and the population of Wyoming is 583,279, giving Wyoming disproportionate power in comparison to some states with larger populations (Liasson). To put it in simpler terms, the fewer people you have in your state, the more you benefit from the Electoral College. A common argument

amongst Electoral College supporters is that abolishing the Electoral College will disenfranchise rural areas. In reality, the abolishment of the Electoral College will only level the playing field for all citizens by giving one vote per person and not giving less populated states more weight in the elections.

Another flaw in the system is the influence of swing states. Swing states are states that are politically divided and don't have a political majority, making them states that have the power to swing the election, giving a large amount of influence to just 12 states, and encouraging presidential candidates to only campaign in those states. This is an unproductive system in picking the executive of this country, and provides less incentive to vote in safe states, resulting in voter apathy. The enormous influence of swing states in deciding the outcome of the presidential election cannot be a representation of a fair and equal democracy. According to PBS NewsHour, "Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have made more than 90% of their campaign stops in just 11 so-called battleground states. This allows for candidates to alter and adapt their presidential goals to the needs of the swing states to win the presidency instead of addressing the entire country. Similarly, presidential elections have very little reliability when it comes to swing states. According to Jesse Wegman, the author of *Let the People Pick the President*, "In 2020, despite the 7 million-vote victory that Joe Biden won in the popular vote, people overlook the fact that 45,000 votes switch in the three key battleground states, and you're looking at a second term of Donald Trump." 45,000 votes had the possibility to outweigh the 7 million votes that counted toward the election. If every vote had the same weight in the election, the presidential candidate would be forced to adapt to the widespread values of the 50 states in the US, not just 12. To have a successful political system, it must encourage its citizens to vote and generate societal, political, and

economic change. Citizens in safe states will not even bother to vote as their state votes for them.

Although the ideal solution would be to completely destroy and rebuild the system in which we elect our president based on Popular Vote, this system would require both houses of Congress to amend the constitution with a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority and given the stability and continuity of the system it is unlikely that we will see reform anytime soon. Instead, the best way to implement a Popular vote in the current system is to slowly encourage more states to enact the National Vote Compact. The National Vote Compact is an agreement amongst states to award their electoral votes to the president who receives the National Popular Vote. This ensures that individual votes will matter, while still preserving the state control of the Electoral College. According to The National Popular Vote website, “The National Popular Vote bill has been enacted by 17 jurisdictions possessing 205 electoral votes, including 4 small states (DE, HI, RI, VT), 9 medium-sized states (CO, CT, MD, MA, MN, NJ, NM, OR, WA), 3 big states (CA, IL, NY), and the District of Columbia. The bill will take effect when enacted by states with 65 more electoral votes” (“Written Explanation”). This is the ideal system to preserve democracy, by changing the system from the inside out. It is important to encourage and vote for legislators who will enact this process as it will jumpstart political reform.

In essence, the Electoral College was crafted centuries ago, no longer aligning with the current needs and values of modern-day society. From its racist origins, unequal weight of votes, and influence of swing states, the Electoral College fails to serve as a fair and democratic process. To change the political system upon which we based this country would be a controversial task, instead proposing a compromise would be a successful start. The National Vote Compact is the solution. A way to ensure that your

vote will count and will matter. The National Vote Compact is a step toward true democracy and a way to ensure all votes matter. "Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people." - Abraham Lincoln

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