



DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

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I want to talk you about the Electoral College and why it matters.

Alright, I know this doesn't sound the like most sensational topic of the day, but, stay with me because, I promise you, it's one of the most important.

To explain why requires a very brief civics review.

The President and Vice President of the United States are not chosen by a nationwide, popular vote of the American people; rather, they are chosen by 538 electors. This process is spelled out in the United States Constitution.

Why didn't the Founders just make it easy, and let the Presidential candidate with the most votes claim victory? Why did they create, and why do we continue to need, this Electoral College? The answer is critical to understanding not only the Electoral College, but also America.

The Founders had no intention of creating a pure majority-rule democracy. They knew from careful study of history what most have forgotten today, or never learned: pure democracies do not work. They implode.

Democracy has been colorfully described as two wolves and a lamb voting on what's for dinner. In a pure democracy, bare majorities can easily tyrannize the rest of a country. The Founders wanted to avoid this at all costs.

This is why we have three branches of government – Executive, Legislative and Judicial. It's why each state has two Senators no matter what its population, but also different numbers of Representatives based entirely on population. It's why it takes a supermajority in Congress and three-quarters of the states to change the Constitution. And, it's why we have the Electoral College.

Here's how the Electoral College works.

The Presidential election happens in two phases. The first phase is purely democratic. We hold 51 popular elections every presidential election year: one in each state and one in D.C.

On Election Day in 2012, you may have thought you were voting for Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, but you were really voting for a slate of presidential electors. In Rhode Island, for example, if you voted for Barack Obama, you voted for the state's four Democratic electors; if

you voted for Mitt Romney you were really voting for the state's four Republican electors.

Part Two of the election is held in December. And it is this December election among the states' 538 electors, not the November election, which officially determines the identity of the next President. At least 270 votes are needed to win.

Why is this so important?

Because the system encourages coalition-building and national campaigning. In order to win, a candidate must have the support of many different types of voters, from various parts of the country. Winning only the South or the Midwest is not good enough. You cannot win 270 electoral votes if only one part of the country is supporting you.

But if winning were only about getting the most votes, a candidate might concentrate all of his efforts in the biggest cities or the biggest states. Why would that candidate care about what people in West Virginia or Iowa or Montana think?

But, you might ask, isn't the election really only about the so-called swing states?

Actually, no. If nothing else, safe and swing states are constantly changing.

California voted safely Republican as recently as 1988. Texas used to vote Democrat. Neither New Hampshire nor Virginia used to be swing states.

Most people think that George W. Bush won the 2000 election because of Florida. Well, sort of. But he really won the election because he managed to flip one state which the Democrats thought was safe: West Virginia. Its 4 electoral votes turned out to be decisive.

No political party can ignore any state for too long without suffering the consequences. Every state, and therefore every voter in every state, is important.

The Electoral College also makes it harder to steal elections. Votes must be stolen in the right state in order to change the outcome of the Electoral College. With so many swing states, this is hard to predict and hard to do.

But without the Electoral College, any vote stolen in any precinct in the country could affect the national outcome -- even if that vote was easily stolen in the bluest California precinct or the reddest Texas one.

The Electoral College is an ingenious method of selecting a President for a great, diverse republic such as our own -- it protects against the tyranny of the majority, encourages coalition building and discourages voter fraud. Our Founders were proud of it! We can be too.

I'm Tara Ross for Prager University.