

Publisher's Desk

Presidents and Popular Vote

By Bala Prasad

Election fever has gripped the nation, more so our candidates than the public. The Electoral College has been analyzed in different ways by each candidate. Every day, some see no path for nomination of other candidates, and others see a clear one.

So how did we elect our presidents in the past? There is not enough space to dwell on everyone, so let us pick the three most famous ones.

Our country declared independence in 1776, the Constitution was signed in 1787, and George Washington was elected our first president in 1789. Before this, the Congress had to decide how presidential elections would work. Different proposals included election by U.S. Congress, election by State Assembly, election by popular vote, and election by Electoral College. The last one was adopted. Every state was given a set number of delegates – one for each Senator and Congressman. Who and how delegates were elected was left to states themselves. We had thirteen states and 69 delegates. Every delegate was given two votes, one of which must go to an out of state candidate. The candidate with the highest votes would become President. In 1789 George Washington scored a perfect 69 and thus became President; John Adams came in second with 50 and thus became Vice President. Thomas Jefferson was a distant third with 3 votes.

When Thomas Jefferson ran for President in 1800, he had the maximum votes but so did Aaron Burr who was the sitting Vice President. This deadlock could be broken only by the House of Representatives. Vote after vote, eventually 35 times, neither man received a majority. Finally on the 36th ballot, the majority prevailed in favor of Mr. Jefferson.

By the time Abraham Lincoln ran for President, things had changed in that we had two

major political parties. Mr. Lincoln ran for the Republican Party nomination against Mr. Douglas, a very gifted orator. There was not much hope for Lincoln to win the nomination, let alone the general election. Mr. Lincoln did not get the majority of delegates on his side on the first or second attempt. On third attempt however, Pennsylvania flipped in his favor and thus he was nominated and later elected President.

Later yet came the system where electoral votes were tied to the popular vote. The first state to have a primary election using this rule was Florida. The first to be elected under this plan was Theodor Roosevelt in 1904. Some states have winner take all and others allocate delegates proportionately.

With all these gradual rule changes, much power still remained in the hands of the party bosses. But the last gasp of the party bosses' power came to a virtual end after the Chicago democratic convention in 1968. The party nominated George McGovern as his party's standard bearer who promptly lost 49 out of 50 states in the general election to Richard Nixon. Then the Democratic Party came up with the idea of super delegates. These included party workers and officials nominated or elected either by the party workers or by the public in general. The idea was to prevent a farce of having the presidential nomination cornered by a very small and vocal minority only to promptly lose the general election.

Presently the Republican Party is in the same pickle. Let us see what happens after the election.

Sincerely,

Bala Prasad