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THE ROOT OF DIVISION IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

— Cameron Vaské, August 11, 2017



THE SYSTEM ISN'T RIGGED, IT'S FAILING.

“Partisan rancour and party politics and ideology have got in the way of compromise - and compromise is the only thing that has ever made politics successful.”

— Kevin Spacey

The American Machine

For the last two centuries, the United States' has developed and adapted to the needs of its citizens, and the demands upon it economically and geopolitically. Regardless of the current political climate, leaders, and appointees, America stands as the one truly unequivocal hyper-power in the world, both in terms of soft power and hard power.

And yet, the American system of governance continues to fail its populace. The United States constantly trails behind its first world peers in almost every **metric of quality of life index** and consistently fails to address both age-old and emerging domestic policy

concerns such as job replacement from automation & free trade, political redistricting, and congressional paralysis.

Rather than the fault of any one President or party, this is the result of systemic failures in the American style of Democracy. Let it not be forgotten that, besides a few very particular amendments Americans have made to the US Constitution, the actual processes by which the government runs have remained untouched. The fact that we are only now seeing a nearly complete breakdown in American governance and political order should not be taken as a defeat, but as a triumph.

The United States has enjoyed two hundred years of general success and unity under this model of democratic governance. However, as Parag Khanna writes, “America’s 2016 presidential election exposed that its style of democracy is as much a tool of division as unity. Two years of toxic campaigning revealed deep rifts in the nation’s fabric while producing no common agenda for how to overcome them.” Indeed, not only did a majority of the population **disapprove of both of the main candidates** in the last election, but the **mathematical fallacies of the electoral college** produced a victor that **betrayed the popular will by 3 million votes**.

*“Nearly two centuries after Alexis de Tocqueville’s ode *Democracy in America*, it’s time to admit that America needs less of its own version of democracy.”*

— Parag Khanna

The Broken Gears

America’s style of governance isn’t delivering solutions to the challenges that it is facing today. What are those challenges? Simply put, they are the collective inefficiencies that have negatively affected our style of democratic governance. While academics and experts back to Alexis de Tocqueville himself have noted these failings, only recently has the wider public begun to conspicuously notice their effect. One of the main problems in America’s style of governance is its Congress.

Congress

American Democracy, in comparison to other forms of governance, is slow. It requires a lengthy, drawn out exchange of ideas, opinions, and facts through concerted debate. It requires authorizations, consultation, and minute inspection. While this process is an

intractable effect of Democracy, American institutions could certainly be improved to respond more quickly and effectively to the demands upon them in a highly interconnected global society. Congress is the poster child of this ineffectuality.

In the American Congress, much politicking happens, but little consensus is brought upon policy reforms. Senators are more responsive to the obligations of party than they are to the needs and wants of the citizens of their state. Representatives are in a constant battle to have the final say on where voting districts are drawn and are constantly forced to play politics by subpar election systems for reelection.

Further complicating matters is the paradoxical position of the Speaker of the House, who is tasked with creating consensus and moving an agenda forward through compromise. Yet the Speaker is constantly threatened by the ability of the House to unseat him or her. If the Speaker pressures any one faction of his or her own party too hard to compromise on an issue in order to pass legislation, a motion from that faction to unseat him or her could be passed with the aid of the opposition party.

Take Paul Ryan, the current Speaker, for example. Were a motion to unseat the Speaker proposed from discontented far-right Republicans who felt too pressured by Ryan (the Tea Party comes to mind), Democrats would have little reason or ground to oppose the motion. Which Democratic congressman wants to be the one to defend a sitting Republican Speaker? This ensures a majority consensus to unseat a Speaker even if only a small faction of disgruntled Republicans support it. And yet, it becomes overwhelmingly evident that such a divided body could never pass a motion to call forth a new Speaker, as a splintered Republican party could not vote in one of its own, and Democrats have not the majority to pass their own Speaker, leaving the position vacant until internal party bickering was resolved.

While Congress represents a great collection of problems, the greatest singular error is represented by the Presidential election and the Electoral College that sets its terms.

The Electoral College

In order to understand the fallacies of the Electoral College, it is helpful to understand its intended benefits and overarching purpose.

The Electoral College was designed in an era where communication was by letter or word of mouth, and Ohio was considered “Western.” In those days, there was no easy and reliable way to collect voting data across such massive distances but by sending individuals to collect votes by state and represent their states at a subsequent meeting to determine the outcome of the election (i.e. to hold an election after the popular election). A number of electors equal to the number of electoral votes per state were chosen to bring the voting information from the states to the capitol in order to aggregate the votes.

Firstly, this was intended to provide a buffer against the potential for rabble-rousing populists to make their way to the White House, since the electors are not required to vote for the candidate that won their state. This means that a candidate could theoretically win both the popular vote and the anticipated electoral vote in November, but still lose the election of the electors in December if the electors decided to vote ‘unfaithfully.’

Secondly, the Electoral College was created to safeguard the interest of demographically smaller states by distributing an equal number of votes to each state before accounting for population size, in effect ‘pretending’ that more people lived where they did not, and fewer people lived where they did. However, this means that a candidate could win the popular vote, and still lose the electoral vote (assuming electors voted ‘faithfully’).

This has happened four times in American history, most recently in the 2000 and 2016 elections, and will only continue to happen more frequently if the problem is not corrected. As metropolitan areas grow and represent ever greater proportions of the population, it is likely that rural areas will continue to be overrepresented, yet still in the minority, causing metropolitan-backed politicians to pay little or no attention to rural concerns, and vice-versa.

Clearly, neither of the Electoral College’s objectives are being met.

In the first case, it’s reasonable to assume that just over half of the population would argue that the electoral college has failed to prevent an unqualified populist from gaining the presidency. However, the entire populace would agree that no quirk of the

rules should allow a truly unknown 'elite' group of electors to decide the result of the single most important election in the country.

In the second case, **the time spent campaigning and money spent on advertising** over the last several election cycles alone shows that candidates spend almost all of their time and funding campaigning in so-called 'swing states,' or rather, states that they stand a chance of winning. They spend very little time in both the smallest and the largest states, as there are fewer undecided or sway-able voters worth fewer electoral votes than there are in medium-sized, more valuable states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida. This causes candidates to focus intently on the needs and wants of a handful of states rather than on the collective whole of the populace.

As another adamant advocate of Electoral College abolishment **once said,**

"This is not Democracy. This is Indefensible."

The only problems worse than the those directly created by Electoral College are those generated by system of voting that the United States uses that compound all of the others.

First Past the Post Voting

The entire United States uses the 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) system of voting,* which means that the candidate that receives the most votes wins. At first glance, this seems just and democratic, yet paradoxically causes the rule of the minority by forcing voters of less popular parties to abandon their preferred choices in favor of the candidate they dislike the least. The remaining two parties then constantly vie over the moderate portion of the population that generally dislikes both parties equally.

In First Past the Post, voters must take into account the rest of the populations' vote in order to help the candidate that they disagree with least to defeat the candidate they disagree with most.

This is called strategic voting, and it ultimately causes voters to abandon candidates and parties that they might otherwise vote for in order to avoid the election of the candidates that they most disagree with. Never before has this been so evident as in

the **2016 election** when almost half of voters were motivated not in part, but primarily by their dislike for the opposing candidate.

What began as two minority parties in a diverse multi-party system became the **only** parties in a two-party system. Yet the preferences of voters haven't changed, merely their electoral expression. This is a problem in itself, as it causes dysfunction in both the **Democratic Party** and the **Republican Party**. The more a party internally reflects the true preferences of their voters, the more divided they become.**

Compounding this problem further is 'The Spoiler Effect,' whereby the First Past the Post voting system punishes any and all attempts at greater political diversity and expression. Occasionally, after enough time of two-party minority rule, discontent with a lack of political expression grows great enough that a new political party is born. However, since FPTP only cares about the absolute number of votes, the new party inadvertently guarantees victory for its opponents by stealing votes from the other main party that it most closely resembles. In effect, this forces a return to a two-party system and makes the formation of new and successful parties almost impossible, and strategically illogical. (Imagine what a Bernie Sanders party would do to Democratic Party votes, or a Libertarian Party to Republican Party votes.)

The list of problems with the American system of governance does not end here. A few others include:

- Senators align more along party lines than they do on the practical needs of the States they represent, often leading to gridlock.
- Party primaries become an internal conflict of the various factions of the party vying to control the entire party, causing further division and limiting political diversity.
- The need for connectivity between states is almost entirely ignored.
- More extreme elements within parties are rewarded by sowing division in order to exploit overall discontent with the party platform (similar to the "Speaker Paradox" from earlier).
- Parties are incentivized to undermine even positive legislative measures of the opposition in order to cause moderate voters to flip their votes.

It's clear that the US political establishment is in jeopardy of total gridlock and division, and that there are significant jams in the gears of governance. So how do we fix the system?

Fixing American Democracy

The greatest irony in all of this is that there are many better systems and easy solutions to the problems that America's style of governance faces, but that neither party can bring itself to implement them.

All of the issues that the Electoral College creates would disappear simply with its abolition, and the installment of direct elections for president. Almost all of the issues created by First Past the Post voting could be resolved simply by changing our voting system for executive positions to more representative and majoritarian systems like Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) or Schulz Voting, and Congressional/Representative positions to systems like Single Transferrable Voting (STV) or Mixed-Member Proportional Voting (MMP). This is why, in several countries around the world, these and other more effective systems are already in use.

Imagine, just for a moment, an America with 7 cohesive, unified political parties across the political spectrum that formed coalitions to pass legislation, and worked together to reach optimal solutions and compromises in both the House and the Senate to better govern all of the United States.

That America is possible.

Making "change" the new reality begins by sharing this conversation and broadening awareness of the issues that restrict our ability to express our political opinions where it matters. America needs a more representative and responsible politics, now more than ever. Only when our politicians are shown that Americans will support reforms to effectively and properly address these issues and punish politicians who don't, will change be made. It all comes back to you, the citizen.

Our elected officials and statesmen are not responsible for the creation of these problems, but they are responsible and directly at fault for failing to correct them. We

the people must educate ourselves and bring forth the solutions for our elected officials to champion. We must be the change.

Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

*Though almost all local and national elections (outside of primaries) use First Past the Post, **a few states** do use different methods, though they tend to be only marginally better than FPTP at providing greater representation, proportionality, or majoritarian elections.

This has happened to such an extent in American politics that there are Wikipedia pages detailing the internal factions of the **Republican and **Democratic** parties.

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