

The Intellectual Dishonesty of the Campaign Against the Electoral College

A full-blown war is raging against the Electoral College.

But as activist groups become more desperate to overturn our way of electing presidents before voters go the polls in November 2020, their arguments become more absurd and hyperbolic.

CNN recently ran a preposterous segment suggesting that James Madison called the Electoral College “evil,” a [shameful distortion](#) and an absurdity given that the man known as the Father of the Constitution had a direct hand in creating the institution.

Others have made more serious but ultimately absurd indictments of the Electoral College.

Among the biggest stretches made by critics of the Electoral College is that the institution was created simply to benefit slavery.

Left-wing [pundits](#), [politicians](#), and even [a few scholars](#) have made this a popular argument.

However, it isn't true and is clearly a smear, a desperate ploy by sophists who want to tarnish the institution because they think it stands in the way of progressive electoral dominance.

Historian Allen Guelzo has utterly debunked the “pro-slavery” narrative against the Electoral College.

Guelzo, writing in National Affairs, says the only mention of slavery related to the Electoral College debate at the

Constitutional Convention—the lynchpin of the argument that the institution was pro-slavery—is an obscure and unclear quote from Madison.

Madison's [words](#) do not seem to suggest the Electoral College would help or hurt slave states in particular, however, but that it would balance the interests of different regions. Guelzo [writes](#):

[Madison] appears to have concluded that an Electoral College system based on representation would improve this balance and keep presidential elections from becoming sectional affairs. The idea that the Electoral College was proposed to protect Southern slavery stretches the imagination; if anything, Madison seems to be suggesting that an Electoral College would mute unfair sectional advantages.

Tying the Electoral College to slavery based on this thin evidence is flimsy at best, a fact recently admitted by liberal historian Sean Wilentz.

Not only does little evidence exist of a connection between slavery and the Electoral College, according to Wilentz, the early president most helped by the lack of national popular vote was John Quincy Adams, who was anti-slavery and from a free state.

Wilentz [writes](#) in The New York Times that he thinks there are plenty of good reasons to get rid of the Electoral College, but that “the myth that the Electoral College began as a slaveholders’ instrument needs debunking—which I hope to help with in my book’s revised paperback.”

A more honest debate about the Electoral College would not be over its relation to slavery, which no longer exists, but over whether it works for our republic today.

The standard argument against the Electoral College is that

it's not fully democratic and is unfair. Detractors lament that a failure of the system is indicated by the rare cases—such as 2016—in which the winner of the presidency is not determined by the winner of the national popular vote total.

This is a fair, but wrongheaded, criticism of the Electoral College.

For one, the Founders did not design our republic as a pure democracy, but they did allow great leeway for democracy as a critical element of self-government.

The Electoral College, as it exists today, is a mostly democratic system. It has been since the early 19th century, when states moved away from legislatures selecting electors in favor of direct elections by the people.

In the 20th century, not a single state has chosen electors by any method other than a democratic one.

The real principle at stake, and the one most threatened by a national popular vote, is the concept of federalism.

Detractors complain that votes in states are unequal, that a voter in a massive state such as California has less power than a voter in dramatically less populous Wyoming. This criticism is overblown.

The framers of the Constitution designed the Electoral College as what they hoped would be the best way of choosing America's chief executive. This meant preserving the concept of federalism and a diffusion of power among the states.

Americans don't directly vote for their presidents. Instead, when we vote for a candidate, we actually vote for electors who then cast their votes for that candidate on a set date after the election. The Founders preferred this method as a way to prevent a corruption of the vote.

Each state's assigned number of electors is based on its total number of representatives in the House and Senate.

How many House seats a state gets is based on population as updated by the census, of course. But since each state has two senators, the Electoral College is slightly unbalanced to favor small states, a concession to them and a safeguard against a tyranny of the majority feared by the Founding Fathers.

It's not a large concession in the grand scheme of things, though.

California currently receives 55 electoral votes in the Electoral College, and Wyoming gets only three. Obviously, being a large state is still a major advantage, and presidential candidates have significant incentives to win those states over the smaller ones.

But this state-based system does, to a degree, force presidential candidates to appeal to a wide spectrum of Americans.

Those running for president not only have to appeal to a wide diversity of people across states, but within states, instead of focusing only on the big urban areas with the greatest payoffs.

A national election that relies heavily on this concept of federalism ultimately fulfills the requirement that presidents receive the "esteem and confidence of the whole Union," as Alexander Hamilton [wrote](#) in Federalist 68.

This played out in 2016, which was [an example of the Electoral College's success](#), not its failure.

One candidate, now-President Donald Trump, appealed to and ultimately flipped states that had voted Democrat for nearly a generation because he appealed to them in ways that members of

his party hadn't in a long time.

On the other hand, Hillary Clinton dumped [massive resources](#) into places such as Chicago and New Orleans, where she already had overwhelming support, in an effort to "win" the popular vote.

Clinton's ill-conceived plan worked directly counter to how the Electoral College was designed to function, the result being a rare circumstance where the winner of the popular vote lost the election.

Clinton could have spent more time in states such as Michigan and Pennsylvania, once thought to be part of an electoral "Blue Wall" in the so-called Rust Belt. But she didn't.

She paid a price, within a well-known system, for taking key states for granted.

Poor strategy, not an inherent flaw in the American election system, did in Trump's opponent. Why should we see this as a reason to ditch a two-century-old institution of marvelous success and stability?

Not everything the Founders predicted about American presidential elections has been borne out, but the federalist structure of the Electoral College remains an excellent, if not perfect, method of selecting our presidents.

Ridiculous accusations about it being pro-slavery, and misguided desires to make it more "democratic," are no reason to let a misguided [and likely unconstitutional](#) National Popular Vote Compact—[or any other scheme](#)—bring the Electoral College to an end.

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