

Excerpted from “Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?” by Alexander Keyssar, published by Harvard University Press. Pages 373–374.

Few factors have shaped the debates over the Electoral College as insistently as the presence and later the legacy of slavery; the politics of race and region have been closely tied to conflicts over reform for more than two centuries. The institution itself accommodated the interests of slave owners, and the slave states banished the idea of a national popular vote throughout the antebellum period. As James Barbour so delicately put it in 1816, direct elections were simply not compatible with the “population anomalous” that lived and worked in the South.

The impact of slavery did not end with emancipation. After Reconstruction, the South became a white-dominated, single-party region with a large, disenfranchised black minority in whose name white citizens cast electoral votes. Southern states and white political leaders augmented their national influence through this arrangement, and they once again became implacable foes of a national popular vote: it threatened to diminish the region’s electoral weight and/or encourage the enfranchisement of African Americans. That stance endured into the middle decades of the 20th century, as Southern politicians came to regard the Electoral College as a key political bulwark against the intrusions of a federal government that sought to end segregation and enfranchise African Americans. The South’s opposition helped to keep the idea of a national vote off the table for decades, and in 1970 the region’s senators led the way in killing an NPV amendment that had been approved by the House and had majority support in the Senate. In the late 1970s, much of the senate debate over Birch Bayh’s revived NPV proposal revolved around the benefits or harms that it would bring to African Americans in the North and the South.

The politics of race and region were influential in other ways and episodes as well. The prolonged Republican defense of winner-take-all, beginning in the late 19th century, was a reaction to the South’s having become a one-party region: many Republicans feared, with reason, that district or proportional elections would cost them electoral votes in the North without their making commensurate gains in the Democratic South. In the mid-20th century the mobilization of support for, and then opposition to, the Lodge-Gossett measure was deeply entangled in concerns about the civil and political rights of African Americans. Congressman Ed Gossett and his Southern allies saw proportional elections as a means of undercutting Northern support for the civil rights movement, while Northern liberals (belatedly) recognized that threat and blocked the amendment in the House. The mid-20th century also witnessed heightened concern about faithless electors, largely because some Southern Democratic electors refused to cast their ballots for their party’s presidential candidates, who were regarded as unduly sympathetic with the civil rights movement. Decades later, after blacks were enfranchised and partisan alignments reshuffled, Republican politicians in the South opposed reform in part because they had predictable, predominantly white majorities in most states

and saw no reason to surrender the advantages of winner-take-all to the benefit of Democratic candidates backed by African American voters.

Issues linked to race, thus, have permeated the history of Electoral College reform, often intersecting with structural and partisan factors to compound the difficulties faced by proponents of alternative electoral methods. Slavery and its manifold legacies served to limit the options for change and, on some occasions, directly reduced the odds of reform campaigns succeeding. The shape, the configuration, of the story told in these pages would have been different—almost unimaginably different—had race not been such a penetrating presence in American political life. That is true, of course, of many strands of American history, and the evolution of Electoral College reform has been no exception.

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