



Background Reading for Federalism and the Electoral College: Are States Still Relevant?

Background Reading

The Electoral College is an important part of how we in the United States elect our president. In this system, each citizen has one vote, which is cast in their state of residency. These votes are tallied at the state level to determine the state's choice. Then, a group of people serving as the Electoral College gathers together at their state's capital to cast votes, based on a state's population, for the presidential candidate that their state has selected.

This might seem like a complicated system, but the Electoral College arose from the Founding Fathers' fear of "factions," groups of voters who agreed on a common purpose and worked together to make their ideas a reality. According to James Madison in Federalist Number 10, if a faction becomes the majority, "a pure democracy...can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction." (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp) In other words, they worried that factions would become a "tyranny of the majority," and use their power to crush those who disagreed by choosing a president who would serve only the faction's desires, instead of promoting the general welfare. Consequently, in creating the method through which Americans would choose the president, the method of the Electoral College was formed. They were proud of the balance they felt this system created. Alexander Hamilton, in Federalist Number 68, notes of the Electoral College, "if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent." (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed68.asp)

Today, many Americans want to move to a system called the "popular vote," which means that the presidential candidate who receives the most number of votes nationally would win, instead of the winner of the majority of Electoral College votes from the states. In fact, according to a 2020 Gallup poll, 61 percent of citizens surveyed said they would support amending the Constitution to use the popular vote in presidential elections. (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/320744/americans-support-abolishing-electoral-college.aspx>)

This podcast discusses whether or not the Electoral College has outlived its usefulness, or if it still has a purpose and role to play in American political life.

The podcasters first focus on the idea of federalism, which is a type of government in which the nation is not simply one single unit, but a collection of state governments under the banner of one national government, each of which has important roles, responsibilities, and identities. Because the United States has a federal system, Dr. Scott Lesley, professor of political science at Western Kentucky University, discusses how the Electoral College reflects this reality of our system of government and upholds the importance of each state as a geopolitical unit.

They also discuss the idea of a National Popular Vote, which would replace the Electoral College with a less federal-focused system.