

# The Electoral College isn't perfect. But that's not enough of a reason to end it.

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*This week Electors met in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to formally elect Donald Trump as the 45th president of the US, despite the fact that his rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly three million votes. In light of this disparity, is it now time to abolish the Electoral College? [Kristin Kanthak](#) argues that such a move could create a new set of problems in future elections. Instead, she writes, a better move would be to end the two 'bonus' Electors states have regardless of population.*



This year was a good one for Alexander Hamilton. His life inspired a Tony award-winning smash musical and his views of the proper role of the Electoral College were dinner table conversation after the contentious American presidential election. Many progressives argued that Hamilton gave Electors permission to ignore their state's voters and select the winner of the national vote: Hillary Clinton. Hamilton, after all, did say in [Federalist 68](#) that Electors should "vote their conscience for the good of America." But Federalist 68 is an essay, not a sound bite, and there's not much for a small-d democrat (or even a small-r republican) to like in Hamilton's conception of the Electoral College. At the same time, though, abandoning the Electoral College altogether could be disastrous.

At one point in Federalist 68, Hamilton seems to foretell the possibility that the Russian government may have intentionally assisted Donald Trump in winning the election (or at least Hamilton foretold the intrigue if not the actual hacking of emails). Hamilton said that the Electoral College may protect us "*from the desire in foreign powers to gain an improper ascendant in our councils.*" But Hamilton is not talking about the Electoral College protecting us from the off chance that a foreign entity could prevent an election from properly selecting the president who represents the popular will of the people. To Hamilton, elites, not "the people," should be selecting presidents.

Well, then, isn't that a reason to do away with the Electoral College entirely? A majority of the American people voted for Hillary Clinton. Shouldn't she be our president? Possibly. But before we throw the Electoral College out with the bathwater, let's consider some of the benefits of keeping the antiquated system around:

- Having to win lots of states by a little bit is not such a bad thing. Consider a stark example: A little more than 53 percent of the US population lives in the states of the old Confederacy. Imagine a presidential candidate who promised not only social policies those voters prefer but a huge tax on all people living outside the old South, with the proceeds going entirely to those states. That candidate would win the election and become president in a victory large enough to preclude even a recount. Under the Electoral College, that candidate would receive a paltry 160 Electoral votes, less than 30 percent of the Electoral College total and 110 shy of the number needed to win. The Electoral College prevents these types of regional candidacies, which is probably a good thing.
- Ending the Electoral College may result in a dilution of minority vote strength. African Americans comprise about 13 percent of the American population and Latinos about 10 percent, not a large portion of the national electorate. But in several key states – Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina, for example – minority groups comprise a large enough voting bloc to merit attention from office-seeking candidates. States like Texas and Georgia could become the presidential battleground states of the future should demographics continue to change and the Electoral College remain in place.

- The 2000 election in Florida could happen again, but on a national scale. Those who don't remember the hanging chads of the 2000 election firsthand have read about them in the history books. Close elections are fairly common in the US – see North Carolina's recent gubernatorial election for the most recent example. But imagine a national recount that may take months rather than days to complete. Indeed, we have only recently completed the national ballot count, and that was without any sort of recount at all. The 2000 election was resolved in the second week of December. If we had to have a national recount, it would be unlikely to be complete by the time we needed to inaugurate a new president on January 20. Who would be in charge in the meantime?

The Electoral College isn't perfect. It, like the Senate, favors small states over larger ones because each state gets a "bonus" two Electors regardless of population. This means that California gets 55 Electors for its 38.8 million residents – a little more than 705,000 residents per Elector – whereas Wyoming (with 3 Electors and a population of about 584,200) has a mere 195,000 residents per Elector. Even if we were to drop the two extra electors, California would have 732,000 residents per Elector, still more than Wyoming's 584,200 per Elector, but the difference is not nearly as dramatic.

Dropping the two extra Electors, then, would allow us to narrow the representation gap of the Electoral College while allowing its more salutary effects to remain. Of course, winning players are generally loath to change the rules of the game. Dropping the two extra Electors might be more small-d democratic, but we should not expect big-R Republicans to support the change any time soon.

*Featured image credit: By Publius (pseudonym) [Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison]. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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Kristin Kanthak, a native of Walnut, Calif., joined Pitt's faculty in 2006. She is a coauthor of *The Diversity Paradox: Political Parties, Legislatures, and the Organizational Foundations of Representation in America*, which was named the recipient of the 2013 Alan Rosenthal Prize. The annual award is sponsored by the American Political Science Association's Legislative Studies Section and is given to the best book or article on legislative studies that has potential value to legislative practitioners. Kanthak received her PhD in political science from the University of Iowa.



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