

Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America

The electoral college is the extraordinarily complex mechanism by which Americans choose their president. Is there any justification for such a system, which may elect the candidate who does not receive the most votes? Today, with two of the last five presidential elections having gone to the popular-vote loser and the debacle following the 2020 election, the electoral college's flaws are more apparent than ever. In this fourth edition of the definitive book on the electoral college, George C. Edwards III employs rigorous analysis and systemic data to show how the system violates core democratic principles and does not provide the benefits its advocates claim. With a new chapter focusing on the 2020 election, Edwards addresses justifications for the electoral college that were popular among Trump supporters following the 2016 and 2020 elections. He concludes by offering a straightforward approach to selecting the president that maximizes political equality.

George C. Edwards III is a Distinguished Fellow at the University of Oxford and University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Jordan Chair in Presidential Studies Emeritus at Texas A&M University. He is a senior figure in the study of the presidency and has written or edited twenty-seven books. He was also editor of *Presidential Studies Quarterly* and general editor of the *Oxford Handbook of American Politics*. He was a founder and served as the president of the Presidency and Executive Politics Section of the American Political Science Association and has held senior appointments at Oxford, the University of London, Sciences Po Paris, Peking University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the US Military Academy at West Point.

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Fourth Edition

GEORGE C. EDWARDS III



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*To Mary Beth and Sue
my cherished sisters*

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Preface

On February 24, 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin and President George W. Bush held a joint press conference in Bratislava. A reporter asked Putin about the antidemocratic direction in which he was taking his country. Putin responded:

I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that the leaders of the regions of the Russian Federation will not be appointed by the president. Their canvases will be presented, will be submitted to regional parliaments that are elected through secret ballot by all the citizens. This is, in essence, a system of the Electoral College, which is used, on the national level, in the United States, and it is not considered undemocratic, is it?

The fact that the leader of Russia, who has demonstrated a distinct lack of appreciation for democracy, used the electoral college as a rationale to defend the less than democratic elections in his own country is, in itself, disconcerting. That he had a point is even more so.

I have been a student of the presidency for half a century. Until the election of 2000, I never paid much attention to the manner in which we selected the president, often referred to as the most powerful person in the world. I was not troubled that George W. Bush won the election, but I was dismayed by *how* he won. I could not reconcile my democratic values with the fact that the person who finished second in the popular vote won the election.

When Donald Trump won the 2016 election despite receiving nearly three million fewer votes than his opponent, it added a new urgency to evaluating the electoral college. Equally concerning were his efforts in 2020 to overturn his election loss by seven million votes. It was the electoral college that provided the opportunity for the president's disturbing challenges to American democracy.

When I read through the electoral college literature, seeking a rationale for such incongruous outcomes, I could not find one. In the process, however, I

discovered that among advocates of the electoral college, there was an insensitivity to democratic norms and a wide range of justifications for the electoral college's violations of them. Yet all these justifications seemed to be contrary to fact.

Upon closer inspection, I found that defenders of the electoral college based their assertions of the system's virtues on a series of faulty premises. They virtually never engaged in rigorous reality checking, provided systematic data to support their claims, or referred to the vast relevant literature on politics and elections. Instead, they simply *assumed* their claims to be true.

This is no way to evaluate the election of the president. As a result, I undertook a more rigorous analysis of the electoral college than had been done before. Chapter 1 raises questions about the electoral college and Chapter 2 explains how it works. Chapters 3 and 4 show how the electoral college violates democratic norms, particularly political equality. Chapter 5 explores the origins of the electoral college, asking whether we can find justification for it in the intentions of the framers. Chapter 6 examines the claims made by advocates of the electoral college that it protects the interests of states, especially small states, and of racial and ethnic minorities. In Chapter 7, I examine other claims made by defenders of the electoral college, namely that it is essential for maintaining the harmony and cohesion of the Republic. In Chapter 8, I analyze whether the electoral college is necessary to prevent the fragmentation and polarization of the party system. In Chapter 9, I review alternatives to the electoral college and explore the consequences of adopting direct election of the president.

I am grateful to a number of people for their help in producing this volume. Rachel Blaifeder, my talented editor at Cambridge University Press, supported and facilitated this project. Sarah Norman did an outstanding job copyediting the manuscript, and Santhamurthy Ramamoorthy provided skilled editorial management throughout the production process. As always, my wife, Carmella, is the one who makes all my work possible.