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Sphere Sovereignty and the Electoral College

Abstract

"Rather than just winning a majority of the popular vote of an undifferentiated populace, the President is actually elected by representatives of the States."

Posting about authority in government from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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Sphere Sovereignty and the Electoral College

 [inallthings.org/sphere-sovereignty-and-the-electoral-college/](https://allthings.org/sphere-sovereignty-and-the-electoral-college/)

February 10, 2017

Donald Roth

Donald Trump was just sworn in as the 45th President of the United States after fewer Americans voted for him than his opponent, Hillary Clinton. This happened because of the [Electoral College](#), the system where electors equaling each state's Congressional representatives actually elect the President. Almost as soon as the rollercoaster of election night revealed that many expert predictions were badly off, disgruntled commentators turned their sights on that system, with retired Senator Barbara Boxer even [introducing a bill to repeal the Electoral College](#).¹ Some criticism from [progressives reversed](#) in hopes that a revolt by electors might still prevent a Trump presidency; then, they quickly [reverted](#) to a negative position after that didn't pan out. Overall, many are upset, and public debate has this Electoral College under some of the fiercest pressure it has ever endured.

Much ink has been spilled on both sides of the debate over whether the Electoral College is an [antiquated relic of a racist past](#) or an [important reflection of the structure of our government](#) and a [check against mob rule](#). Plenty of voices are arguing for where we should stand on this issue as Republicans or Democrats, but what about as Christians? How does this particular democratic device, unique among Western democracies, measure up to a Christian theory of government?

Sphere Sovereignty: Power Delegated & Restrained

Since at least the time of Constantine, Christians have wrestled with how to balance the related authorities of church and the state, institutions merged in ancient Israel but clearly divided from one another in the New Testament. In the medieval world, the Catholic Church claimed supremacy over the rulers of Europe, while the Enlightenment tendency was to reverse that relation of power. In the late 19th Century, Abraham Kuyper offered one of the most useful alternatives to this binary relationship by articulating the concept of [sphere sovereignty](#).

Sphere sovereignty developed from the notion that all power is delegated from the Source of all power and authority (God). However, God often delegates different authority to different people and institutions, with no one institution having total supremacy. We can see this in the Garden, where God sets the sun and moon to govern over light and darkness and man to govern over living things.² We can also see this in Romans, where Paul cautions Christians against seeking vengeance for themselves, saying that God has claimed that right, then saying that God has appointed the governing authorities as "ministers of vengeance."³ In an inverted sense, we can see this in the consummation of the New Jerusalem in Revelation, where Jesus, as God Incarnate, now takes all authority unto Himself, removing the need for temple, sun, or moon.⁴

This ties together in a theory that, while divinely instituted, the government must respect the coordinate and independent authority given to other societal institutions, like the families, churches, and schools. In this view, the state has a deeply fundamental role, but it is not the author of rights and authority, either by Divine Right or social contract. This view is rooted in the notion that we humans are bad at using power well, and Kuyper calls on the various spheres to work together in policing one another as one sphere seeks to reach into another and claim that authority for itself.⁵

Evaluating the Electoral College

So how does the concept of the Electoral College look through the lens of sphere sovereignty? By reinforcing the separate and balanced powers that form the bedrock of the American government, I think this system stacks up quite well and is worth preserving.

Every semester that I teach about our Constitutional System, students are somewhat surprised when I tell them that they are actually subject to two governments. While most students have heard of the separation of powers within the branches of our federal (national) government, they aren't as clear on the fact that our state governments actually function independently (albeit subordinate in some aspects) with regard to the federal government. This concept is called "[dual federalism](#)" and it means that, unlike in Europe or most Western democracies, the federal government cannot force the States to pass specific laws.⁶

Instead, the Constitution sets up a United States made up of sovereign individual states who have pooled their broader authority to create a higher national power. This higher power is limited by the scope of powers explicitly given to it by the Constitution, while the States retain much greater latitude. In fact, it wasn't until the 20th Century that the Supreme Court interpreted much of the Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments) as a restriction on the States.

The Electoral College then is a reflection of the nature of the American government. Rather than just winning a majority of the popular vote of an undifferentiated populace, the President is actually elected by representatives of the States. Since most States grant their electoral votes to whoever wins the popular vote in that State, it means that the President must have broader appeal than just a few populous areas.

The Founding Fathers feared tyranny and aggregations of power in too few hands, and our system reflects that. The U.S. Constitution allows rule by the majority but protects against its potential excesses. It's why federal judges are insulated from the political process via lifetime appointments; it's why the Senate offers equal representation to each State; it's why the Bill of Rights exists, and it's why the Electoral College system was created.⁷

In sum, then, the Electoral College reflects a system of divided, coordinate authority and reflects a potential restraint on the tyranny of the majority. It's a system that largely affirms the majority will but functions differently when our nation is closely divided (it has made a difference in about 9% [5/57] of our elections), and it's a system that sits in good accord with a Christian view of government. We may not like the results that it produces,⁸ but I think it's wrong to call it antiquated or evil.

Footnotes

1. The bill had no real chance of passing, since the only real way to amend the system is a constitutional amendment. [↩](#)
2. [Genesis 1: 18, 26](#) [↩](#)
3. Most of us use versions of the text that make this less clear, but the more literal translations, such as the NKJV, preserve this sense in [Romans 12:17-13:5](#). [↩](#)
4. [Revelation 21:22-27](#). [↩](#)
5. For more on this concept, see Neal DeRoo's [piece](#) from In All Things, or, to read about how this could be practically applied, pick up Abraham Kuyper's [Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto](#), recently published by the Kuyper Translation Society. [↩](#)
6. The federal government *can* incentivize certain regulation by offering grant money, but it cannot force States to pass specific laws. [↩](#)

7. See, e.g. [Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist No. 10*](#) ↩
8. Arguably, even Hamilton and other Founding Fathers would have hoped that it was a mechanism to prevent exactly someone like Trump from getting elected. See [Federalist No. 68](#) ↩