

Critically examine the part played by primaries, caucuses, and the Electoral College in the election of US Presidents.

Introduction

This essay will look at the definitions and roles that primaries, caucuses and the Electoral College play in the election of a President. This essay will also look at whether these establishments and practices are effective or whether they should be replaced, reworked or kept the same. It will look at the controversial issues around these systems, especially the Electoral College. This essay will conclude that the part played by primaries, caucuses and the Electoral College is not as democratic or effective as it should be but the chances of change are slim because of the constitutional overhaul that would be required.

Definitions

A primary is a relatively new and more common invention and is a State based election to choose a party's candidate for the Presidency. They are held between the months of January and June on the same year of the Presidency election, which is held in the November. Primaries are under State law and so there are many variations. The basic principle behind them is that the electorate will go to polling stations and vote for the party candidate they want. The States get to choose the timing of their primaries and whether they are open or closed. States have more recently opted for primaries over caucuses or nothing at all, they have also pushed their primary dates to beginning of the contest, known as front loading, in an attempt to gain more importance for their primary in the Presidential election. States also choose whether a primary is open or closed. In an open primary any person in a State can vote for any candidate on either party side, they could even vote for both sides, this type of primary is dying out due to the legitimacy of the outcome. In a closed primary a voter must be on the electoral role and be affiliated to one of the two parties and can only vote for that parties candidates. This essay will discuss further primaries and there effect on the Presidential elections; the concerns people have with the system; and whether there is need for reform.

Caucuses on the other hand are less formal; they are a set of State based meetings that select the Presidential candidate. They are mainly held in States which geographically are large but the population is small and spread out. There is a cumulative process with caucuses. It starts off with local caucuses and their preferences, then County caucuses and finally the State caucuses which decide who the people want as their candidate. Caucuses used to be the main way that States choose their candidate for President, nowadays Primaries are used more. The States of Iowa and Nebraska still hold onto the 'tradition' of caucuses.

What must be said about both Primaries and Caucuses is that they do not directly elect the candidate that they wish to be President instead they are voting in delegates who will go to the National Conventions who will then elect the Parties candidate.

Once the Primaries and Caucuses have occurred and the National Conference's of the two parties have happened and have decided their Presidential candidate, the Presidential election campaign begins. On the Tuesday after the first Monday of

November, anywhere between the second and eighth of November, the Presidential election will happen. Each State will hold their election, in forty eight of the fifty States (Nebraska and Maine are the exceptions), the candidate with the most votes will get all the Electoral College votes (winner takes all system). In Maine and Nebraska, the Electoral Colleges votes are handed out in proportion to the popular vote. The American people do not directly elect the President; instead they send representatives to the Electoral College to vote for a candidate. It is normally the case and in many States the law that the electors will vote for the candidate that won the most popular votes in their State. There are 538 Electoral College votes, the amount of votes and so representatives in each State is in proportion to the amount of representatives in Congress, so their will be 2 Senators plus the amount of House of Representatives. California has 55 Electoral College votes (2 Senators and 53 Representatives) whereas Vermont has 3 Electoral College votes (2 Senators and 1 Representative). For a Presidential candidate to become President they must have a majority of votes in the Electoral College, that's 270 votes. Later in this essay the Electoral College and its functions and methods will be discussed and will be examined as to the part played in electing the US President.

Advantages of Primaries in relation to electing the US President

The role of the Primaries in the election of the President is for the States to choose their preferred Presidential candidate and for those chosen delegates to go to the National Conference, either in Denver for the Democrats or Minneapolis for the Republicans, and cast their votes to choose the Presidential candidate for the party. It is the case now that convention delegates, those elected in the Primaries, will merely register the votes as already decided by the popular vote in the State they come from. Convention delegates make up the vast majority of those at the National conferences however there are a select few, 'super delegates', that are not votes in through primaries but are high ranking party officials and are not tied down to vote in a certain way. These super delegates will be discussed in the disadvantages to primaries.

In the 1970's a commission was set up called the McGovern-Fraser report which looked into the use of Primaries. There were findings were in favour of there use and said that they provided many benefits. This report had come about after Hubert Humphrey the Vice President had gained the Democratic Nomination through caucuses and not primaries. Reformers called for change in party rules, which would make primaries the preferred method of selecting a Presidential candidate. By the 1990's two thirds of the Democratic convention delegates and three quarters of the Republican delegates were chosen through primaries.

The McGovern-Fraser report said that primaries would increase participation with people. And that they have, primaries have more of an appeal than caucuses and gain a lot more coverage on the media networks giving them a lot of airing and people are more aware of the primaries and the candidates. The system is well broadcast and open allowing people to look at all the candidates and to be aware of the primary and where and when it will be. The primaries encourage higher levels of participation as the American people feel more involved in the Presidential election, for all the faults with system what it does do is make the people feel involved in a huge decision even if it is indirectly.

The McGovern-Fraser report also said that it would increase the amount of candidates and the choice people had. The Primary process opened up the contest to ‘outsiders’ who may not have had a chance as it comes down to the popular vote, as long as they have the resources to mount a Presidential campaign they always have a chance to win the Presidential candidacy from the primary process.

It used to be the case before primaries and even in the early days of primaries when delegates were not obligated to vote as the popular vote had wanted them to the party bosses and officials would ‘persuade’ the delegates to vote in certain ways to suit the bosses preference for the Presidency. The system was corrupt from the core, what the primary system does now is reduce hugely the chances of corruption as delegates are tied down to voting for who the people voted for, even more so since there is only a maximum of 15% super delegates allowed.

For many commentators a major advantage of Primaries over Caucuses, and in general, is that they are very much like the Presidential campaign. Primaries are a hard slog and the demands both physically and mentally in a primary are mirrored in the Presidential campaign. So a party will be able to see whether a candidate is ready for the gruelling test of being their Party candidate. So not only is the part played by the primaries in the presidential elections about the people choosing their candidates but it is also about nurturing and selecting the best candidate for the party.

Disadvantages of Primaries in relation to electing the US President

The Primary system is not perfect, far from it; this essay will now look at the numerous faults and complaints against it and its role in the Presidential election process.

Many believe that the primaries do not in fact choose the best Presidential candidate for the people and the country but in fact choose the most pretty, imaginative or funny candidate. It has become to be known as a ‘beauty contest’ as it is not always the case the best person wins on principles and policies but those with pout and poise. Primaries are there for the public to have their say on who they want as their presidential candidate and so should take it seriously as they will be in power for up to eight years. One should take these primaries very seriously and look at what the candidates offer in terms of policy not grand and illustrious speeches which are intended to ‘woo’ the crowd without having any substance. Opposition to primaries say that only those who know what each candidate stands for and understands the complexity of the issue should vote on who becomes a party’s candidate. The worst thing that can happens is for a primary to vote for a candidate who is all show and no substance and losses in the presidential election to someone who shouldn’t be there but has more substance. The role of the primaries can be over stated in the part played in electing a President as primaries can be seen as ‘beauty contests’ and not real contests between presidential ‘wannabees’.

Primaries are very long and expensive cutting short many candidates hopes of becoming President. A candidate may be the best person for the Presidency but because of the cost of funding both primary and presidential campaigns they have to pull out. This happened to Bill Bradley in 2000 and Paul Tsongas in 1992, both for the Democrats. It is estimated that in the 2008 elections the winning Presidential

candidate will spend in both campaigns \$500 million, this is a lot of money and only those few elites can afford such a campaign. For many primaries cut down the choice of candidates for the Presidency because of the extra costs involved with having a primary campaign as well. Not only the cost of primaries but also the time taken up by the contest. Candidates from each party will start campaigning a year before the actual contest which is along time and stretches their time and their duties. Most candidates being Senators or State executives. The role of primaries can be positive in the way that they toughen the candidates up for the course ahead but on the opposite side they separate the rich from the super rich and it is always the super rich who can afford the two campaigns meaning those rich people not able to compete. If primaries were scrapped then the only costs would be a Presidential campaign which everyone who was serious about becoming President could afford.

The timing of primaries is also seen as a problem which effects the election of Presidents. In recent presidential candidacies States have opted to put their primaries at the beginning of the campaign in January and February which is known as 'front loading' and has led to the infamous 'Super Tuesday' when at least 20 States hold their primaries and caucuses. The problem with this attitude is that Party Presidential candidates do not get time to go to every State and campaign. This leads to candidates selecting States over other States which has a negative effect on the candidate as a State may look less favourable to a candidate who does not visit their State. This desire to have their State primary at the beginning to show that they are some kind of indicator to the final outcome leaves candidates in a difficult situation which ultimately leaves them in a worse position than they would like. If primaries were spaced out it would allow candidate not go to every State and treat them all fairly. Another problem with front loading is that a candidate may need time to replenish their war chest for the continuing battle for Presidential candidate. But if all the primaries are at the beginning then good and strong candidate may have to drop out because they can not afford such a lot in such a small amount of time. This can not be good for the Presidential election as good and strong candidates are not in the election because of overcrowding of primaries early on.

Closed primaries are not a problem, it is open primaries in the few States that hold them which cause problem and call into question the use of primaries and their part in the election of Presidents. In open primaries anyone from the State can vote for either party candidate and even for both. This causes problems as voters from the opposite party will vote for the opposition's weakest candidate. If there is enough cross over voters then the candidate for the opposition party may be very weak and so when it comes to the Presidential election it may not be the strongest candidates for the job but the weakest as the opposition parties have voted in open primaries for the opposition's candidates.

In all but a few States the candidate with the most votes wins all the delegates for that State, known as the winner takes all system. How can this be fair, in many States the contests may be close but because of the winner takes all system only one candidate gets all the delegates and in the bigger States like Texas and California that is a few hundred delegates. How can the primaries show who the people want as their President candidate if the delegates are not shared out in proportion to the popular vote. If votes were given out in proportion to the popular vote then a different Presidential candidate may have been chosen. Due to this the primaries have a

negative effect on the election of Presidents as the most popular candidate may not get to the position of being their parties candidate because of the 'winner takes all system'.

Reform

There have been calls for reform of the primaries which would enhance the legitimacy and fairness of them in respect of the election of a President. The first reform would be splitting the USA into four sections, the: Northeast, South, Midwest, and the West. In doing this each section would hold their primaries on the first Tuesday on March, April, May, and June. This would stop the issue of frontloading and the ability for candidates to visit every State. This reform of the primary system would give more candidates the chance of staying in the candidacy race for longer and would stop States trying to be the 'first' primary. The second reform would be to have a pre-primary mini-convention which would see party members drawing up a list of two or three candidates for each party which would see only the best candidates get the chance to compete for the Presidency, it allows for both informed and politically minded members to have a say as well as the people of America. This can only be good for the Presidential election as it pits only the best against the best.

Critical examination

This essay has shown both positive and negative sides to the primary process in relation to the election of the US President. Primaries do not decide the President but delegates who will go to the National Conferences to vote for the candidates in relation to the outcome in their State. However this does not mean that the primaries are useless as they do allow the people to have some say in who they want as their party's Presidential candidate. The problem lies with primaries in the issue of 'front loading' and the 'winner takes all system' both of which do not fully represent the candidates or the people's views. There needs to be at least some reforms to these issues for the mechanism of the primary to be kept otherwise the election of a President may not be who the US electorate voted for in their primaries or wanted.

Advantages of Caucuses in relation to electing the US President

As already described caucuses are a set of meetings in sparsely populated, large States like Nevada and Iowa (which is where the first caucus is for the selection of a Presidential candidate). The turnout of people in caucuses is very low, in 2000 in Kansas the Democratic caucus only turned out 566 votes. This is a negative side to the idea of caucuses and their relation to presidential elections which will be discussed in the following subtitle of this essay. On the positive side this low turnout means only those who know who is who and is in the know about politics will vote which increases the chances of the best candidate being picked and there is little argument in winner takes all systems with such few votes. If the candidate gets the majority of the votes then they probably deserve all the delegates.

Caucuses can be seen as the beginning of momentum for a candidate, the Iowa caucus is seen as crucial because it is the first election for a President candidate for both parties and is taken very seriously. It is believed that whoever wins the Iowa caucus is

likely to be their party's candidate. In relation to the Presidential election this holds no bearing but shows the importance of a good momentum in an election.

Disadvantages of Caucuses in relation to electing the US President

A disadvantage of caucuses is the generally poor turnout which shows high political apathy and also blindness to the candidates that are being put forward by the parties. If people do not know or care about the candidate selection for the party's presidential choice then they are not going to be full aware of the presidential election itself if they even bother to vote at all. This can not be good for the elections, if people are not voting or very few are then surely it would be best to scrap the caucus mechanism and instead just let party members and those who are knowledgeable to vote for the candidates within the State, as this is what they are mainly doing in the caucuses anyway. Then at least the candidate who gets to the Presidential elections is the best for the job in the eyes of those in politics.

Caucuses are in the minority compared to primaries, this essay would argue that there should only be one system to make it equal and fair. As there are more States which use primaries, as their way of choosing their parties presidential candidate, then it would be best to scrap the caucus mechanism and go with the majority, which is the primary system.

Critical examination

This essay would conclude that the mechanism of caucuses in relation to their part played in the election of Presidents is minimal if not negative on the outcome. There are very few States which still use caucuses and those that do there are high levels of apathy and low voter turnout. So the part it plays in the election of a President is small because the numbers of delegates which come from those States which use caucuses are few.

Advantages of the Electoral College in relation to electing the US President

The founding Fathers set up the Electoral College to act as an indirect way of electing the President. The electorate would vote for their choice within the State and then that State would send its delegates to the Electoral College to cast their votes on behalf of the people. Most voters do as those who put them there wanted, but they are not bound in all States to follow the public opinion.

What the Electoral College does do is cut down the votes for the Presidential election from the population of the USA to 538 votes. This cuts down a lot of time and bureaucracy.

There are very few advantages to the Electoral College and its part in the Presidential election, it if anything just adds another step in an already over complicated process that is the Presidential elections. This essay will discuss in detail the numerous disadvantages to the system and its negative effect on the Presidential election.

Disadvantages of the Electoral College in relation to electing the US President

Those that go to the Electoral College are not in proportion to the popular vote of the State, just like the primary process, except the States of Maine and Nebraska where the popular vote is shared out by the voters going to the Electoral College. So in all the other States the party candidate with the most votes gets all the votes from that State, in California that would be 55 votes whereas the party candidate who may have only been a few votes behind of the winner gets no votes. How can this be fair or acceptable for a supposed democracy, this is because the votes are not all equal. The 'winner takes all system' provides a party candidate more votes than he or she should really have got. This is what happened in 2000. Al Gore had gained more of the popular vote than George W Bush but lost out on the Presidency because George W Bush gained more of the Electoral College votes. Also in 1992 the independent candidate Perot gained 19% of the popular vote but gained no Electoral College votes because his support was too widespread and in the States he campaigned they were using 'winner takes all' systems. This must have a negative effect on the Presidential election as the American people will see their preferred choice for President not get into office because of a flawed Electoral College.

Anachronism means something chronologically out of place, and this is what the Electoral College is. When set up in 1787 by the founding fathers their intentions for the constitution was for it to act as a check on the government and give the power to the people and States, but the Electoral College does not fit in with the thinking of the time as it is a check on the people from them choosing a 'random' person or backbencher as President. The Presidential election should be about the people choosing their leader and figure head but the Electoral College acts as a filter and makes the election indirect and does not all ways give the people what they want as the distribution of voters distorts the outcome.

Electoral College voters are not bound to vote for who the popular vote voted for in some States, other States have laws binding the voters to that of the States majority decision. These Electoral voters can go completely against the wishes of the people and vote in who they want. This is awful for the Presidential elections as it places the power into one person to choose when they should really be representing the views of thousands if not hundreds of thousands. That is not democracy. One Elector in 2000 voted for nobody while in 1988 a Democratic elector (supposedly) voted for the Republican Presidential candidate. The Electoral College in this instance can not be tolerated and distorts and makes a mockery of eth Presidential elections.

Reform

There have obviously been calls for reform of the Electoral College because as it stands it does not portray the people's votes as it should and so puts into question the legitimacy of the President, does he or she have the approval of over 50% of the popular vote. It certainly wasn't the case in 2000.

The first reform proposal is the 'Automatic plan', which is considered the most straight forward plan. It would bind all voters to the view of the popular vote and cut out cowboy voters. At the moment only 26 States have laws binding voters, one of which being North California, however 24 States do not and they equate to 257 votes

in the Electoral College. Bringing in this reform although providing more legitimacy into to the Presidential election it does not provide the accuracy and proportionality of the popular vote.

The 'Maine system' is the system they use in Maine and Nebraska. The votes would be shared out in relation to the winners of the congressional districts. This system would be radical and bring about the necessary change to sustain the use of the Electoral College and make it acceptable in relation to the Presidential election.

The 'Proportional system' is an adaptation of the Maine system and would directly share out the popular vote in proportion to the votes of each candidate and not limit it to the congressional boundaries. This system would also bring about the requirements to make its role in the Presidential election valid and worthwhile. The problem however with this and the Maine system is that it would mean 48 States changing their laws on the election process or for a constitutional change which is even harder. Either way the likelihood of change through legislation is very unlikely as at the moment the system suits both party's at some point or another and stops the likelihood of an independent President.

The most radical reform would be the 'Direct election plan' which would completely scrap the Electoral College and let the population vote directly for their President. This would definitely change the outcome of the Presidential election and the part played by the Electoral College would be none. There are too many problems with this method to mention for it ever to be installed.

Critical examination

After discussing in this essay the benefits and draw backs of the Electoral College and its part in the Presidential election this essay believes that the part it plays is detrimental and in fact distorts the views and votes of the people and does not provide what the people want and is just another unnecessary step in the presidential election process. But this essay also shows that the likelihood of change is small due to the mammoth overhaul and changes within the State laws, and so the USA is stuck with this unnecessary and unfair system and can at times churns out Presidents who should never have won. What would the world be like if the Electoral College had not existed in 2000 and Al Gore had won the election?

Conclusion

This essay concludes that the part played by primaries, caucuses, and the Electoral College is varied and complex. It is undeniable that change must occur in some areas of the system and its role in the Presidential election. Are Primaries necessary if there is also going to be a Presidential election? Is it feasible for there to be two campaigns? And does the Electoral College hinder the true outcome of the Presidential election? What ever the outcomes of these answers, it will be these answers for a long time as reform does not seem likely in the near future.

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