

The Broken System:  
How the 2000 US Presidential Election Reveals the Flaws in American Democracy

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Fall 2016

Every four years, voters in the United States get to make the biggest decision on the planet: choose the next leader of the free world. The United States presidential election is the cornerstone of democracy, and is observed not only by people of the United States, but by people all over the world. The proverbial “American Dream” is sought after by people of all creeds and colors, and from every pocket of civilization on earth. This process however, of electing one person to be the head of a nation of millions, has shown some troubling signs of weakness in recent years. The one election that illustrates it the best is the election of 2000, which pitted Democrat Al Gore vs. Republican George W. Bush. This election can be used as a case study to show that even in the biggest election in the world’s largest democracy, elections are not being held in a way that will produce the correct winner every time. Using just this election, an argument can be made that shows the massive flaws in the electoral process of a so-called “democratic” election. Whether it be the Electoral College, or state election laws, or ballot discrepancies, this election is a perfect example of almost everything wrong with the most basic function of American democracy.

In the year 2000, the world had just entered a new millennium. America had been presided over by Bill Clinton for almost eight years. Throughout those eight years, economic conditions had begun to rise in America, and many citizens thought that it was the most stable the country had been in a long time.<sup>1</sup> It was time to choose a new leader though. The country needed someone to boldly bring it into the 21st century, and to build upon its newfound success. Like almost every election cycle though, the electorate didn’t have a consensus on who they wanted to be the next leader of the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

Unlike the general election, both sets of primary elections were pretty standard. On the Republican side, two main candidates emerged out of the pack fairly quickly. George W. Bush, who was the son of 41st President George H.W. Bush, and who had been serving as the Governor of Texas since 1995, was considered the favorite by many. His biggest threat was Arizona Senator John McCain, who although being considered an underdog, was able to gain momentum by winning New Hampshire's primary. In the end Bush won convincingly, winning contests in 43 states and the District of Columbia. The Democratic primaries were even less of a contest. The two main contenders were Vice President Al Gore, who had been Clinton's right-hand man for the last 8 years, and New Jersey Senator Bob Bradley, who before his time as a politician had been a professional basketball player. Unsurprisingly, Bradley was not much of a threat to Gore. As a sitting Vice President, he had a clear advantage to win the party's nomination. He did, winning every single contest held that year. Not everyone thought Gore was the best fit to be the Democratic Party's nominee though. Timothy Mayers, a lifelong Democrat up to that point, remembers supporting Bradley in the 2000 primaries. He told about the two times he actually met Bradley and states that he thought Bradley was "by far the most intelligent candidate running."<sup>2</sup> When Bradley lost the primary, Mayers was faced by a choice. Did he support his party, and in turn their presidential nominee Gore, or did he find a candidate who more aligned with his views. Eventually, Mayers decided that because he feared the impact of another Bush presidency, and because the election looked like it was going to very close, he would support Gore in November.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

As the election transitioned from the primaries to the general, it was becoming apparent that the race was going to be extremely tight. Many polls showed the predicted winner within the margin of error. Even after both the Democratic and Republican conventions, the Presidential debates, and all the normal twists and turns of a campaign season, no clear favorite emerged. By every indication, this election was going to go down to the wire.

When election day finally rolled around on November 7, 2000, the mood was tense and the result was up in the air. For the past few months, each side had been campaigning nonstop, trying to garner enough votes to win the presidency. Like any election, most of these attempts had been in crucial areas, specifically to undecided “swing voters.” Naturally though, this affects a party’s base as well. As the election grew nearer, each side grew more and more devoted. Mayers recalls that the overall mood of the country preceding the election was very tense.<sup>4</sup> Like many elections, people were very divided on key issues. Mayers recalls that some of the biggest issues at the time were national security and terrorism, climate change, and social security.<sup>5</sup> As the election grew closer and closer, the country became even more polarized.

As polls started closing and results began to come in, it was apparent that this race was tighter than anyone could have predicted. A winner was announced in every states except one: Florida. The vote count in Florida seemed to very close. No clear winner was declared that night. At that point, Bush had 246 electoral votes, and Gore had 266. Whoever was declared winner in Florida would gain its 25 electoral votes and in turn obtain the 270 total electoral votes needed to become President. The next morning, official counts said that Bush was winning by around 2,000 votes. This was close enough to trigger an automatic re-count of all the votes cast in the

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<sup>4</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

state. A few days later, the recount gave Bush an even smaller lead. Both sides spent all their time in Florida, trying to oversee that these recounts were being done fairly. Three Florida counties in particular were the ones that were being focused on. These were Miami-Dade County, Palm Beach County, and Broward County. The recount process went on for a long period of time. On November 26, an official count put Bush ahead in Florida by 537 votes. This was an extremely close number to decide an entire election on. Not only was the vote that close, there was debate on the validity of some ballots used in Florida.<sup>6</sup> Some of the ballots were “punch ballots” in which voters punched out a piece of the ballot to mark who they were voting for. Sometimes, the part meant to be punched out was not removed all the way, creating what was referred to as a “hanging chad”. Debate sparked on whether or not to count these ballots. Along with hanging chads came “butterfly ballots” in which many people claimed they found the ballot confusing and may have ended up voting for the wrong person<sup>7</sup>. All these reasons made the recount very hard and controversial. Eventually, the Supreme Court had to get involved. On December 12th, the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* that the current recount in Florida was unconstitutional and that the last result of Bush winning by 537 votes should stand. Gore conceded soon thereafter and Bush could finally be declared winner.

All of the events of this election can be used to show how American elections are flawed. Firstly, the Electoral College is a highly ineffective way to elect Presidents. Four presidents: John Quincy Adams in 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, Benjamin Harrison in 1888, and George W. Bush in 2000, won the Presidency even after acquiring less nationwide votes than

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Kettle, “Florida ‘recounts’ Make Gore Winner,” *The Guardian* (The Guardian), January 28, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jan/29/uselections2000.usa>.

<sup>7</sup> Mayers, Timothy. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

another candidate.<sup>8</sup> In 2000, Gore won the popular vote, and that is undisputed. Official counts put him around 500,000 ahead nationwide. But, because of how the Electoral College works, nationwide results do not matter, but the results from individual states do. Other than Maine and Nebraska, each state gives all of its electoral votes to the candidate which won its state.

Therefore, it is possible for results to be very disproportionate. For example, if a candidate won the state of California by one vote, they would receive all 55 of California's electoral votes. This is how the results between the Electoral College and the popular vote can differ so much. In a state like California, with millions of voters, a candidate could win by the slimmest majority and still gain all of its electoral votes and getting them a fifth of the way to winning the presidency.

Another problem with this election that was highlighted in Florida especially was ballot discrepancies. This is a reference to the hanging chads and butterfly ballots that were discussed previously. These problems with Florida ballots brings up the question about how states are conducting their elections. Election laws are largely left up to the individual states. For instance, the times for polling may differ based on which state or even county you live in.<sup>9</sup> This could lead to some places holding elections that could have questionable results. In the 2000 election, the Florida counties that were previously mentioned for being contentious all had some sort of controversy arise during the recount process.<sup>10</sup> For these reasons, the 2000 election was a controversial one, and it had many oddities that show the problems of the American electoral system.

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<sup>8</sup> D'Angelo Gore, "Presidents Winning Without Popular Vote," Factcheck.org, March 24, 2008, , accessed November 6, 2016, <http://www.factcheck.org/2008/03/presidents-winning-without-popular-vote/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Toobin, *Too Close to Call* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Toobin, *Too Close to Call* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks), 97.

The 2000 presidential election was certainly one that will be cited for as influential or historical for a long time. It was the first election of the new millennium and certainly would have been historic regardless. Every four years voters in America vote to elect their next president, which will change the course of the country for years to come. In 2000, the American people went to the polls, voted, and voiced their opinion. Yet, the person they wanted to be their next Commander-in-chief did not become President. The most basic function of American democracy is broken, and no one seems to want to fix it.

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