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A Government of the People, For the People, and By the Electoral College?

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Abstract

Every four years, as another presidential election approaches, the debate by scholars over the efficacy of the current electoral college system intensifies. Supporters of the Electoral College argue that the existing mechanism has worked well for over 200 years and should not be changed. Critics of the Electoral College, however, argue that the existing system is both undemocratic and possibly dangerous.

This study reviews the existing electoral college mechanism by presenting some of the advantages, as well as identifying some of the major criticisms of the current system. In addition, some proposed reforms are discussed. Finally, general public attitudes on the existing electoral college system are compared with preliminary data from what we term an "educated public" (one that has a clearer understanding of the Electoral College). Our purpose is to ascertain if a more thorough understanding of the current presidential electoral system impacts positively on a respondent's perceptions of the efficacy of the Electoral College.

Previous surveys show that the existing electoral college mechanism for selecting the president of the United States is not popular with the American public. Curiously, however, the matter of reforming or abolishing the Electoral College does not appear to be a salient issue with the American public. The fact that the electoral college mechanism is widely opposed, yet is not a salient issue with the general public, piqued our curiosity as to why this is the case.

More recent research shows that a majority of Americans view politics as too complicated and do not have a sense of political efficacy with regard to influencing the political process. And since the existing electoral college mechanism clearly is more complicated than a direct popular election for president, it is not too surprising that the Electoral College does not enjoy widespread public support. Thus, we hypothesized that an "educated public" would evidence considerably more support for the existing electoral college mechanism. In an effort to prove this hypothesis, we undertook a survey of an "educated public's" views on the Electoral College and compared the results

with a series of similar Gallop and Institute for Research in Social Science surveys of the general public.

Introduction

At least once every four years, as the nation approaches the election of the president, political commentators raise the issue of the electoral college mechanism for electing the president, claiming that something ought to be done to correct it.

Robert E. Diclerico and Allan S. Hammock

As the new millennium approaches, the debate will continue as to whether or not the Electoral College should continue to choose the president of the United States. Many observers believe that the existing system of government should be maintained, arguing that political tradition and the positive features of the Electoral College outweigh any shortcomings. However, there is a growing perception by others that the electoral college mechanism is both undemocratic and politically dangerous. These opposing views have not only generated a lively debate over the efficacy of the Electoral College, but also have prompted a number of proposed reforms to the existing system.

This study reviews the existing electoral college mechanism by presenting some of the advantages, as well as identifying some of the major criticisms of the current system (e.g., the faithless elector, the winner-take-all system, the constant-two addition for smaller states, the uncertainty of the popular vote winner winning the presidency, and the possibility of an Electoral College deadlock). In addition, some proposed reforms to the existing unit rule system (e.g., the congressional district system, the proportional plan, the national bonus plan, and direct election of the president) are presented. Furthermore, public perceptions to the current electoral college system will be discussed and a comparison will be presented with what we term the "educated public" — a select group of the public with a more extensive knowledge of the Electoral College.

Previous surveys show that the existing electoral college mechanism for selecting the president of the United States is not popular with the American public. Curiously, however, the matter of reforming or abolishing the Electoral College does not appear to be a salient public issue. The fact that the electoral college system is widely opposed, yet is not a salient issue with the general public, piqued our curiosity as to why this is the case. Since more recent research shows that a majority of Americans view politics as too complicated and do not have a sense of political efficacy with regard to influencing the political process (National Election Studies, 1996); and since the existing electoral college mechanism clearly is more complicated than a direct popular election for president, it would not be surprising that the Electoral College does

not enjoy widespread public support. Thus, we hypothesized that an “educated public” would evidence considerably more support for the existing electoral college mechanism.¹ In an effort to prove this hypothesis, we undertook a survey of an “educated public’s” views on the Electoral College and compared the results with a series of similar Gallop and Institute for Research in Social Science (IRSS) surveys of the general public.²

The objective of this study is to test the opposite of the following generalization. Many scholars argue that when an issue is highly salient with the public, the government is responsive. So far, the issue of reforming the Electoral College has not been of high importance. This is the case even though many scholars disagree with the system and a majority of the general public favors a direct popular vote for president. We surmised that this could be the result of the American public not fully understanding the concept of Electoral College. Therefore, the primary contribution of this study is its interpretation and analysis of data collected by surveying university students who have a better understanding of the electoral college mechanism. In other words, methodologically speaking, this study will add to current approaches of exploring the Electoral College by surveying students educated about the system. Thus, it can be determined what aspects of the Electoral College an “educated public” would support. Furthermore, the literature does not emphasize public acceptance of the Electoral College or alternative methods. Therefore, this study will provide more information about how a segment of the public would respond to a change in the way the president is selected.

The Existing Electoral College Mechanism

The institution of the Electoral College is described in Article 2, Section I, of the *Constitution of the United States* and was later refined by the Twelfth Amendment. The Electoral College is a body of delegates representing each state that elects the president of the United States. According to the *Constitution*:

Each State shall appoint, in such a Manner as the
Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors,

¹For the purposes of this study, an “educated public” is defined as a select group of American Government students enrolled at Arkansas Tech University and the University of Oklahoma who have a clear understanding of the Electoral College.

²The Gallop surveys were conducted in 1944, 1948, 1950, 1951, 1955, 1960, 1961, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1977, 1980 and 1992. The IRSS surveys were taken in 1968, 1973 and 1975. The “educated public” were surveyed in 1997, 1998 and 1999.

equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be appointed an Elector

Therefore, each state will have at least three electors, since every state has two senators and at least one member in the House of Representatives.

In practice, each political party nominates a slate of electors pledged to that party's candidates. On election day, instead of voters directly electing the president, they vote for one party's slate of electors. Then, the electors cast a vote for President and Vice President. In all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), a system of unit rule is practiced. Unit rule is a "winner-take-all" mechanism in which the candidate who receives the most popular vote in that state will receive all of the state's electoral votes.

After the electors cast their votes, the candidate who receives a majority of the 538 electoral votes (270 votes) wins the election. However, there is a possibility that no one candidate will receive a majority of electoral votes. According to the *Constitution*, in this situation, the House of Representatives chooses the President from the three candidates who received the most votes. Each state casts one vote, and the candidate receiving the majority of votes wins the Presidency. The Vice President, on the other hand, is decided by the Senate when no majority exists. Each Senator casts a vote for one of the two candidates who had received the highest number of votes.

Advantages of the Electoral College

Although there seem to be many critics of the Electoral College, the system continues to endure. A number of scholars support the existing presidential electoral system. For example, Weissberg (1998) defends the existing electoral college mechanism and argues that criticism of the process falls into two main groups: the unpredictable and unintended outcomes under the present system, and accusations that the Electoral College overhauls some votes at the expense of other votes. With respect to the first criticism — the nightmare of unintended consequences — he contends that the odds of this occurring are unlikely. His argument is bolstered by the fact that the winner of the popular vote has almost always won the presidency, and an election has not been decided by the House of Representatives in the last 160 years. In addition, the likelihood of faithless electors affecting the outcome of an election is even more remote. As Jacobson (Nov 1996) points out, there have only been seven faithless electors recorded in the past 50 years (1948, 1956, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1988).

With respect to the second criticism of the Electoral College — misrepresentation caused by the Electoral College — Weissberg (1998) asserts that it is not clear just who the over-advantaged voters are, or whether certain

groups can be the cornerstone of any electoral victory. He further argues that "this 'key-voting-bloc-in-a-key-state' is largely the creation of statistical manipulation" (1998, 101). Weissberg (1998) also responds to the claim that the large states have an undue impact on the policy agenda. He notes that while a candidate who wants to win a populous state may have to appeal to certain groups that may be concentrated in the state, he maintains that one group's interests will coincide with those of other socio-economic groups. Thus, ultimately no one group would necessarily be advantaged over the other. Finally, Weissberg argues that no system will be totally free of some type of bias: therefore, "the issue is not one of 'fair' versus 'unfair,' but what type of unfairness will be present" (1998, 102).

Weissberg (1998) also defends the Electoral College by offering four advantages of this system: (1) it is a proven, workable system; (2) it makes campaigns more manageable; (3) it discourages election fraud; and (4) it preserves a moderate two-party system. The first advantage — a proven, workable system — is a conservative argument: "when something works, though somewhat imperfectly, it should not be easily abandoned for the promise of perfection" (Weissberg, 102). This assertion has some merit since policy changes do not always work as intended. Weissberg's second point — the Electoral College makes campaigns more manageable — is a direct result from the "winner-take-all" system, in which large states receive greater priority. By allowing key states to serve as the focal point of campaigns, the candidates do not have to spend a lot of time, money and energy in all 50 states in order to secure the presidency. Thus, the campaign becomes more manageable since the candidate can focus his or her efforts and limited resources on a smaller number of states. Weissberg's third point suggests that the present system's division of votes discourages election fraud. He argues that in the states with a relatively small number of electoral votes, especially where the outcome is not in much doubt, little incentive exists for widespread election fraud. Finally, Weissberg believes that the two-party system is preserved by the Electoral College which enhances stability of the electoral process since it is difficult for any third-party candidate to receive enough popular votes to secure any electoral votes for that state. Watson (1984) also points out that the Electoral College benefits the two-party system. He contends that for any third party candidate to have an advantage, support must be concentrated geographically in one area instead of dispersed throughout all the states.

Former presidential candidate Steve Forbes (1996) also supports the electoral college system. He believes that the Electoral College "forces general-election presidential candidates to wage national campaigns... and encourages the bringing together of people and interests with different priorities" (1996, 26). He also maintains that when the vote is close between candidates, the Electoral College can be useful. For example, in the 1960 and 1968 elections, where the popular vote was almost a tie, the electoral vote was decisive, providing

legitimacy for the incoming administration since it can assert that it had a mandate to govern.

Criticisms of the Electoral College System

The electoral college method of selecting the president and vice president has been widely criticized. Critics of the present system have outlined a number of flaws: the faithless elector, the winner-take-all system, the "constant two" electoral votes, the uncertainty of the winner winning, and the contingency election procedure.

The Faithless Elector

Longley (1998) criticizes both the quality of the electors and the fact that there is no assurance that the electors will vote as expected. Electors are "pledged" to vote for the candidate of their party. However, as Longley (1998) points out, "State laws requiring electors to vote for their party's candidate are, in practice, unenforceable — and almost certainly unconstitutional" (1998, 93). As previously mentioned, since 1948 there have been seven cases in which the electors have voted for a candidate of a different party. Although there have been few "faithless electors" over the years, Longley asserts that "the likelihood of such deviations occurring on a multiple basis would be greatly heightened should an electoral vote rest on only one or two votes, a real possibility in any close presidential election" (1998, 94). Watson (1984) agrees that the faithless elector is a potential danger of the Electoral College. He points out that one way to prevent this particular shortcoming would be to change the present system to the "automatic plan." Watson's plan would "eliminate the possibility of 'faithless electors' by abolishing that office and automatically casting a state's electoral votes for the popular-vote winner in that state. If no candidate received a majority of the electoral votes, a joint session of Congress would choose the winner, with each representative and senator having one vote" (1984, 65-66).

With respect to Longley's concern of the faithless elector, only a significant number of variant electoral votes could generally pose a validity threat. As history indicates, this is very unlikely. Only a handful of the almost 21,000 electors in U.S. history have voted contrary to the wishes of the electorate. While Watson's "automatic plan" would eliminate the possibility of a faithless elector, currently the states have considerable control over the nomination process for electors (e.g., whether the names are on the ballots, and whether they are legally bound to vote for the candidate that received the most popular votes) which ensures a quality control over the elector selection process. (See Appendix A for a listing of each state's electoral vote process). Furthermore, the concept of using electors to cast the vote for president is a part of U.S. electoral history, and tradition is sometimes difficult to modify. A less radical change would be to encourage states to instigate penalties for those electors who do not vote as pledged. As of January 1997, only five states have defined penalties for an unfaithful elector (New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and

Washington). While it might be difficult to enforce severe penalties, the fact that penalties exist might help to preclude the problem of a “faithless elector.”

The Winner-Take-All System

In the winner-take-all system, as discussed earlier, all of the state’s electoral votes are given to the winner of the state’s popular vote. Longley (1998) notes that this can lead to situations in which a candidate could win 100 percent of the state’s electoral vote, while potentially receiving less than a majority of the popular vote in that state. For example, in the 1992 presidential election, the popular vote was divided between Bill Clinton (43%), George Bush (38%), and Ross Perot (19%). This in turn resulted in a number of states casting all of their electoral votes for a candidate who received less than a majority of the popular vote. Wayne (1997) also agrees that a strong third party movement, combined with the winner-take-all system, could create some problems for the electoral college system. He notes that “third-party candidates or independent electoral slates threaten to secure enough votes to prevent either of the major candidates from obtaining a majority” (1997, 18). Winning a state by less than a majority, or even by a small plurality, can skew the results of the presidential election since all the electoral votes (except for Maine and Nebraska) are given to the candidate with the most popular votes.

The winner-take-all system can have other unwanted effects on the electoral process. In addition to state votes being decided on the basis of small pluralities, the winner-take-all system enhances the importance of winning the most populous states. For example, if candidates focus their campaigns on the ten largest electoral vote states, they can win over 250 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win. Therefore, large states can have a greater impact on influencing the public policy process since candidates concentrate a considerable amount of their campaign resources in those states. In addition, Holmes (1991) notes that not only do candidates campaign in the states with large numbers of electoral votes, but also make sure not to alienate groups that are disproportionately located in them. For example, while the Jewish community makes up only 2.5 percent of the national population, this group is highly concentrated in New York. Since New York contains 33 electoral votes, it is important for candidates to make sure they have support from the Jewish community. Other groups also could potentially be over-represented with the existing electoral college system. For example, President Bill Clinton was criticized in 1996 for signing the Helms-Burton legislation (which sanctioned foreign companies dealing with Cuba) so quickly. Many observers believed that his support for the legislation was an attempt to gain support from the Cuban-American community which is highly concentrated in Southern Florida. Since Florida is the fourth largest state in population, winning the state’s 25 electoral votes was deemed important to the Clinton campaign strategy.

While the current winner-take-all system enhances the importance of candidates winning the most populous states, this is something that will occur regardless of which system is in place. Candidates will still find it vital to campaign in large population states whether the election is determined by popular vote or some form of electoral college mechanism. Clearly, the large population states offer the candidate the opportunity to reach a larger number of the potential electorate more easily. Thus, any electoral system (e.g., proportional vote allocation, popular vote) would encourage candidates to still want to win the most populous states.

The "Constant Two" Addition

Although the large states seem to have an unfair advantage in affecting the political agenda, the smaller population sized states are over-represented in the electoral college process with respect to their relative population size. Regardless of population size, all states are apportioned two electoral votes for their members in the Senate. Longley states that because of this, "inhabitants of the smallest states are advantaged to the extent that they 'control' three electoral votes while their small population might otherwise entitle them to but one or two votes" (1998, 96). Watson also agrees that there is a "built-in bias in the Electoral College that works to the advantage of certain states over others" (1984, 63).

The complaint that the smallest states have an unfair advantage often seems to be overlooked. Perhaps it is masked by the criticisms of the larger states receiving more attention by the candidates. Clearly, the current vote allocation does provide the small states with additional representation. For example, the state of California is allowed 54 electoral votes compared to Arkansas' 6 votes and Oklahoma's 8 votes. While California (52 representatives) has about 13 times the representation of Arkansas (4 representatives) and 8.7 times the representation of Oklahoma (6 representatives), with each state receiving 2 additional votes for the number of senators, California's representation (54 electoral votes) declines to only 9 times that of Arkansas' (6 electoral votes) and 6.8 times that of Oklahoma's (8 electoral votes). Clearly, the principle of one-person, one-vote is not applicable in this case.

The Uncertainty of the Winner Winning

A fourth concern with the Electoral College is that the winner of the popular vote is not guaranteed to win the presidency. This concern has been somewhat validated by the fact that the popular vote winner has not won the presidency on three occasions. For example, in 1824, although Andrew Johnson received 41% of the popular vote compared to John Adams' 31%, Adams became president. In 1876, Samuel Tilden received 51% of the popular vote, but lost to Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes only received 48% of the popular vote, but won the presidency by one electoral vote more than Tilden. In 1888, Grover Cleveland received 100,000 more popular votes than Benjamin Harrison. Yet,

Harrison was elected President because he won a majority of the electoral votes. With this in mind, Longley presents the following question: "This problem is a fundamental one — can an American president operate effectively if he or she received fewer votes than the loser?" (1998, 96). This potential disparity between the popular and the electoral vote has generated great opposition to the Electoral College. Wayne also raises concerns about the possibility of losing the election even though the candidate may have received the most popular votes: "A candidate could be elected by winning the popular vote in the big states by small margins and losing the smaller states by large margins" (1997, 17).

While history demonstrates that the likelihood of a presidential candidate who gets the most popular votes will not win the presidency is rather remote, there are no guarantees that it will not happen in the future. If such a situation now occurred, the results may be more damaging since, with television, today's electorate is more easily informed about the results of the presidential election. It is very likely that any administration that did not win the popular vote, but won the presidency, would experience a crisis in legitimacy with the general public. Not only would the incoming administration not have a mandate to govern, but it most likely would find its political power severely limited. It already is difficult for a president to secure a mandate to govern. If the president was not the popular vote winner, many Americans probably would question the administration's authority to govern and, therefore, limit the president's ability to govern effectively. In today's complex and interdependent world, where decisive decision making can be critical, this could be a dangerous result.

The Contingency Election Procedure

In 1824, Andrew Johnson received more popular votes compared to John Adams. However, in spite of the fact that Johnson received the greatest number of votes, Adams was chosen as the new president. It should be noted, though, that in this case it was not the electors who decided the presidency, but the House of Representatives, since no candidate won an electoral majority. The possibility of an Electoral College deadlock is likely to occur in contemporary politics. For example, Longley notes that in 1960 "a switch of less than 9,000 popular votes from John Kennedy to Richard Nixon in the two states of Illinois and Missouri would have prevented either man from receiving an electoral college majority" (1998, 97). Moreover, in 1976, the presidential election could have resulted in a 269-269 tie if some 12,000 popular votes in Delaware and Ohio had shifted from Carter to Ford. Longley further asserts that in a three party candidate contest, it would be even more difficult in deciding the winner: "there might well be enormous difficulty over choosing between partisan labels and support for the candidate who might have carried their district" (1998, 98). Jacobson (Dec. 1996) agrees that the failure of obtaining an electoral majority would result in a potential constitutional crisis. He believes that a nationwide election between the two candidates with the most votes should occur instead of the House contingency system. Then, if there is still no electoral majority in the

runoff, the candidate with the most popular votes would become President. Watson (1984) also believes that the House contingency system violates political equality. He points out that by allowing the House of Representatives to vote by states, is a violation of the "one person, one vote" principle since each state (regardless of their population size) has one vote.

While many scholars, such as Jacobson, believe that the contingency election procedure should be replaced with a nationwide runoff, there are some advantages and disadvantages associated with this reform. Clearly, the advantage of a runoff deciding the president in the case of a tie is that the people would become the decision makers. This alternative is definitely more democratic and also would provide additional legitimacy for the winner. However, a runoff election would be very time consuming and expensive. The following questions should then be asked: How much time, money and energy is worth allowing the people to vote in a nation-wide runoff election? How large would the turnout be? And do the voters not already entrust the representatives that they elected to make decisions for them (a cardinal principle of representative democracy)?

Proposals for Reform

Many scholars want to reform the Electoral College because they believe that the system of unit rule is undemocratic and unfair. In addition to advocating the outright abolition of the Electoral College, a number of alternatives have been proposed instead of replacing the current system. For example, three suggested alternatives to unit rule are: the congressional district system, the proportional plan, and the national bonus plan.

Congressional District System

The congressional district system was actually the method initially used by states. Hoffman notes that under this system, "only two of a state's electors are chosen according to the statewide popular vote. The remaining electors are chosen based on the popular vote totals within each congressional district" (June 1996, 15). However, with the exception of Maine and Nebraska, legislators gradually began to adopt "unit rule" instead of the district plan. Watson (1984) asserts that there are two reasons for this shift. First, a state's majority party benefits from the unit rule because it does not have to give any electoral votes to a minority party that might be successful in a particular congressional district. Secondly, he believes that unit rule increases the state's power by allowing them to cast all its votes for one candidate. Furthermore, Watson points out that a problem with the congressional district plan is that it "would incorporate into the selection of the president the gerrymandering abuses present in elections to the House of Representatives — manipulating of district boundaries to favor particular political interests" (1984, 67).

The Proportional Plan

The second alternative — the proportional plan — allows each candidate to receive the same proportion of electoral votes as it receives in popular votes. Hoffman (June 1996) notes that if this method was used in Alabama, during the 1992 election, Bush and Clinton both would have received four votes and Perot one instead of Bush receiving all nine electoral votes. Watson (1984) states that in 1950 a proportional plan was introduced by Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and Democratic Representative Ed Gossett of Texas. The plan passed the Senate, but failed in the House of Representatives. Another plan using a system of proportional vote was introduced a short time later in the 84th Congress. According to Corwin, the Lodge-Gossett plan was introduced as the Daniel-Humphrey resolution to “call for the abolition of the Electoral College, but the electoral vote of each state is still retained, to be divided among the several candidates for president in proportion to the popular vote cast for each within a given state” (1957, 49). The candidate with the majority of electoral votes would win the election. If no majority occurred, the Senate and House would choose the president from the two candidates with the most votes. However, because of the concern that this plan could undermine the stability of the electoral system, no reform was enacted. Watson (1984) claims that a disadvantage of the proportional plan is that it would increase the possibility that the two major candidates would fail to achieve a majority. In this case, the House would then decide the presidency. He also points out that, while this system would eliminate the winner-take-all advantage from the large population sized states, the smaller states would still have an advantage since every state receives three electoral votes regardless of size.

The National Bonus Plan

The third alternative — the national bonus plan — has received some support. Watson (1984) notes that under this plan, the winner of the popular vote would receive a “bonus” of 102 electoral votes cast in their favor (two from each state plus two from the District of Columbia). He further points out that the candidate would still have to receive a majority of electoral votes to win the election. If no candidate received the required 321 votes, a runoff election would occur between the two candidates with the most votes. Therefore, if no majority exists, the voters would choose the president instead of the House of Representatives. Holmes asserts that this plan “would assure that the popular vote winner would always win the electoral vote while preserving the importance of the states” (1991, 116). Watson (1984) agrees that this system does retain the state-by-state feature that is important to the concept of federalism. However, he believes that this plan does not always guarantee that the popular vote winner will win the electoral vote.

Eliminating the Electoral College

Instead of reforming the system of unit rule, there have also been proposals that would eliminate the Electoral College altogether. It is believed by many scholars that selecting the president by direct election instead of the Electoral College is the most democratic method. Holmes notes that "under direct popular election, all votes would count, so candidates would have increased incentive to campaign everywhere, even in states where the opposing party had a majority" (1991, 116). Watson (1984) also believes that the direct popular election of the president offers one of the most promising solutions for reform. He contends that this plan ensures that the winner of the popular vote would always be elected president and points out that three influential members of the Constitutional Convention in 1776 (Madison, Wilson and Morris) supported the idea of direct election. However, he admits that other delegates believed that this method would be too democratic: "It would be unnatural to refer the choice of a proper magistrate to the people as it would to refer a trial of colors to a blind man" (1984, 59). In fact, many of the delegates believed that direct election was neither desirable nor feasible. As Wayne points out, many delegates lacked confidence in "the public's ability to choose the best-qualified candidate" and that they "believed that the size of the country and the poor state of its communications and transportation precluded a national campaign and election" (1997, 5).

That said, the size of the country is no longer a problem today because of the communication and technology revolutions that have occurred. In addition, as Amar points out, "Improvements in communications technology, and the rise of political parties, makes possible direct election and a populist Presidency" (1995, 144).

One of the most compelling arguments against direct election of the president is that it could jeopardize the two-party system — a system that has provided considerable political stability for the United States. Watson (1984) notes that some scholars believe that state political leaders will lose power since the candidates will concentrate on a nationwide election instead of a state-by-state vote. Nevertheless, he believes that the state party leaders would continue to play an important role in the election process. Bickel (1968) also expresses concern about direct election and maintains that this system would encourage minority parties to run and support candidates. These minority parties would then obtain bargaining power in determining which of the two leading candidates will receive support. Meanwhile, Ranney (1978) suggests that since the selection process and nominating process are linked, any modification to one might influence the other. For example, enactment of direct election of the president could lead to a similar modification in a national primary law. Weissberg (1998) agrees that there could be some problems with a direct popular election, especially in the case in which no candidate receives a majority. He believes that it is conceivable that a direct election could encourage a wide range of candidates to run for president. If a large number of moderate candidates split the vote and each received several percent from the

middle of the spectrum, the runoff could involve a contest between two extremists who together received the largest number of votes. Weissberg (1998) also believes that a direct popular election system could encourage election fraud and asserts that "all votes are equally valuable and thus equally worth manipulating" (1998, 103). Therefore, he is concerned about such practices as multiple voting, voting the dead, and intimidating the opposition.

Public Perceptions of the Electoral College

While scholars often question whether or not the Electoral College should be maintained or whether an alternative system should be established, the public is usually left out of the debate. In this study, public attitudes were brought into the process. Results of the Gallop and IRSS surveys of the general public on the electoral college system were compared with our survey in which the respondents were part of the "educated public" (i.e., individuals who possessed a clear understanding of the electoral college mechanism). In order to be able to make reliable comparisons between the two surveys, our survey's questions were patterned after the Gallop and IRSS surveys.

Survey Methodology

For the purposes of this study, an "educated public" is defined as a group of select university students at Arkansas Tech University and the University of Oklahoma who have a clear understanding of the Electoral College. In order to determine the public reaction of an "educated public," we surveyed a group of 517 students enrolled at Arkansas Tech University (248) and the University of Oklahoma (269). Clearly, there are advantages and disadvantages to limiting the sample to this group. One advantage is that these students learned about the Electoral College in class. Therefore, they not only have a better understanding of the complicated electoral college mechanism, but also are better able to form a reasoned opinion about the alternative approaches. Furthermore, we were aware of what information pertaining to the Electoral College these students were exposed to. Certainly, there are also drawbacks to surveying this limited group. The information obtained may not be representative of the opinions of all university students or the public as a whole. Therefore, the sample does not necessarily reflect the entire population. However, since the issue explored in this study is so complex, the selected group is necessary to achieve the objectives desired in this study (i.e., survey an "educated public").

While survey data and prior surveys that would provide a secondary analysis were not readily available, Gallup and IRSS have asked some questions pertaining to the Electoral College in past public opinion polls. Realizing that these organizations are highly respected by political scientists, ten of the questions used in their prior surveys were adapted to fit this study. In addition

to adapting relevant questions used by Gallup and IRSS, nine additional questions (not including demographic information) were incorporated into the questionnaire used for this study. Furthermore, since the Electoral College is a more difficult issue to understand, a brief summary of the electoral college mechanism was included at the beginning of the questionnaire. In sum, the survey data provides information to determine whether or not the current electoral college mechanism is supported by an "educated public." In addition, responses indicate which alternatives to the current system are preferred.

Comparison of the Survey Results

A number of questions relevant to support for the existing electoral college system was asked of the "educated public" and the general public (See Appendix B for a more detailed description of the questions and responses). A comparison of the results from the "educated public" survey conducted in this study to the poll results conducted by Gallup and IRSS revealed both similarities and differences. For example, results in both surveys show that the respondent's perceptions of the existing electoral college system (question #5) generally was negative (50.8% of the "educated public" and 54.5% of the general public), while direct election by popular vote (question #6) was supported (59.1% of the educated public and 65.0% of the general public). Thus, the initial hypothesis that the "educated public" would evidence considerably more support for the Electoral College because they had a better understanding of the existing presidential elector system is *not* supported.

However, the "educated public" did seem to possess a deeper understanding of the complexities of the existing electoral college mechanism. For example, there was a noticeable difference between survey results (45.8% of the "educated public" compared to 31.0% from the Gallup polls) for those who believe the Electoral College serves any real purpose (question #7). Also, when asked about how the president should be chosen if no candidate received a majority of electoral votes and the election was referred to the House of Representatives (question #11), a majority of respondents from the 1992 Gallup Poll (52%) believed the candidate who wins the most votes nationally should be voted as president. This response is not too surprising since it parallels to some degree the concept of the popular vote winner becoming president. However, only 29.6% of the "educated public" survey chose that response (30.5% answered the presidential candidate who won their district and 25.1% selected the candidate who won the state). Thus, the "educated public" evidenced more support for alternatives other than just who won the popular vote. While there was widespread support by both groups ("educated public" — 55.9%, general public — 68.2%) for a constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College and have direct election of the president, the "educated public" exhibited less enthusiasm for amending the Constitution. Responses to the questions that were used previously by the Institute for Research in Social Science also demonstrated some differences in attitudes. For example, in the IRSS findings, a majority of respondents (57.9%) opposed the House of Representatives voting in the case of no electoral majority (question #13).

However, only 40.2% of the "educated public" supported this view. Furthermore, in the 1975 IRSS survey, 70.9% of respondents favored replacing the electoral college system with a direct popular vote, believing that this would reduce the amount of money spent on traveling to the small states. This can be compared to only 42.8% of the "educated public" (question #14).

The "educated public" survey also asked questions about the current electoral vote distribution (question #18). Interestingly, it is somewhat supported (52.4%). Moreover, the small state advantage was not a concern to those surveyed (question #20); and only 17.2% of the "educated public" viewed it as a disadvantage of the Electoral College. Perhaps this is the case since both Arkansas and Oklahoma are small population sized states which clearly benefit from the current vote distribution. However, additional attention given to large states was opposed. Since little attention generally is given to either Arkansas or Oklahoma during presidential campaigns, it is possible that this explains why the students in both states who were surveyed opposed the larger states from receiving additional attention.

This said, what should replace this system? There are some interesting responses by the "educated public" of what changes the electoral college mechanism should undergo. The reform alternatives presented were the congressional district system, the proportional plan, the national bonus plan and direct popular election of the president. While the current unit rule winner-take-all system was unpopular, the congressional district plan (question #15) — which is used only in two states — was not supported (only 31.7% were in favor) by the "educated public." Moreover, 35.1% of the "educated public" responded "not sure" to the congressional district plan, indicating that perhaps this plan was too complicated. On the other hand, the proportional plan was supported (66.5%) similar to that of direct popular election (question #8). While it seems that there is great support for the popular vote winner securing the office, the national bonus plan (which helps ensure that the popular vote winner also gains majority of the electoral vote) was not supported (question #16). Only 18.4% of the respondents supported the national bonus plan while 57.7% opposed the plan.

Conclusions

This study reviewed the existing electoral college mechanism by presenting some of the advantages, as well as identifying some of the major criticisms of the current system. In addition, some proposed reforms were discussed. Finally, general public attitudes on the existing electoral college system were compared with preliminary data from what we term an "educated public" (one that has a clearer understanding of the Electoral College). Our purpose was to ascertain if a more thorough understanding of the current presidential electoral system impacts positively on a respondent's perceptions of the efficacy of the Electoral College.

More recent research shows that a majority of Americans view politics as too complicated and do not have a sense of political efficacy with regard to influencing the political process. And since the existing electoral college mechanism clearly is more complicated than a direct popular election for president, it is not too surprising that the Electoral College does not enjoy widespread public support. Thus, we hypothesized that an "educated public" would evidence considerably more support for the existing electoral college mechanism. In an effort to prove this hypothesis, we undertook a survey of an "educated public's" views on the Electoral College and compared the results with a series of similar Gallop and Institute for Research in Social Science surveys of the general public.

The preliminary findings of this study, however, do not support the thesis that an "educated public" would evidence considerably more support for the existing electoral college system. In fact, a clear majority of both the "educated public" and the general public favor a direct election by popular vote for the president of the United States. Thus, a better understanding of the more complicated electoral college mechanism does not produce more support for the existing system.

In spite of significant public opposition to the electoral college mechanism, the concept of the Electoral College is not an especially salient issue with the general public. Citizens do not seem to care that much about changing the status quo. Furthermore, when an issue such as the Electoral College is extremely complicated, there is a tendency to ignore the issue instead of advocating change. National Election Studies (1996) conducted a survey that indicated that in 1994, 65% of Americans viewed politics as too complicated and 55% believed that they did not have a say in what government does. This pessimistic view undoubtedly limits the extent to which citizens get involved in the political process and is a probable contributor to the decline in citizen participation in elections. Thus, it likely will take an event such as the candidate who receives the most popular votes is not elected president to "excite" the public and make the Electoral College a salient issue. Only then will the debate force policy makers to address the issue directly.

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APPENDIX A
States and Electoral Votes

Total Electoral Vote: 538
Needed to Elect: 270

State	1981-1990	1991-2000	Electors nominated by...	Names on ballot?	Legally Bound?
Alabama	9	9	party	no	yes
Alaska	3	3	party	no	yes
Arizona	7	8	primary	yes	no
Arkansas	6	6	convention	no	no
California	47	54	special	no	yes
Colorado	8	8	party	no	yes
Connecticut	8	8	convention	no	yes
Delaware	3	3	convention	no	no
D.C.	3	3	committee	no	yes
Florida	21	25	committee	no	no
Georgia	12	13	convention	no	no
Hawaii	4	4	convention	no	yes
Idaho	4	4	convention	yes	no
Illinois	24	22	convention	no	no
Indiana	12	12	convention	no	no
Iowa	8	7	convention	no	no
Kansas	7	6	party	yes	no
Kentucky	9	8	party	no	no
Louisiana	10	9	party	no	no
Maine	4	4	convention	no	yes
Maryland	10	10	convention	no	yes
Massachusetts	13	12	committee	no	yes
Michigan	20	18	convention	no	no
Minnesota	10	10	convention	no	no

Mississippi	7	7	primary	yes	no
Missouri	11	11	party	no	no
Montana	4	3	party	no	no
Nebraska	5	5	convention	no	no
Nevada	4	4	convention	no	yes
New Hampshire	4	4	convention	no	no
New Jersey	16	15	committee	no	no
New Mexico	5	5	convention	no	with penalty
New York	36	33	committee	no	no
North Carolina	13	14	convention	no	with penalty
North Dakota	3	3	convention	yes	no
Ohio	23	21	convention	no	yes
Oklahoma	8	8	convention	yes	with penalty
Oregon	7	7	party	no	yes
Pennsylvania	25	23	presidential candidate	no	no
Rhode Island	4	4	convention	no	no
South Carolina	8	8	committee	yes	with penalty
South Dakota	3	3	convention	yes	no
Tennessee	11	11	party	yes	yes
Texas	29	32	party	no	no
Utah	5	5	convention	no	no
Vermont	3	3	convention	no	no
Virginia	12	13	convention	yes	yes
Washington	10	11	party	no	with penalty
West Virginia	6	5	convention	no	no
Wisconsin	11	11	legislators & candidates	no	no
Wyoming	3	3	convention	no	yes

Source: Distribution of Electoral Votes: <http://www.fec.gov/pages/electvote.htm> Last updated: 2/18/97.
 How States and Parties Choose Electors: http://www2.smart.net/~deepriver/e_c/statelaw/index.htm
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*A Government of the People, For the People,
 and By the Electoral College?*

APPENDIX B

Results of the Survey

517 students surveyed

Demographic Information

Gender	# students	%
Male	229	44.4
Female	287	55.6

Age	# students	%
under 18	4	0.8
18-20	372	72.1
21-23	92	17.8
24+	47	9.1

Race	# students	%
White	418	81.6
African American	38	7.4
Hispanic	19	3.7
Asian or Pacific Islander	17	3.3
American Indian or Alaskan Native	15	2.9
Other	5	1.0

Classification	# students	%
Freshman	200	39.4
Sophomore	185	36.5
Junior	75	14.8
Senior	47	9.3

5) Do you think that the electoral college vote system should or should not be continued?

Value label	Frequency	%
Should	204	39.5
Should not	262	50.8
No opinion	50	9.7

Gallup Poll results (approximately 1500 national adults surveyed): June 1948 - 2 surveys

Value label	%	%
Should	34.0	31.0
Should not	53.0	56.0
No opinion	13.0	14.0

6) It has been suggested that the electoral vote system be discontinued and Presidents of the US be elected by total popular vote alone. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

Value label	Frequency	%
Favor	305	59.1
Oppose	161	31.2
No opinion	50	9.7

Gallup Poll results June 1944:

Value label	%
Favor	65.0
Oppose	23.0
No opinion	13.0

7) Do you think that the Electoral College today serves any real purpose?

Value label	Frequency	%
Yes	236	45.8
No	216	41.9
No opinion	63	12.2

Gallup Poll results 1948:

Value label	%
Yes	31.0
No	58.0
No opinion	11.0

Note: questions #5-7 were only asked of those in the Gallup Poll who gave a correct answer regarding what the Electoral College is.

8) Today, the presidential candidate who gets the most popular votes in a state takes all the electoral votes of that state. Do you think that this should or should not be changed so that each of the candidates would receive the same proportion of electoral votes that he gets in the popular vote? This would mean, for example, that if a candidate gets two-thirds of the popular vote in a state, he would then get two-thirds of the electoral votes of that state.

Value label	Frequency	%
Should	344	66.5
Should not	111	21.5
No opinion	62	12.0

Gallup Poll Results:

1948: 63/16/20 1955: 58/27/16
 1948: 58/15/27 1960: 50/28/22
 1950: 57/22/21 1960: 59/27/13
 1951: 57/21/22 1961: 61/21/18
 1955: 51/28/21 1965: 57/28/14

9) Would you approve or disapprove of an amendment to the *Constitution* which would do away with the Electoral College and base the election of a president on the total popular vote throughout the nation?

Value label	Frequency	%
Approve	289	55.9
Disapprove	168	32.5
No opinion	60	11.6

Gallup Poll results:

1967: 58/22/20 1968: 80/12/8
 1967: 65/22/13 1977: 73/15/12
 1968: 66/19/15 1980: 67/19/15

10) Do you think such a change (constitutional amendment to do away with the electoral college and base the election of a president on the total vote cast throughout the nation) is likely to come about before the 2000 presidential election?

Value label	Frequency	%
Is likely	18	3.5
Is not likely	477	92.6
No opinion	20	3.9

Gallup Poll results 1968 (used the year 1972 as the presidential year):

Value label	%
Is likely	45.0
Is not likely	39.0
No opinion	16.0

11) If no presidential candidate gets a majority of electoral votes in the next election, the House of Representatives will choose the President. How would you like the Representative in your Congressional district to vote? Should he or she vote to elect: the presidential candidate who won in your district, the candidate who won in your state, the candidate who won the most votes nationally or the candidate nominated by your Congressional Representative's political party?

Value label	Frequency	%
Presidential candidate who won in your district	157	30.5
Candidate who won in your state	129	25.1
Candidate who won the most votes nationally	152	29.6
Candidate nominated by your Congressional Representative's political party	22	4.3
No opinion	54	10.5

Gallup Poll results 1992:
12/13/52/13/10 (respectively)

12) Suppose no candidate receives a majority of the electoral college vote for President the next election. Would you favor the candidate who received the most popular votes being named President or would you rather see the three candidates negotiate with each other in the Electoral College?

Value label	Frequency	%
Elect man with most votes	378	73.5
Negotiate in the Electoral College	43	8.4
Not Sure	93	18.1

IRSS survey results taken in 1968 (1929 cases):
70.8/15/14.3

13) If the Electoral College can't elect a President, the House of Representatives names the President, with each state, no matter how big or small, having one vote. In general, do you favor or oppose this present system of naming a president?

Value label	Frequency	%
Favor	208	40.4
Oppose	207	40.2
Not sure	100	19.4

IRSS survey results taken in 1968 (1931 cases):
25.1/57.9/16.9

14) In trying to reduce campaign spending, would you favor abolishing the electoral college system so the President can be elected by popular vote, reducing the amount of money spent on traveling to small states?

Value label	Frequency	%
Favor	220	42.8
Oppose	166	32.3
Not Sure	128	24.9

IRSS survey results:
1973 (1445 cases): 70.2/17.6/12.2
1975 (1505 cases): 70.9/17.3/11.8

15) Would you favor or oppose an electoral vote system in which two of a state's electoral votes are given to the candidate who won each congressional district? In other words, each congressional district would cast a vote for the candidate who received the most votes in that district and then two votes would also be cast for the overall state winner.

Value label	Frequency	%
Favor	163	31.7
Oppose	171	33.2
Not sure	181	35.1

16) Would you favor or oppose a plan that gave the winner of the popular vote an additional 102 electoral votes cast in their favor to assure that the popular vote winner would always win the electoral vote?

Value label	Frequency	%
Favor	95	18.4
Oppose	297	57.7
Not sure	123	23.9

17) If presidential candidate A received more popular votes, but presidential candidate B received more electoral votes, in your opinion, who should become president?

Value label	Frequency	%
Candidate A	358	69.5
Candidate B	90	17.5
Not Sure	67	13.0

18) Each state is given the same number of electoral votes as the number of representatives that they have in the House and Senate. For example, AR/OK has a total of 6/8 electoral votes since there are 4/6 representatives in the House and 2 senators. Therefore, every state will receive at least 3 electoral votes. Since the number of representatives from each state in the House are determined by the state's population, this guarantees that the more populated states receive more electoral votes. For example, California receives 54 electoral votes. Do you agree or disagree with this vote distribution?

Value label	Frequency	%
Agree	270	52.4
Disagree	175	34.0
Not Sure	70	13.6

19) In regards to the electoral vote distribution, which of the following would you support the most?

Value label	Frequency	%
Each state should have the same number of electoral votes	122	23.8
The vote should be distributed according to population only	117	22.9
The current system should be maintained (see question above)	195	38.1
Not sure	78	15.2

20) Regardless of population size, small states are given two electoral votes for the members in the Senate in addition to the number of members in the House of Representatives. Do you agree or disagree with this vote distribution?

Value label	Frequency	%
Agree	357	69.2
Disagree	89	17.2
Not sure	69	13.4

21) Do you think that changes should be made so that additional attention is not given to the most populated states during presidential campaigns?

Value label	Frequency	%
Yes	265	51.6
No	167	32.5
Not sure	82	16.0

22) While California has 13/8.6 times the representation of AR/OK, practicing the current electoral vote distribution with every state receiving 2 additional votes for the number of senators, California's representation becomes only 9/6.7 times that of AR/OK. Do you agree or disagree with allowing each state the 2 votes for their number of senators?

Value label	Frequency	%
Agree	328	63.7
Disagree	59	11.5
Not sure	127	24.7

23) Which of the following do you believe is a disadvantage of the Electoral College?

Value label	Frequency	%
Faithless elector (the elector does not vote for the candidate that received the most popular vote in their state)	89	17.3
The possibility that the House of Representatives would have to decide the president if no candidate receives majority of electoral votes	60	11.7
The additional attention that large states receive during presidential campaigns compared to small states	73	14.2
The over-representation that the smallest states get by having three electoral votes	8	1.6
The possibility of the popular vote winner not being elected president	168	32.6
None of the above	8	1.6

Note: respondents could select more than one answer for question #23