Divided by Design: The Polarizing Impact of the Electoral College

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Introduction

"One person, one vote"– a defining feature of the Western-influenced conception of democracy and what it stands for. It is a phrase so often echoed in civic textbooks, campaign speeches, and courtroom briefs that it has become synonymous with the very legitimacy of democratic governance. Yet, beneath the polished promise of equal representation lies an electoral mechanism that distorts this ideal at its core: the United States Electoral College. The Electoral College refracts the democratic will of the people, fragmenting it into a winner-take-all mosaic of red and blue. What emerges is not a unified expression of national consensus, but a polarized political landscape marked by distortion, exclusion, and strategic manipulation. Centered at this distortion is the Winner-take-all method of allocating electoral votes, used by 48 states and the District of Columbia, and not including Maine and Nebraska as they award their electoral votes on a district-by-district basis. Under this rule, the candidate who wins the most votes in a state, whether by a landslide or by a razor-thin margin, receives all of that state's electoral votes. In effect, millions of ballots cast for the losing candidate are erased from the final count. What remains is a patchwork of red and blue: a simplified, binary rendering of the American electorate that conceals the ideological diversity within states and communities. The nuance of political identity is lost; in its place, a narrative of "us" versus "them" takes hold.

In the past two decades, the United States has experienced a striking increase in political polarization. Voters are more ideologically divided, party identities have hardened, and hostility between partisans has grown. Presidential elections now often feel like contests between two separate nations, labeled red and blue. This divide is not only cultural, but institutional. The Electoral College reinforces it by enabling presidents to be elected without winning the popular

vote, by encouraging campaigns to focus narrowly on swing states, and by helping entrench the perception that the country is split into two rigid partisan camps.

This thesis investigates the extent to which the Electoral College contributes to polarization in the United States. My core argument is that its Winner-take-all structure fuels division in three ways: first, by reducing the spectrum of political identity to binary categories; second, by allowing discrepancies between the popular vote and electoral outcomes, which damages perceptions of legitimacy; and third, by pushing candidates to cater disproportionately to swing state voters, often through more polarizing campaign rhetoric and policy promises. The first half of this project reviews the theoretical and psychological foundations of polarization under the Electoral College, drawing from political science, social identity theory, and electoral research. The second half addresses a key gap in existing literature by examining how these dynamics have played out in recent elections. The proceeding discussion section focuses on contemporary elections, including those in 2000, 2012, 2016, and 2020, as case studies that show how these dynamics play out in practice. Together, this research demonstrates that the Electoral College is not just a mechanism for selecting a president. It has become a powerful driver of the political division that continues to define modern American politics.

The Evolution of the Electoral College and the Winner-take-all Structure

This section draws from the work of Robert M. Alexander to explore the historical, institutional, and political forces that have shaped the Electoral College into the system we know today. While much scholarship addresses the Electoral College's modern-day consequences, Alexander offers a detailed account of how this system came to adopt its current structure. His

analysis is important for understanding how early challenges in designing a voting system, and the tensions associated with its creation, came to shape the

According to Alexander in *Representation and the Electoral College*, the roots of the Electoral College trace back to one of the nation's first governing charter: the Articles of Confederation. Alexander outlines the complicated origins of what is today's Electoral College. According to him, in 1781, the ratification of the Articles of Confederation marked the United States' first attempt at national governance. Deeply cautious of centralized authority, the document preserved the independence of each state, promoting a system rooted in mutual cooperation rather than federal cohesion (Alexander, 2020, p. 40). The national legislature was a single-chamber Congress in which each state had one vote, and the so-called "president" of Congress functioned merely as a procedural administrator, not an executive leader. The government lacked a unified economic policy, a standing military, and the ability to enforce national laws—all of which led to fragmentation and dysfunction across the early nation. As economic instability, trade disputes, and weak defense structures mounted, it became clear that a more robust federal framework was needed (Alexander, 2020, 61).

This crisis of governance brought delegates to Philadelphia in 1787, not merely to revise the Articles, but to reimagine the American political system entirely. Central to their debates was the question of how to elect a chief executive (Alexander, 2020, 61). The discussions were polarized, because larger states pushed for proportional influence through the Virginia Plan, while smaller states feared marginalization and supported the New Jersey Plan's emphasis on state equality. This tension extended to the selection process of the president, which became one of the most contentious and unresolved issues at the Convention (Alexander, 2020, 61).

The Electoral College emerged as a political compromise, one designed to balance the competing demands of federalism, state sovereignty, and popular legitimacy. While Alexander Hamilton would later champion the system in Federalist No. 68, describing it as one of the few elements of the Constitution to escape criticism, historical evidence suggests otherwise (Alexander, 2020, 62). As scholars argue, Hamilton's depiction created a false aura of consensus that has protected the institution from scrutiny by appealing to the supposed wisdom of the Framers. In reality, the Electoral College provoked more internal conflict than any other constitutional provision and has since inspired more calls for reform than any other clause in the Constitution (Alexander, 2020, 62). The historical record makes clear that the Electoral College was born not from a unified vision but from political calculation and deep compromise, but between populous and small states, slave and free states, and federalists and anti-federalists. This origin story is vital to understanding its modern implications, as the structural flaw of the College is that it was a compromise to preserve a balance of power, not so much to represent the American people fairly and equally. And, the result of this history has stretched on to spark today's polarized political climate.

Furthermore, Anderson makes the distinction that modern institution functions in ways the Framers never intended. The Electoral College has gone through changes, not through constitutional amendments, but rather through political necessity and state-level changes. This in itself makes it hard to rely on the Framers' vision of the Electoral College, and to use it as the primary source of forming the electoral system today–especially since it was shaped by compromise and disagreement (Anderson, 2020, 71). Anderson cites political science scholars Lawrence Longley and Neal Peirce, who identify five major shifts that have significantly affected the operation of the Electoral College: the rise of electors pledged to party tickets, the

abandonment of the College as a nominating body, the popular election of electors, the adoption of the unit rule by most states, and the structural reforms introduced by the 12th Amendment (Anderson, 2020, 71). These changes gradually changed the system, and two changes stick out as more impactful than others.

Firslty, the rise of electors pledged to party tickets. This was a pivitol change that occured after the election crisis of, when Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr received an equal number of electoral votes (Anderson, 2020, 72). This exposed the flaws in the original design, where electors cast two votes without distinguishing between the president and vice president. After this, electors began pledging their votes to specific party tickets. This practice meant electors were no longer independent decision-makers, but instead acted as representatives of political parties (Anderson, 2020, 72). Political parties in many states began requiring electors to pledge loyalty to their candidates, and some states even passed laws to punish electors who broke their pledges. These norms in practice received a “formal push” and became official with the passage of the 12th Amendment in 1804, which required separate ballots for each office and further encouraged the use of party tickets (Anderson, 2020, 72). This effectively transformed electors from independent decision-makers into loyal party delegates, a shift that happened without formal constitutional sanction but eventually became the norm (Anderson, 2020, 72).

Secondly, the “unit rule” (which is essentially the winner-take-all system). By the 1830s, nearly every state had adopted the unit rule, which granted all its electoral votes to the candidate who won the statewide popular vote (Anderson, 2020, 73). For states that use the unit rule, the presidential candidate who wins the state's popular vote, even by a small margin, receives all of that state's electoral votes. This reinforced the two-party system and political parties by making it hard for thrid parties to gain any real influence institutionally (Anderson, 2020, 73). Ultimately,

through his work, Anderson illustrates the historical timeline that led to the Electoral College we have today, and he specifically highlights that what we see today is a product of political evolution. Most importantly, his scholarly work traces the evolution, particularly the widespread adoption of the unit rule, that gave rise to the modern winner-take-all structure at the heart of today's partisan polarization.

Literature Review

The Winner-take-all Structure and the "Red" versus "Blue" Identity

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In recent decades, political scientists have devoted significant attention to the institutional structures that shape electoral behavior and partisan alignment in the United States, particularly the role of the Electoral College in fostering political polarization. A growing body of scholarship has investigated how the winner-take-all allocation of electoral votes in most states reduces ideological diversity and reinforces a binary, red-versus-blue framework of national politics. Central to this literature is the argument that the Winner-take-all system flattens the ideological spectrum into two rigid categories, concealing the presence of political moderates and marginalizing minority party voices.

Scholars such as Abraham M. Rutchick, Joshua M. Smyth, and Sara Konrath have explored how this structure interacts with visual representations of electoral outcomes to distort public perception and deepen affective polarization in their publication. They argue that the structure of the Electoral College fosters a binary conception of political identity in the United States, one that significantly shapes partisan attitudes and reinforces ideological division (Rutchick et al., 2009, p. 270-71). The Winner-take-all system used in most states allocates all electoral votes to the candidate who wins a simple majority, thereby encouraging a reductive

red-versus-blue framework. This system collapses the ideological diversity of the electorate into two opposing categories, red and blue, both reflecting and intensifying partisan polarization (Rutchick et al., 2009, p. 270).

According to Rutchick and his coauthors, this binary framework produces two critical effects: interchromatic polarization and intrachromatic homogenization. Interchromatic polarization refers to the perception of stark, antagonistic divisions between red and blue states. Drawing on social identity theory, the authors explain that such binary groupings intensify intergroup bias, as individuals identify more strongly with their political "in-group" and view "out-groups" as more ideologically extreme or threatening (Rutchick et al., 2009, p. 271). This dynamic fuels mistrust, reinforces stereotypes, and discourages compromise across party lines.

Intrachromatic homogenization, on the other hand, occurs when the red/blue dichotomy obscures ideological variation within states. Labeling states as uniformly red or blue promotes misleading assumptions—for example, that all Texans are conservative or all Californians are liberal (Rutchick et al., 2009, p. 272). This oversimplification erases nuanced political beliefs and reinforces divisive narratives in both political discourse and media representation. Reducing political identity to a binary framework not only misrepresents the electorate but also deepens polarization by discouraging recognition of internal party diversity in viewpoints (Rutchick et al., 2009, p. 272).

Interchromatic polarization and intrachromatic homogenization are concepts under the umbrella of "in-group" and "out-group" polarization that has been growing in the past two decades, and which has been covered under different terminology by political scientists. For example, John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck in their publication *The Bitter End*, delve into a similar concept called "Tectonic Shifts" in partisan attitude. They note that over the

long term (at least since the year 2000), Democrat and Republican parties have become more *internally homogenous* and more different from each other in political ideology. They have also adopted more unfavorable opinions about the other party (Sides, et al., 2022, p. 7). They explain that Democrats have moved more firmly to the left, and Republicans more firmly to the right, making each party more unified on issues and further apart from the other. This shift has not happened overnight, but slowly over time, like *tectonic plates* moving under the surface and gradually altering the political landscape in a deep and lasting way (Sides, et al., 2022, p. 7). This reality is reflected in publicly obtained data by year as well: between 1994 and 2020, the percentage of Democrats who identified as liberal doubled, from 25 percent to 51 percent (Sides, et al., 2022, p. 7). During that same time, the percentage of Republicans who identified as conservative rose from 58 percent to 75 percent. Although a portion of both parties still identify as moderates, these numbers show that the middle has shrunk, and the ideological divide has grown (Sides, et al., 2022, p. 7). As proven, the idea of in-group homogeneity and out-group polarization is extremely pertinent in political science discourse, and has been the most vividly extreme over the past few decades.

Patterns of cross-party polarization and bias align with findings from Pew Research Center in their article titled “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System,” which shows that Americans increasingly view members of the opposing political party as “closed-minded,” “immoral,” or even “a threat to the nation’s well-being,” signaling the rise of strong in-group and out-group biases in the political sphere (Pew Research Center, 2022). As both psychological and institutional forces reinforce these divisions, the binary electoral map becomes not just a representation of outcomes but a symbol of entrenched partisan

division. In this same article, Pew Research presents another graph that shows the rising overall partisan antipathy between 1994 to 2022:

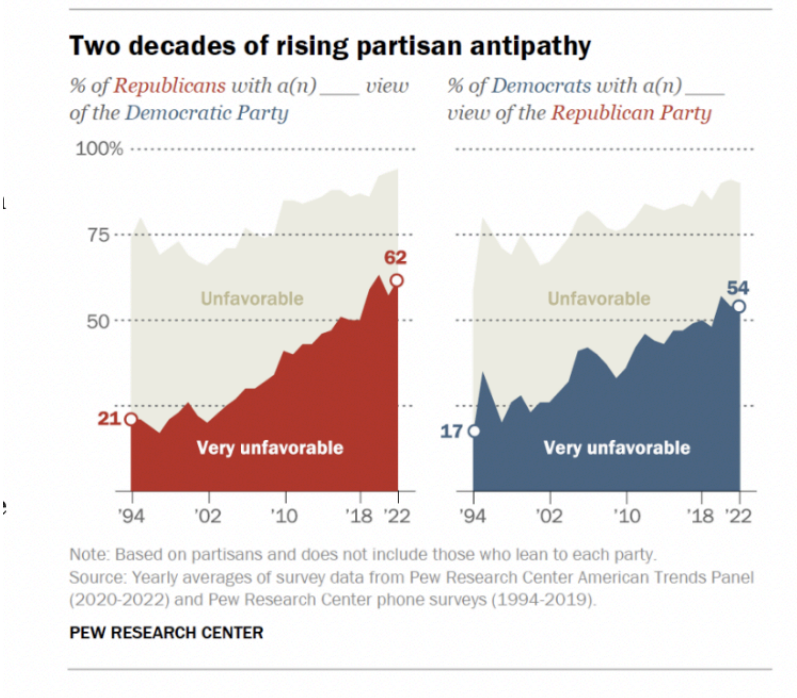

Figure 1. Examines the rising negative opinion and apathy from one party toward the other.

Pew Research Center reports that negative perceptions between Republicans and Democrats have grown significantly over time. Currently, about six in ten Republicans and over half of Democrats view the opposing party very unfavorably—a sharp increase from 1994, when fewer than a quarter in each party felt this way. While these negative views have remained relatively stable in recent years, they are much more widespread than in the past (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Simplification and downplays of the vast spectrum of political ideology is pushed onto Americans through the electoral college's visual mechanisms as well. Every four years, on the

first Tuesday of November, Americans sit down in front of a map that transitions from a light to heavy hue of both blue and red. This indication of colors is extremely symbolic: it represents the presidential candidate winner for each state. However, what is even more symbolic about these colors is their ability to reinforce the Winner-take-all, zero-sum outlook caused by the Electoral College.

With similar ideas, authors Rémy A. Furrer, Karen Schloss, Gary Lupyan, Paula M. Niedenthal, and Adrienne Wood, in their research publication *Red and blue states: dichotomized maps mislead and reduce perceived voting influence*, best identify this notion as "dichotomized maps:" a simple visual representation of election outcomes where red represents Republican, and blue represents Democrat, which in turn conceals the margin of votes by which and election is lost or won (Furrer, et al., 2023, p.1). They state that this visual representation and neglect for independent and marginal votes in turn increases the existence and perception of polarization because, "people's preferences for their political in-group permeate their color preferences, underscoring the strength of the association between parties and colors"(Furrer et al., 2023, p. 2).

Building on the concept that electoral visualizations reinforce a simplistic red-versus-blue dichotomy, the authors present three maps of the 2016 presidential election results to contrast the effects of design (See Figure 1.2). The first map (A) uses a dichotomous color scheme—counties are either red or blue depending on the winning candidate. This approach mirrors traditional media representations and enforces a zero-sum perception that neglects vote margins and ideological nuance. The second map (B) incorporates a continuous hue gradient where purple signals closer races, offering a more accurate view of political competition. The third map (C) combines hue and lightness to indicate not only the winner but also the margin of victory, with darker colors representing larger gaps. The authors argue that traditional dichotomous maps like

Map A oversimplify voter behavior and contribute to heightened perceptions of polarization by visually erasing close contests and minority party influence. In contrast, more nuanced visualizations like Maps B and C better reflect the spectrum of political ideology across regions, potentially mitigating the visual and psychological effects of electoral division. (Furrer et al., 2023, p.2-3).

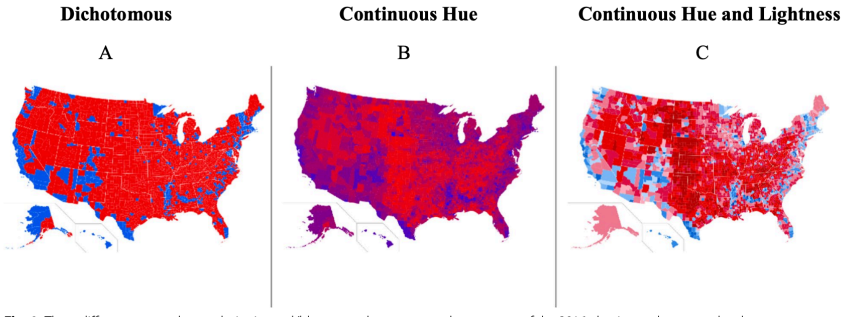

Figure 1.2. Three different mapping strategies used to represent the 2016 U.S. presidential election results by county, illustrating how visual design influences public perception of political division.

Scholar Bryan Mckenzie sythesizes this work, and states that in their discussion of such hues and the pattern of dichotomous maps, our authors reach the conclusion that the problem is not so much the colors, but with the winner-takes-all nature of the two-color map legend— and in turn the Electoral College (McKenzie, 2023). It is this structural Winner-take-all system that amplifies polarization, and the maps merely mirror what the institution enforces. By allocating all electoral votes to the majority candidate within each state, even if that majority is slim, the Electoral College's Winner-take-all system erases the millions of dissenting or minority votes that were cast (McKenzie, 2023). This erasure is then embedded into the way the public visually

understands the election: not as a complex mosaic of opinions, but as a hard-edged divide between “red states” and “blue states.”

What results is a political geography that appears far more polarized than it actually is, transforming a diverse political landscape into a symbolic battleground (McKenzie, 2023). The visual flattening of this complexity makes it seem as though states are ideologically monolithic, when in reality, every state contains urban-rural divides, generational divides, racial and class divides, and local political subcultures (McKenzie, 2023). But the Electoral College distorts these distinctions into binary outcomes.

To expand further on this notion, Rutchick, Smyth, and Konrath, in their study, reaffirm the psychological effects of visual representations of election outcomes. To explore this, they conducted a study with 150 undergraduate participants who were shown one of four versions of a U.S. election map. These maps varied in two key ways: whether they displayed states as entirely red or blue based on who won each state (mimicking typical Electoral College maps), or in shades of purple depending on the proportion of votes each candidate received; and whether or not they included numerical voting data (See Figure 1.3).

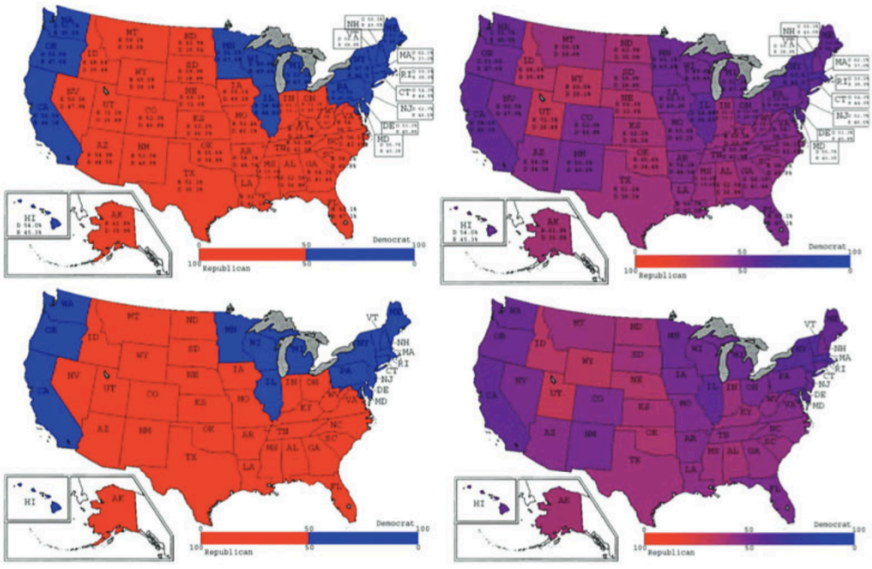

Figure 1.3. Map conditions.

Participants were then asked to 1. rate how politically divided they believed the country was, 2. how different Democrats and Republicans are on key issues, and 3. how influential or likely to vote minority-party voters (such as Republicans in California or Democrats in Texas) might be in future elections (Rutchick, et al., p. 274). Their answers were measured on a scale from 1-9, for their first question, 1 = not at all divided, and 9 = very divided. For their second question, 1= very little potential for agreement, 9 = great potential for agreement. And for the final question, 1 = not at all likely, 9 = very likely (Rutchick, et al., p. 274).

The results of this research revealed a clear pattern for each question. Firstly, participants who viewed the solid red-and-blue Electoral map perceived the country as significantly more divided than those who saw a more nuanced, proportionally colored map (Rutchick, et al., p. 276). Secondly, those who saw the proportional maps believed there was more potential for political compromise, and they perceived smaller ideological differences between the two major parties on issues like environmental protection, gun control, and same-sex marriage (Rutchick, et al., p. 277). Lastly, participants who viewed the electoral-style maps were less likely to believe that voters from minority parties had influence or were likely to participate in elections (Rutchick, et al., p. 277).

Building on these findings, the authors use their discussion section to highlight the significance of how visual representations of the American electoral system, especially its Winner-take-all structure, can shape public perceptions and deepen divisions in political opinion. The researchers argue that their findings provide the first empirical evidence demonstrating that the way election results are visually presented, particularly through the widely used red-versus-blue Electoral College map, has significant consequences for how Americans

perceive national unity, partisan difference, and political agency (Rutchick, et al., p. 278-79). Participants who viewed the dichotomous electoral map were more likely to see the nation as deeply divided and to believe that Democrats and Republicans were ideologically further apart, even when objective numerical data on voting outcomes were available (Rutchick, et al., p. 279). On a similar note, these effects persisted even when participants were shown exact vote percentages. For example, even when a state was nearly evenly split, such as 51% Republican and 49% Democrat, participants still perceived it as overwhelmingly partisan if it was shaded solid red or blue (Rutchick, et al., p. 280). This suggests that the visual impact of simplified red and blue coloring is powerful enough to override more nuanced facts and numbers (Rutchick, et al., p. 279). The authors also address concerns that the unfamiliarity of the Proportional maps might have skewed responses (Rutchick, et al., p. 280). However, participants only showed different perceptions on real political issues, not on made-up "filler" ones. This suggests that their reactions were not just due to novelty, but to genuine shifts in belief caused by how the information was visually framed.

Furthermore, the study found that this visual polarization extends beyond national perceptions to how people view their fellow citizens. When exposed to electoral-style maps, participants viewed residents of conservative states as more conservative and residents of liberal states as more liberal (Rutchick, et al., p. 279). This effect created a psychological exaggeration of ideological extremes. In contrast, participants who viewed proportional maps, where state colors were blended based on actual vote shares, perceived Americans' political attitudes as more moderate and their differences as less stark (Rutchick, et al., p. 279).

The authors connect these results to broader theories in social psychology, particularly intergroup processes. They state that, "It has long been known that sharper intergroup

boundaries, greater category salience, and more meaningful bases of categorization - all interchromatic effects reinforced by the Red-Blue depiction - can intensify intergroup bias and potentially inflame conflict…and there is reason to believe that the intrachromatic uniformity implied by depicting all red and all blue states identically may further contribute to stereotyping and bias" (Rutchick, et al., p. 279). By presenting states as uniformly red or blue, even when they are ideologically mixed, the map visually erases nuance and diversity of opinion. As a result, individuals are more likely to view political opponents as fundamentally different or even threatening, reinforcing a tribal mindset. This visual oversimplification mirrors and amplifies the zero-sum logic of the Electoral College itself, reducing complex political beliefs into binary categories and feeding the kind of "us versus them" thinking that drives polarization.

Ultimately, the authors argue that while political competition naturally creates tension, the Electoral College's Winner-take-all system magnifies this by rigidly sorting states into binary categories (Rutchick, et al., 280). This structure erases ideological nuance, encourages stereotyping, and can discourage participation among voters who feel unrepresented (Rutchick, et al., 281). Their central claim is that electoral maps do more than communicate results; they actively shape how Americans interpret politics and division itself. In this way, the Electoral College, along with the visuals it generates, does not just reflect polarization—it fuels it.

The Winner-take-all Structure and the Discrepancies Over the "Winner"

The president of the nation should be the person who wins the most votes. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is in direct conflict with the process Americans endure every four years when they elect the leader of their country. George C. Edwards III, in his book, *Why*

the Electoral College is Bad for America, critiques the system for regularly distorting the relationship between voter preferences and electoral outcomes. He explains that the electoral vote can "deviate from the popular will," sometimes even denying the presidency to the candidate with the most votes nationwide (Edwards, 2019, p. 42). Edwards' analysis is gripping, especially considering the reality that throughout history, 5 presidents have come into office without winning the most popular, or most number, of direct votes nationwide. Edwards then hits an incredibly intriguing conclusion, where he states that the popular vote does not translate into electoral votes; rather, the former expresses the people's choice, while the latter determines who becomes the president (Edwards, 2019, p. 42). This discrepancy creates a profound sense of disenfranchisement among voters whose preferences appear ignored, leading to widespread public outrage and a loss of faith in democratic institutions. The Electoral College's frequent failure to align with the national popular vote has become a significant source of political frustration and polarization in the United States (Edwards, 2019, p. 45). According to the National Popular Vote website, "Under the current system, a small number of votes in a small number of states regularly decides the Presidency. All-or-nothing payoffs fuel doubt, controversy over real or imagined irregularities, hair-splitting post-election litigation, and unrest" (National Popular Vote).

Similarly, Robert M. Alexander introduces the term "misfire elections" in his work, *Representation and the Electoral College*, to describe instances in which the Electoral College outcome diverges from the popular vote (Alexander, 2019, p. 121). According to Alexander, such misfires have occurred in approximately 12 percent of all U.S. presidential elections—a nontrivial yet alarming portion that raises serious concerns about democratic legitimacy (Alexander, 2019, p. 122). He further argues that one of the fundamental expectations in a

representative democracy is that electoral outcomes reflect the will of the majority, and so does the selection of it's leader. When the Electoral College overrides the popular vote, it undermines this principle and weakens the president-elect's mandate. As Alexander notes, this discrepancy places the incoming administration in a precarious position: "It can reasonably be expected that candidates losing the popular vote but winning the electoral vote may have a more difficult time persuading policymakers and the general public to pursue their agenda" (Alexander, 2019, p. 121). Scholars at the Brookings Institution argue that when a president is elected without winning the popular vote, it "undermines electoral legitimacy" and often results in a presidency "off on a rough start," setting a confrontational tone that exacerbates partisan divisions from the outset (Galston and Kamarck, 2020). This distrust extends beyond the election itself, fostering an environment where political opponents question the mandate and authority of the elected leader, thereby increasing polarization. The sense of exclusion among voters who supported the popular vote winner cultivates bitterness and suspicion, which politicians then exploit through increasingly divisive rhetoric aimed at mobilizing their base rather than seeking broad consensus.

This highlights how the Electoral College, through its potential to produce such misaligned outcomes, contributes to political division. Rather than reinforcing consensus, the system can sow doubt and resentment, especially among voters who see the election results as unfair or unrepresentative. In doing so, the Electoral College not only complicates the governing process for misfire presidents but also reinforces public distrust in the governing party, which increases cross-party tensions.

Winner-take-all Structure and Swing States

The Winner-take-all format of the Electoral College incentivizes presidential campaigns to focus disproportionately on a handful of competitive swing states, and they do so by crafting ideologies and policy platforms tailored to the specific concerns of voters in those states. This targeted strategy often leads candidates to adopt more polarizing positions on contentious issues, and therefore raises the overall temperature of American political discourse. In their publication In *the Electoral College and Presidential Particularism*, Douglas Kriner and Andrew Reeves emphasize a longstanding structural issue: the combination of the Electoral College and the "unit rule" (Winner-take-all allocation) results in voters from swing states and less populous states receiving disproportionate political attention and influence (Kriner & Reeves, 2014, p. 746). Legal scholar Katherine Shaw expands on this problem in her article "A Mystifying and Distorting Factor: The Electoral College and American Democracy." In the section titled "Distortion and Dysfunction," she notes that neither the Constitution nor the 12th Amendment provides any mechanism for addressing the representational inequalities that have emerged over time. Although the structure of the Electoral College is constitutionally defined, the distortions created by the Winner-take-all system, such as the marginalization of safe-state voters and the overrepresentation of swing-state interests, are the result of state-level choices and political tradition (Shaw, 2022). Shaw argues that these practices have warped the democratic process, creating a political environment where voter influence is unequally distributed and civic engagement is discouraged in many parts of the country (Shaw, 2022).

Moreover, Shaw argues that because of the electorate's Winner-take-all structure, presidents pursue policies with an eye to their own electoral fortunes rather than the national interest. In the section, she explains that the Winner-take-all system leaves most states politically uncompetitive and effectively ignored by presidential campaigns (Shaw, 2022). As a result, candidates concentrate their time and policy focus on a narrow group of battleground states, while "safe" states are consistently overlooked, which suppresses voter engagement and reduces participation in down-ballot races (Shaw, 2022). Shaw reinforces this point by citing Kriner and Reeves, noting that the disproportionate attention paid to swing states continues into governance: "the compulsion for presidents to court swing state voters does not end when the election is over" (Shaw, 2022, p. 170). Shaw's writing shows how the unit rule distorts campaigns, policymaking, leading to a presidency shaped somewhat by geographic advantage rather than national consensus.

Scholar Jesse Wegman is another source that echoes Shaw's writing by covering this phenomenon in *Let the People Pick the President*. He notes that presidential campaigns have "little incentive to appeal to a broad cross-section of Americans, because the path to victory runs through a few key regions in a few battleground states" (Wegman, 2020, p. 282). According to him, this dynamic encourages candidates to craft messages that appeal to specific regional or partisan interests rather than to the concerns of the country as a whole. As a result, political discourse becomes fragmented, and voters in non-competitive states are often overlooked, further deepening feelings of political alienation and regional resentment (Wegman, 2020, p. 282). This focus also distorts how candidates approach major national issues. Because they tailor their messages to win over small groups of decisive voters, their platforms on deeply important topics—such as healthcare, immigration, and the environment—are often shaped not by broad

consensus but by what will energize their base in key regions (Wegman, 2020, p. 283). Wegman explains that when candidates must compete for votes nationwide, they are more likely to pursue solutions that reflect the needs of most Americans. In contrast, the Electoral College encourages candidates to adopt more extreme positions to win narrow victories, fueling partisanship rather than cooperation (Wegman, 2020, p. 282).

This distorted system fuels polarization by reinforcing geographic and demographic divisions. Wegman cites political strategist Matthew Dowd, who explains that under the current system, "one party has a demographic advantage, the other party has a geographic advantage, and neither is pushed to reach across those divides" (Wegman, 2020, p. 285). Campaigns are shaped within echo chambers, where candidates speak only to the needs of select voter groups rather than engaging with diverse perspectives. This leads to greater ideological rigidity, as candidates become more dependent on energizing their party's base in swing states rather than persuading a broader range of voters. Wegman then cites Reed Hundt's warnings that such a system rewards extremism: "If you want radicals and radicalized partisan politics, then you like the presidential selection system we have" (Wegman, 2020, p. 285-86). Even Wegman emphasizes that the Electoral College encourages the major parties to move away from the center, stating that "more moderation by the major parties could lead to less polarization among the electorate"(Wegman, 2020, p. 285). Yet the current system makes such moderation unlikely, since most voters live in states where their voices carry little weight in presidential elections. In this way, the Electoral College not only distorts representation but actively contributes to the growing ideological divide in American politics.

Understanding the theoretical impacts of the Winner-take-all system of the Electoral College begins to reveal a deep connection to the polarization that has gripped American society

over the past two decades, particularly in the context of presidential elections. The rigid division into “red” and “blue” states, the recurring discrepancies between the popular vote and the Electoral College outcome, and the disproportionate influence of swing states on campaign strategies have all been examined extensively in political science literature. Yet, most existing scholarship treats these dynamics in isolation. Some sources focus on the theoretical and psychological consequences of the Electoral College—its distortion of political identity, perceived legitimacy, and voter agency—while others document the material consequences in specific elections. Rarely, however, do scholars attempt to synthesize these two dimensions simultaneously.

This thesis aims to fill that gap. By drawing from both theoretical frameworks and election case studies, it examines how the structural features of the Electoral College not only contribute to polarization in the abstract but manifest in real time through campaign rhetoric, voter behavior, and electoral outcomes. In doing so, it demonstrates that the Winner-take-all system is not just a method of counting votes, but it is also a powerful institutional force that actively shapes the strategies of presidential candidates and deepens the partisan divide in American political life.

Analysis

Case Study: Popular vs. Electoral Vote Results (The 2000 and 2016 Elections)

The 2000 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections serve as clear examples of how the Electoral College undermines voter representation and inflames political polarization. In both instances, the candidate who lost the national popular vote was nonetheless awarded the

presidency through narrow victories in key states, thanks to the winner-take-all nature of the Electoral College system. These outcomes not only distorted the representation of voters' preferences but also triggered long-lasting partisan animosity, eroded public trust in institutions, and entrenched perceptions of illegitimacy on both sides of the political spectrum.

The 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore was one of the most controversial in American history. Although Gore won the national popular vote by over half a million ballots, the outcome hinged on Florida's 25 electoral votes (Edwards, 2019, p. 29). At the time, Gore had 267 electoral votes and Bush had 246, leaving Florida's result as the decisive factor. The initial vote margin was so small that Florida law triggered an automatic machine recount. What followed was a chaotic and contentious legal battle, compounded by design flaws like the infamous "butterfly ballot" in Palm Beach County and technical issues with punch-card ballots, many of which produced "hanging chads" that made voter intent difficult to determine (Edwards, 2019, p. 29).

The Florida Supreme Court ordered a manual recount, but the Bush campaign appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. In Bush v. Gore (2000), the Court ruled that the recount violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because it lacked uniform standards across counties (Edwards, 2019, p. 29). The Court also concluded that there was not enough time to implement a constitutionally acceptable recount before the December 12 "safe harbor" deadline established by the Electoral Count Act of 1887 (Edwards, 2019, p. 30). This system sets the date by which states must certify their election results to ensure that Congress will accept those results as conclusive during the official electoral vote count. By halting the recount, the Supreme Court effectively handed the presidency to George W. Bush, despite Al Gore's popular vote lead. Legal scholars widely criticized the decision, noting that the Court's interpretation of

the safe harbor deadline was overly rigid and inconsistent with prior electoral precedent, such as the 1960 election in Hawaii, where Congress accepted updated results after the deadline (Edwards, 2019, p. 30). This outcome prompted national debate over the fairness and legitimacy of the Electoral College. As historian Alexander Keyssar notes in his book *Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?*, the response was immediate: "In the immediate aftermath of the election, there were, predictably, numerous calls for the abolition or reform of the Electoral College" (Keyssar, 326). Although no reforms followed, the election left behind a lasting sense of injustice and fed the emerging narrative of a red-versus-blue nation.

The 2016 election, though different in context, revealed similar fractures in the democratic process and heightened polarization. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 3 million ballots, 65,853,516 (48.5%) to Donald Trump's 62,984,825 (46.4%), marking the largest popular vote margin ever for a candidate who did not win the presidency (Edwards, 2019, p.1-2). Trump's victory was secured by narrow wins in three key Rust Belt states: Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where his combined margin of victory totaled fewer than 80,000 votes. These states, collectively delivering 46 electoral votes, flipped the entire national outcome despite millions of voters across the country preferring Clinton (Edwards, 2019, p. 44).

The backlash to the 2016 result was immediate and severe. On the Democratic side, the result fueled anger and disillusionment, sparking protests and debates over the legitimacy of Trump's presidency and the Electoral College. On the Republican side, approval of the Electoral College did rise, whereas the opposite became true for Democrats (Keyssar, 2020, p. 1-2). Allegations of foreign interference, particularly Russian involvement in influencing voter opinion through disinformation campaigns, further intensified the controversy. In December of 2016, even with the CIA's confirmation of the Russian interference in the 2016 presidential

elections, Donald Trump and many Republicans viewed challenges to Trump's legitimacy as partisan hysteria, labeling it as "fake news"–further antagonizing the other "side" of the political spectrum to their supporter base.

Meanwhile, the existence of "faithless electors," members of the Electoral College who attempted to vote against their state's popular winner, exemplified the tension and discontent surrounding the outcome. In 2016, there were an unusually high number of such electors, with seven casting votes for candidates other than those they were pledged to, reflecting a significant protest against the Electoral College system (Rothman, 2016). The Supreme Court later upheld laws allowing states to penalize or replace faithless electors, reinforcing the contentious nature of the Electoral College process (Fink, 2020).

These cases expose much about the Electoral College: how it fails to reflect national consensus, and how it allows a candidate to prevail without securing concurrent majorities across key demographics. As noted in examination of the 2016 electorate by Pew Research, Trump's support was disproportionately concentrated among white, male, Protestant voters, long the dominant group in American society, while he lost the support of most politically significant minority interests, including Black, Latinx, and urban voters (Source: Table 2.0, validated voters in 2016) (Pew Research Center, 2018).The Winner-take-all method erased these demographic complexities and painted a misleading picture of national unity behind the victor. As a result, large portions of the electorate felt ignored, misrepresented, or disenfranchised.

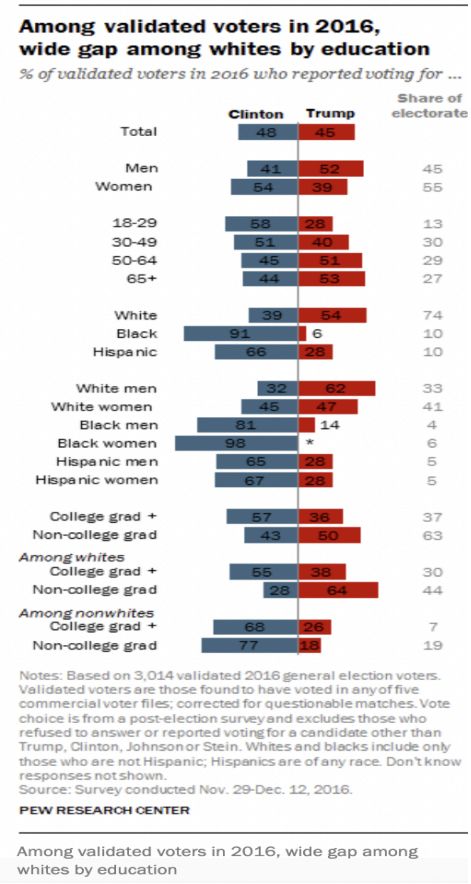

Figure 2.0. Demographics of voters in 2016, and the stark racial divide.

Instead of fostering legitimacy through broad support, the Electoral College enables narrow, demographically skewed victories that do not represent a cross-section of the electorate. The 2000 election generated deep suspicion about the role of the judiciary and the fairness of the electoral process. The 2016 election, in turn, reinforced existing divisions and led both sides to question the fundamental fairness of the system itself. In both cases, polarization was not merely a byproduct of political competition, it was a consequence of institutional failure to honor the democratic principle of majority rule.

Case Study: Swing State Presidential Focus (The 2012 and 2016 Elections)

Over recent elections, contenders have explicitly adjusted issue stances to appeal to swing-state voters at the expense of a broad national message. For example, in the article "How swing states came to be critical in U.S. presidential elections," Joe Hernandez observes that campaigns now emphasize hot-button social and economic issues in key suburbs and swing regions (e.g. North Carolina's 2016 transgender bathroom debate, Georgia's 2019 abortion law) which can advantage one party's base in those states (Hernandez, 2024). In practice, both parties have honed distinct messages in these states. The Electoral College "invites targeted appeals" to a limited selection of states, giving those states outsized influence and contributing to a more polarized national discourse (Nivola, 2005). With such an emphasis on gaining the electoral votes of battleground states, this discussion/case study is aimed at proving that presidential candidates and sitting presidents, specifically throughout the past two decades, have altered their campaigns to cater to such states. And, as a result of disproportionate monetary and ideological focus on swing states, presidential candidates have crafted much more extreme and polarizing messages, deepening national divides on key issues. To illustrate this phenomenon, I will examine the 2012 and 2016 elections as case studies.

In 2012, economic issues were at the forefront of swing states' voter targets in the Midwest. During this election year, President Obama made the auto-industry bailout, which had been widely criticized by Republicans, a centerpiece of his campaign in states like Ohio and Michigan (Scott Neuman, 2012). He framed the bailout as a story of economic leadership and job preservation, emphasizing its direct impact on working-class communities. This local framing helped strengthen his appeal to voters in those states, and many analysts credit it as a decisive factor in securing their electoral votes (Neuman, 2012). In addition, in southern and Sun

Belt swing states, immigration also loomed large: observers noted that the GOP's tough talk on immigration "hurt" its Latino support in 2012 and beyond, benefiting Democrats in places like Florida and Nevada (Neuman, 2012). According to our previously cited author, Jesse Wegman, while Congress may control the majority of federal spending, the president of the United States holds the power to direct the flow of money through tools such as grants (Wegman, 2020, p. 277). These grants can work as "an ideal electoral tool" by allowing presidents to obtain swing state favor through funding in those states. Under the Electoral College, a president can, "Direct the most funds to swing states, where the ultimate electoral payoff will be at its highest" (Wegman, 2020, p. 278). And, during his 2012 re-election campaign, Obama made sure to remind the swing state voters in Ohio that he funded almost $125 million in alternative-energy grants to companies (Wegman, 2020, p. 279). This depicts an example of not just rhetorical strategy, but the materialization of support shown by a presidential campaign in order to secure swing-state loyalty. It illustrates how far presidents are willing to go to win over voters in competitive states, even if it means directing millions of dollars in funding and embracing politically divisive positions on polarizing issues such as alternative energy and corporate dependency.

In addition, the 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton offers a clear example of how swing-state targeting led candidates to adopt polarizing issue positions. Trump's campaign heavily emphasized protectionist and culturally conservative messages in Midwestern swing states, particularly among white, working-class voters who had previously supported Barack Obama (Ernest Scheyder, et al., 2020). His large "promises" to renegotiate trade deals, revive manufacturing, and take a hard-line stance on immigration and gun rights resonated deeply in these regions (Ernest Scheyder, et al., 2020). Many voters in the

Rust Belt cited Trump's "protectionist trade philosophy, strong defense of gun rights and hard-line stance on immigration" as key reasons for their political shift (Scheyder, et al., 2020). In contrast, Hilary Clinton approached these swing states with opposite stances. Clinton's support for existing trade agreements and opposition to mass deportations failed to gain the same traction in these areas, contributing to the unexpected flipping of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—states once considered part of the Democratic "blue wall" (Scheyder, et al., 2020).

Most importantly, 2016 was seeped in highly divisive rhetoric from Donald Trump. He adopted a persona of extremity, which sparked passion with white, working class voters in the middle of America, many of whom reside in such swing states (Anthony Zurcher, 2016). In fact, to say Donald Trump's rhetoric in the 2016 election was extreme is an understatement, it was intentionally polarizing. He called for a ban on Muslim immigration, referred to Mexican immigrants as "criminals" and "rapists", and framed American decline as a cultural crisis (German Lopez, 2020). Overall, this messaging strategy leaned heavily on resentment, particularly targeting immigrants and minority groups. Rather than offering detailed policy proposals, his campaign embraced a combative style built on slogans that resonated deeply with voters in key battleground states. These appeals were not spontaneous but carefully calculated. As political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck explain in *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, the strategic activation of racial and cultural attitudes significantly benefited Trump, particularly in swing states (Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 9).

Crucially, this racialized rhetoric gained traction in exactly the states where it mattered most under the Electoral College. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck note that many white Obama voters who held negative views of immigration and minority groups defected to Trump in 2016. These

voters were disproportionately concentrated in swing states like Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where they played a decisive role in flipping the electoral outcome (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 128). Although Hillary Clinton won the national popular vote by nearly 3 million, Trump's ability to win narrow margins in these critical states secured his presidency. Donald Trump was able to compromise the "blue wall" proceeding the 2016 presidential elections, because his rhetoric was able to appeal to many of the previously-blue leaning swing states. The ability to shift the election to favor the Democrats relied on the strength they had in the midwest with swing states such as Colorado and Wisconsin. Many working class white people in the midwest swing states, particularly those without college educations in rural areas, turned out for this election in high numbers with incentives that their voices were being heard by the Republican party this time around (Anthony Zurcher, 2016)

The 2000 and 2016 elections illustrate how the Electoral College's Winner-take-all structure fundamentally distorts presidential campaign strategies, and allows the president to be chosen through a small, sometimes unrepresentative set of swing states. By prioritizing geographic advantage over national consensus, this system encourages candidates to tailor their messages to a narrow set of swing state voters rather than seeking broad-based appeal. Especially through examination of the 2016 election, we are able to see how extreme and polarizing rhetoric is *rewarded*–a nominee can tailor the discourse to strategically win certain votes in certain states, no matter how isolating and exclusionary their stances on identity and social issues may be.

Case Study: Engrained "Red" and "Blue" Perceptions (The 2000 election)

As explored in the literature review, political homogeneity and the dilution of ideological diversity are not merely outcomes of public opinion. They are deeply reinforced by the binary

red versus blue framework embedded within the structure of the Electoral College. This binary logic is most clearly displayed through the color-coded electoral maps that flood television screens and media platforms every four years (at the very least). These maps visually paint the country in solid red or blue, based solely on which candidate wins the majority of votes in each state. While they are presented as objective tools for communicating election results, their symbolic impact runs deeper. By reducing complex electoral outcomes to a two-color system, the maps create the impression that states are politically uniform and that the country itself is sharply divided into two opposing camps. In truth, every state contains a wide range of political beliefs, often divided along urban and rural lines, generational perspectives, and socioeconomic status. Yet the Winner-take-all structure of the Electoral College ensures that only the majority preference is reflected, leaving minority voices visually erased and ideologically sidelined.

To understand the lasting power of this red and blue narrative, it is helpful to trace its origin to the 2000 presidential election. According to Ron Elving's article for NPR, titled "The Color of Politics: How Did Red and Blue States Come to Be?," television networks had no consistent system for assigning colors to political parties prior to that election (Elving, 2014). Some networks used red for Democrats and blue for Republicans, while others did the opposite. The color scheme only became standardized during the prolonged vote-counting crisis between George W. Bush and Al Gore (Elving, 2014. With the outcome of the presidency hanging on a few hundred votes in Florida, television broadcasters leaned heavily on electoral maps to help viewers understand the situation. During this period, they began uniformly coloring Republican states red and Democratic states blue. This choice, though originally arbitrary, quickly became convention. As the election controversy dragged on, the red and blue map became a familiar

visual symbol of the contested process, and by extension, a symbol of broader political identity (Elving, 2014).

Analyzing these elections highlights the power shift in American political patterns, where now we have become so dependent on the colors “red” and “blue.” What began as a practical media tool soon evolved into a powerful metaphor for national division. The simplicity of the red and blue divide provided a clear, digestible narrative during a time of uncertainty, but it also masked the reality of political nuance. Once entrenched, this visual shortcut spread beyond television screens into public discourse, academic literature, and everyday conversation. It shaped the way Americans saw themselves and each other, reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging people to view entire states as either allies or adversaries. As this visual framework became more widespread, so too did the perception that political identity is a fixed, binary trait rather than a spectrum. The Electoral College’s Winner-take-all structure did not just determine electoral outcomes; it provided the perfect foundation for this visual oversimplification to take hold. This false clarity intensifies the “us versus them” mentality central to modern American polarization. It is not merely that people disagree, but rather that the structural and visual mechanisms of our electoral system teach them to see their political opponents as winners or losers, insiders or outsiders. The Electoral College, with its rigid divisions and the maps it produces, reflect political polarization, and *actively cultivates it*, both structurally and symbolically.

In effect, the color-coded maps that Americans now associate with presidential elections are more than just representations of political results. They are instruments of perception that harden partisan divides and suppress the visibility of moderation and internal diversity. The institutional design of the Electoral College, paired with the symbolic language of red and blue,

has helped turn politics into a battle of identities rather than a contest of ideas. This transformation has serious consequences for political dialogue and civic unity, as it encourages the belief that compromise is impossible and that the other side represents a fundamentally different America.

Discussion & Conclusion: Moving Forward

The Electoral College has now survived more than two centuries and more than seven hundred attempts at reform, yet its flaws have never been more visible. Recent elections have shown how easily a candidate can win the presidency while losing the national popular vote, how a handful of states can decide a nation's course, and how voter diversity is flattened into opposing red and blue groupings. Recognizing that our current electoral framework amplifies division means grappling with uncomfortable truths about the systems we often accept as tradition. This thesis has examined how the Electoral College's winner-take-all structure fuels this divide in three key ways: by reducing the spectrum of political identity to binary categories, by allowing discrepancies between the popular and electoral vote, and by incentivizing swing-state-centered campaigning that alienates much of the electorate. These are not abstract ideas. Over the past two decades, legal scholars and political scientists have deeply analyzed either the theoretical impacts or the material consequences of this system. However, this thesis examines two things simultaneously: the theoretical ideas and practices, and the modern-day election patterns that comprise the political atmosphere we see today.

The examination of a structural player in the division of American political partisanism is incredibly important today, considering that political party apathy is at an all-time high. According to our previously noted authors, Sides, Tausanovitch, Vavreck, in *The Bitter End*,

“This dislike of the opposing party has become more prevalent over the past decades—a phenomenon known as “affective polarization” or “negative partisanship””(Sides, et al., 10). This polarization has had incredibly impactful effects on the mentalities and perceptions of ordinary American citizens, who now have ingrained perceptions of opposing parties that are exaggerated and stereotype-ridden. Americans see themselves as farther apart and more foundationally different than those of the differing party than they actually are (Sides, et al., 11).

What we deal with today is the notion of calcified politics: a political landscape where opinions are hardened, compromise is rare, and party identity overrides issue-based reasoning.The emotional charge of negative partisanship, fueled by years of institutional and media reinforcement, has made polarization feel not just like a political reality but a social identity. Understanding the structural mechanisms, such as the Electoral College–and the Winner-take-all system as a byproduct–that have contributed to and sustained this division is therefore not only relevant but essential to grasping how American democracy functions and has lost legitimacy in our contemporary political time.

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