

US can learn a lot from Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating

Wednesday, 23 November 2016 06:36

It is time for the US to scrap its Electoral College system for choosing its president and simply go with the popular vote. Yes, I know, as soon as one mentions this, someone will pipe up with “but the founding fathers, etc, etc,” as if the US has not changed from the original 13 colonies and the first presidential election of 1789 and as if its electoral college process had not already been changed to be more realistic.

Democracy must continue to be representative. What was good in one age and under certain circumstances falls short under the new, and in this the US with its archaic system could ironically learn from the new kid on the block, the fledgling democracy of Taiwan.

Let's start with the US founding fathers' concerns. When the US had its first election, members of the Congress had many fears. They were concerned that any one area of the small country with a greater voting population might dominate politics if the president were chosen by popular vote.

Similarly they also had a mistrust of the education level of many in the voting public. Further, there was the fact that with little communication between the colonies/states, which meant voter loyalty would primarily favor locally known people whose qualifications would rarely be known throughout the nation.

It was a system driven by the basic fear that an uneducated majority might pick the wrong person and wreck this newly established country. Interesting, is it not?

There was more. The southern states had a different economy. While some of those states might have had a large slave population to work on the plantations, those slaves were not eligible to vote. This could give northern states with a greater number of voters the chance to constantly dominate the presidency.

That of course would later prove to be its own issue, where many southern states refused to accept the Electoral College system as soon as Abraham Lincoln was elected president. That would finally be resolved by the Civil War and a faulty Reconstruction that continued to disenfranchise many.

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Go back then and examine what the founding fathers were facing. They had 13 colonial states on the eastern seaboard with a population of 2.4 million of which about 43,782 with little means of communication would vote in the first election, an alien situation from today's world.

When the founding fathers made up the rules of the Electoral College system, they had no vision of a country that would eventually extend from "sea to shining sea," would allow the female vote or "slave" vote, and would have a growing population of over 318 million people.

They also had no concept that economies would go beyond regionalization and become globalized, nor that instantaneous and daily communication between all areas would be possible.

Yes, today, things are totally different. The US does extend from sea to shining sea; it has a current voting population of about 230 million registered voters and most of them are better educated than many of the original colonies. These voters have constant and instantaneous communications, not only with each other, but also the world.

However, what about the possibility of regional domination? Take a look at the most populated areas and how they are spread out. The top six states in terms of population are California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois and Pennsylvania. They extend from coast to coast and from north to south. All that diversity hardly leaves room for domination by one region at the national presidential level.

What then about half of the population being in urban areas? That is true, but the opposite fact remains that all states no matter how big or small have representation in both houses of Congress. Congress has its own powers and the president does not control Congress.

Each state, even one like Wyoming with a population of barely 586,000, is guaranteed two members in the Senate and at least one in the House of Representatives. So even if a vast number of states do not have large urban areas, these "rural" states do have "more equal" representation in Congress. In particular, the numerous less-populated states, which select their US representatives locally, can collectively dominate the Senate, if not the House.

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Repeat again, the president does not control the Congress.

In the 1800s, problems with the Electoral College system surfaced three times. The first was in 1824 when John Quincy Adams defeated Andrew Jackson; the second was in 1876 when Benjamin Harrison defeated Grover Cleveland and the third was in 1888 when Rutherford Hayes defeated Samuel Tilden.

Each time the loser had won the popular vote, but lost by the system and the results were bitter and divisive.

Unmentioned in this list is the secession, which caused the Civil War.

However, in the 21st century, and perhaps because of better communications, this problem of the Electoral College system has already occurred twice. In 2000, George W. Bush defeated then-US vice president Al Gore, who won the popular vote in an election whose outcome was finally determined by the Supreme Court stopping a recount.

In this year's election, Hillary Rodham Clinton's rising victory of some 1.5 million in the popular vote is still registered as a loss to Donald Trump by the Electoral College system.

Is an old, outdated system automatically good? Enter Taiwan, the new kid on the democratic block, and a nation that has never had these problems because it is free of archaic appendages set for 43,872 voters in 1789. After one-party state dominance, Taiwan started directly electing its president in 1996 by popular vote.

Taiwan is a mid-sized nation with a population of 23 million; its voting population has increased from about 14.3 million eligible voters in 1996 to 18.7 registered voters this year.

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To give US citizens a sense of comparison, only two states in the US have populations larger than that of Taiwan, California, which boasts of being the sixth-largest economy in the world, and Texas. However, neither of them has a registered voting population larger than Taiwan.

Taiwan is not without its own issues, such as disproportionate representation in the 113-seat Legislative Yuan; it also has six major municipalities, 13 counties and three provincial cities in its voting mix. It even has a north-south divide.

However, despite all these differences, and overcoming 50 years of indoctrination by a one-party state, the election of its president is by popular vote and has not been a problem for Taiwan.

In 2000, it weathered the storm where there were three major candidates for the presidency and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) won with only 39.3 percent of the vote. In the 2004 election, Chen was re-elected with 50.11 percent of the vote to former vice president Lien Chan's (連戰) 49.89 percent in an election that had an assassination attempt to boot. Nonetheless, Taiwan has remained with no trouble electing its president by popular majority.

Thus, the allegedly “experienced” US may want to look and learn from the new kid on the block. It will certainly see reasons to jettison an archaic system, which continues to create more problems than it ever solved and which now faces more complex issues than its founding fathers could ever have anticipated.

Instead in the US, a major irony continues to build. It now has 10 to 12 swing or battleground states, where certain regions do receive far more special attention and power to nullify the equal representation intentions of the founding fathers.

The Electoral College system in effect marginalizes the voters in the remaining states. And if that is not enough, most states also have a winner take all system, which along with gerrymandering of districts continuously adds more disenfranchisement to voters at all levels. It needs a major overhaul.

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Finally of course, in a last-ditch protest, traditionalists afraid of change in a changing world will say change would require the backbreaking task of amending the US constitution. That has an element of truth, but it is not insurmountable, for a new National Popular Vote Bill is spreading throughout the US and can bring the needed change once it is signed by states possessing a total of 270 Electoral College votes.

Change is possible if the US is open to learn.

The archaic national Electoral College system has outlived its usefulness. The repeat divisiveness of the recent US election is a wake-up call. Two major and divisive instances in 16 years is not a good omen. If Taiwan, the new kid on the block, can handle selecting its president by popular vote in the 21st century, it is time for the US to observe and catch up.

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