

# Changing the scale and changing the result: Evaluating the impact of an electoral reform on the 2000 and 2004 US Presidential elections

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## Abstract

The ‘perverse’ outcome of the 2000 US Presidential election, whereby the candidate with most ‘popular votes’ was defeated in the Electoral College, has stimulated renewed interest in electoral reform in the United States. One option discussed is the Maine/Nebraska system (sometimes termed the Mundt–Coudert scheme) which changes the geography of the contest somewhat. One-fifth of the Electoral College votes are retained for the winner of the popular vote contest in each of the States, with the remainder being allocated to candidates who win in each of the separate Congressional District contests. This paper evaluates the likely outcome of the 2000 and 2004 Electoral College contests if this scheme had been in place. It shows that the 2000 result would not have been changed, but the 2004 outcome would have been even more favourable to the Republican candidate, because his vote total was much more efficiently distributed than his opponent’s.

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## Introduction

George Bush's victory in the 2000 US Presidential election, despite him getting fewer votes than Al Gore, was the stimulus for considerable discussion regarding the nature of the Electoral College system used for those contests.<sup>1</sup> Alternative methods of conducting a Presidential election were canvassed, with most of them promoted on the grounds that they could not lead to another 'perverse' outcome whereby the most popular candidate in the contest for votes failed to be elected. (See, for example, the essays in Schumaker & Loomis, 2002; Thompson, 2002.)

Because of this and other perceived defects of the Electoral College system, a number of options have been debated for some time, including (see, for example, Longley & Braun, 1972; Peirce & Longley, 1981):

- *The automatic plan*, which eliminates the need for the Electoral College to meet because its members are required to vote for the candidate to whom they are pledged (one member did not do so in 2000) and so delivers victory to the candidate with most Electoral College votes;
- *The proportional plan*, whereby each State's Electoral College votes would be allocated to the candidates according to their percentage of the votes cast there (this option was proposed in a referendum in Colorado in 2004, but defeated by a margin of 2:1);
- *The direct vote plan*, whereby the Electoral College would be abolished and the Presidency awarded to the winning candidate in a nationwide popular vote contest; and
- *The district plan*, whereby each State would have two votes in the Electoral College for the candidate winning in the State-wide popular vote contest, and its other Electoral College votes would be allocated to the candidate who won in each of its Congressional Districts.

The last of these is already deployed in two States—Maine and Nebraska—where separate contests are held for Electoral College votes in each of the State's Congressional Districts (which have one vote each) as well as State-wide (where the victor gets two votes). As such, although there has been little discussion about its wider adoption, it offers an interesting—geographical—option whose possible impact on recent election results is worth exploring.

The reasons for Bush's victory over Gore in the Electoral College were to be found in the geography of the 2000 election, in particular the geography of where the two main contestants won their support (Johnston, Pattie, & Rossiter, 2001; Johnston, Rossiter, & Pattie, 2005). Bush defeated Gore because more of his popular votes were cast in the right places than was the case for his opponent: the geography of his support was more efficient than was Gore's.

Would a different geographical architecture for the election—the Maine/Nebraska system—have delivered a different result in 2000? That question cannot be addressed directly, because if the election had been conducted within that framework then the parties would almost certainly have organised their campaigns differently; some voters who abstained may have voted (and vice versa), and some who did vote may have supported a different candidate. Nevertheless, it is possible to re-run the 2000 Presidential election (and also, for comparative purposes, the 2004 contest) as if it had been held using the Maine/Nebraska system in every State, to evaluate the possible outcome under that different set of rules. This is not a 'true' natural experiment, therefore, but it provides insights into the importance of geography in the conduct of elections and especially the translation of popular into Electoral College votes within different architectures.

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<sup>1</sup> An early example was a special issue of *The CQ Researcher* (Volume 10, Number 432, December 2000).

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