

The Under-Representation of Minorities in the Electoral College System

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Abstract

The Electoral College system for selecting the U.S. president has created a situation where only a handful of states are relevant on Election Day. Because of the winner-take-all system that virtually every state uses for allocating their respective electoral votes, voters in swing states such as Ohio and Virginia are more important to candidates during the campaign than voters in non-swing states like New York and California. This paper addresses the extent to which the demographic profile of voters in these important swing states differs from the demographic profile of the nation as a whole and thereby the extent to which the demographic profile of the electorate would differ under a popular vote system compared to the current Electoral College. It finds most notably that minorities are significantly under-represented under the current Electoral College system. The paper also finds that the following groups are under-represented by the Electoral College: college-educated, religious, users of public transportation, renters, non-elderly, those in poverty, and the uninsured.

INTRODUCTION

According to 2012 Census Bureau data, 77.9 percent of Americans that year identified themselves as "white alone," while 13.1 percent of Americans identified themselves as "black alone." Furthermore, 16.9 percent of Americans identified themselves as "Hispanic or Latino," and 12.9 percent of Americans were identified as foreign born.

Most would probably expect that the collective voting power of each of these groups in the 2012 presidential election would have been roughly proportional to these national population shares, give or take differing voter turnout propensities. But when it comes to voting for president, the Electoral College system has given significantly less weight to these minority groups in recent elections because of their clustered locations in non-swing states, as this analysis shows.

NOT EVERY VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IS EQUAL

While your high school civics teacher may have stressed to the class that "every vote counts" and that any person's vote could potentially swing the election, the reality is that the probability of any single person's vote swinging the election depends on the underlying competitiveness of the race. If a person living in California believed in 2012 that the sole purpose of going to the polls on Election Day was to affect the outcome of that year's presidential race, he/she might as well have stayed home. This is because California, like all states except Nebraska and Maine, uses a winner-take-all method to allocate its electoral votes, combined with fact that there was a 100 percent probability that Barack Obama was going to win California. Ditto for Texas: there was a 100 percent probability that Mitt Romney was going to win Texas and receive all of its electoral votes.

Election results in swing states like Ohio and Virginia, on the other hand, were far from certain leading up to Election Day, which is why the candidates spent so much time there. According to the Center for Voting and Democracy, Romney and Obama held public campaign events in only 12 states following the conventions, 61% of which were in only three states: Ohio, Virginia and Florida. Furthermore, over 99 percent of the television advertising dollars for the 2012 general election were spent in media markets targeting just 10 states.

A more sophisticated method for determining which states were the most important on Election Day 2012 was done by former New York Times blogger Nate Silver. Silver estimated the probability that each state would be the "tipping point" state, which he described as "the probability that a state provides the decisive electoral vote." Silver estimated that Ohio had the highest probability of being the tipping point state (49.8 percent), followed by Virginia (12.3 percent), Nevada (6.6 percent), Iowa (6.4 percent), Colorado (6.4 percent), Wisconsin (5.9 percent), Pennsylvania (3.3 percent), and New Hampshire (3.2 percent). All other states were less than 2 percent, including Florida, Maine District 2, Michigan, Oregon, New Mexico, North Carolina and Minnesota.

AN ELECTORALLY-WEIGHTED ANALYSIS OF THE U.S. POPULATION IN 2012

Using Silver's tipping point probabilities as "electoral" weights for each state, this paper compares the demographic profile of the U.S. electorate under the current Electoral College system to a hypothetical popular vote system. To calculate the national demographic profile of the electorate under the current Electoral College system, each demographic statistic (such as race, religion,

etc.) is multiplied by the electoral weight of each state and then aggregated. Under this system, the demographic profile of Ohio is weighted most heavily because its electorate is the most likely to swing the presidential election, whereas the demographic profile of a non-swing state like California is irrelevant as it receives a zero weight. On the other hand, the national demographic profile under a popular vote system requires no calculations and is simply the nationwide statistic for each demographic. This is because each person's vote is weighted the same under a popular vote system.

The differences in the demographic profiles between the electorate under the Electoral College (i.e., the electorally weighted population) and the electorate under a popular vote (i.e., overall population) are most evident on the question of race. Even though Hispanics make up 16.9 percent of the overall population, their share of the electorally-weighted population is less than half of that: 8.2 percent. This is largely due to the fact that nearly half of all Hispanics live in the non-swing states of California and Texas, which receive weights of zero in this analysis. And while foreign-born Americans make up 12.9 percent of the overall population, their share of the electorally-weighted population is merely 7.1 percent. Blacks are also slightly under-represented by the Electoral College system as their population share falls from 13.1 percent in the overall population to an electorally-weighted share of 11.1 percent. Of course, as minorities' shares decrease, the share of whites increases. Whites make up 77.9 percent of the overall population, but their electorally-weighted share is 82.8 percent.

There are also other demographic differences between the overall population and the electorally-weighted population.

Using Census Bureau data, one can see that the electorally-weighted population is slightly less likely to have a college degree than the overall population (27 percent versus 28.5 percent). It is also less likely to use public transit (2.2 percent versus 5 percent), less likely to be in poverty (13.9 percent versus 14.9 percent) and less likely to be uninsured (13.8 percent versus 15.5 percent). The electorally-weighted population is more likely to be a homeowner (67.4 percent versus 65.5 percent) and slightly more likely to be elderly (14.3 percent versus 13.7 percent). Because the survey sample sizes at the state level for the American Community Survey are so large, these are all statistically significant differences between the two groups.

On the question of religion (courtesy of Gallup), the electorally-weighted population was slightly less religious than the overall population (38.2 percent versus 40.0 percent), which is likely due to the fact that few 'Bible Belt' states are swing states. This is statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level. There was little-to-no difference between the overall population and the electorally-weighted population on questions of union membership and median household income in 2012 based on Census Bureau data.

IMPLICATIONS

Assuming policymakers tailor their policy proposals based on the preferences of the voters that put them into office (i.e., the median voter), these numbers indicate that certain groups' preferences are likely to receive greater attention than others under the Electoral College. Therefore, potentially moving to a popular vote system could have significant effects on actual policies. For example, on the issue of immigration, because states with smaller Hispanic and foreign-born populations are more likely to

be swing states, presidential candidates may find it advantageous to be less open on immigration. On the issue of transportation funding, because mass transit is used more heavily in non-swing states, there may be a preference by presidential candidates to invest in building roads and bridges instead of rail and bus systems. Even on social issues, because the Electoral College population is less religious than the overall population, moving to a popular vote could put a slightly greater emphasis on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

Some have argued that minority groups benefit from the Electoral College system because minority groups could be big players in select states (see for example Rotunda, 2000). Spilerman and Dickens (1974) found that in the 1960 election, blacks were actually over-represented by the Electoral College system. While this may have been the case in the past and could be the case again in the future, the state-by-state breakdown in the most recent presidential elections suggests that is not the case. The fact of the matter is that currently minorities, including blacks, disproportionately live in non-swing states, making their votes for president less valuable than whites.

CONCLUSION

As campaign travel and expenditure data show, presidential campaigns appeal exclusively to swing-state voters in the months preceding the election. This is because swing-state voters are more likely to cast the decisive vote for president, as statistical analysis shows. In a world where each state was a microcosm of the United States, it wouldn't matter much as to the selection method of the presidency. But as this analysis shows, that is far from the reality. Using each state's probability of being *the* swing state as weights, this

analysis finds significant differences between the demographic profile of the swing-state electorate compared to the non-swing state electorate with the most notable differences being on race, where swing-state voters are significantly less likely to be black, Hispanic, or foreign born.

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