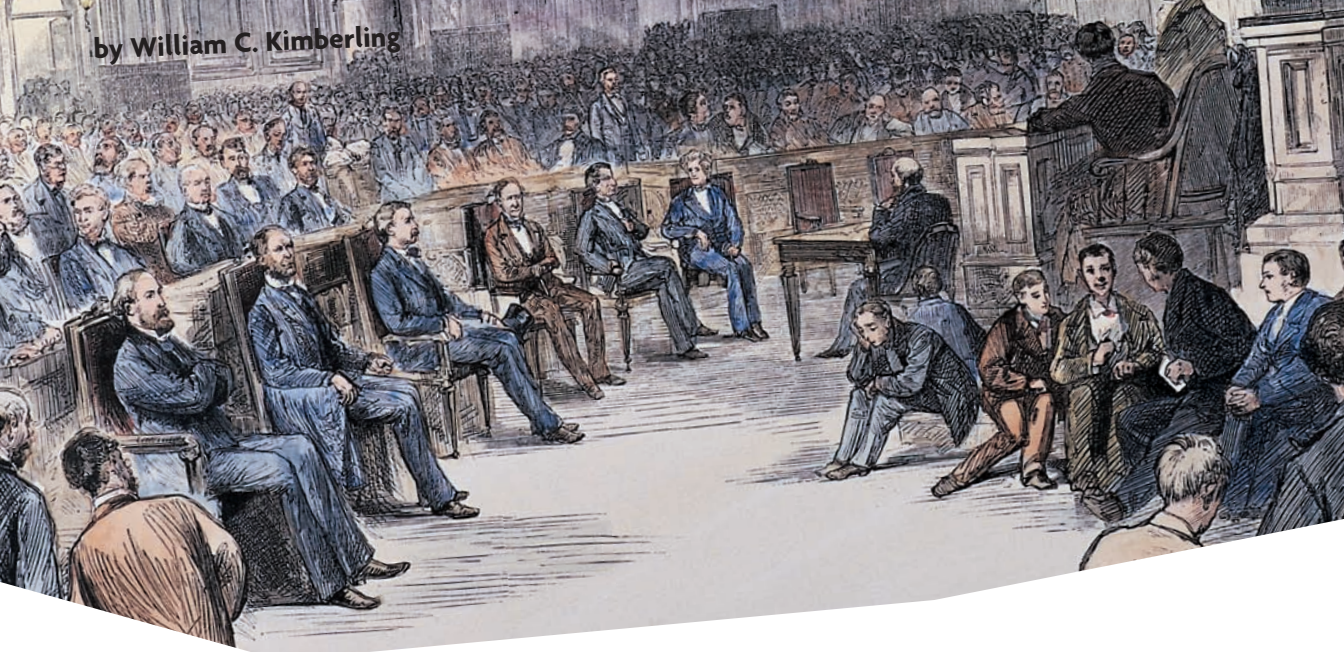


ORIGINS OF THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

by William C. Kimberling



The **Founding Fathers** (also called Framers of the Constitution) were members of the convention that drafted the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

Why did the **Founding Fathers** create the Electoral College? In

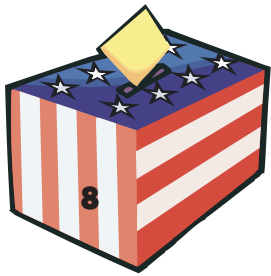
order to answer this question, it is important to go back in time and look at the problems they were trying to solve more than two centuries ago.

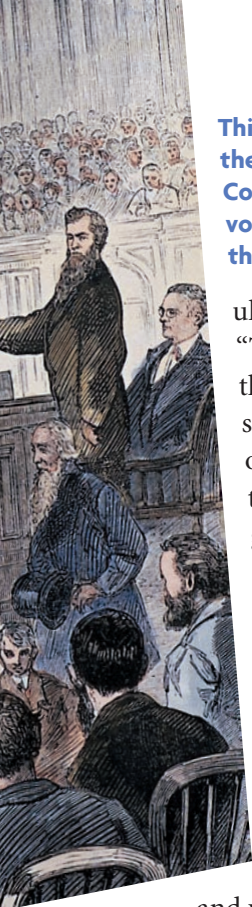
The United States was a very different nation in the post-Revolutionary War years. There were only thirteen states, which varied in size. All the states were jealous and suspicious of one another's

rights and powers and distrustful of any central government telling them what to do.

The population of this mostly rural country was only four million in the 1780s. Citizens were spread out, up and down about one thousand miles along the Atlantic Coast. Nationwide campaigns were impractical, as people barely were connected in terms of transportation and communication.

At that time, most Americans believed that political parties were evil and not to be trusted. The pop-





This woodcut captures the official counting by Congress of the electoral vote in 1876, a tradition that continues today.

ular saying of the day, “The office should seek the man, the man should not seek the office,” also showed their displeasure with gentlemen openly campaigning.

When they convened to draft the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the Founding Fathers grappled with how to choose a president without using national campaigns

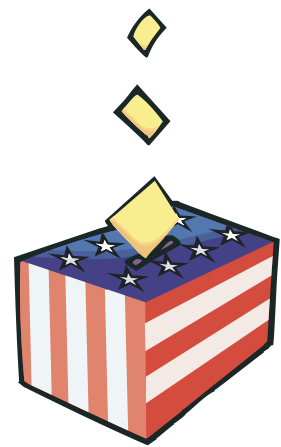
and without the backing of political parties. They also did not want to upset their carefully designed balances between a future president and Congress, between the states and the federal government, and between the large and small states. The Framers at the Constitutional Convention considered several possible methods of selecting a president.

One idea, which eventually was rejected, was to have Congress choose the president. Some Founding Fathers felt that doing so would create division and hard feelings in Congress. Others believed that such a procedure would invite inappropriate political bargaining, corrup-

tion, and possibly even interference from foreign powers. Still others felt that this arrangement would upset the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches of the federal government.

A second proposal was to have the state legislatures select the president. This suggestion also was not successful, as the Fathers feared that

Henry Clay (framed in background) was a man after the Founding Fathers’ hearts: He sacrificed his own political career to keep the country united in the years prior to the Civil War. Politician Mark Hanna (left), however, is portrayed as the kind of man the Founders feared. To him, the presidency and politics represented fame, money, and power. In this editorial cartoon, Hanna claims, “It is better to be president than to be right!”



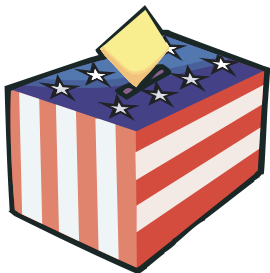


America's Founding Fathers based aspects of our government on the ancient Roman concept of a senate and rule by representation.

Beholden means owing something to another.

A **federation** is a joining together of states into a league or federal union.

A **favorite son** is a man favored as a presidential candidate by his own state.



a president would become so **beholden** to the state legislatures that federal authority would be weakened. This would undermine the point of having a **federation**.

A third failed idea was to have the president elected by a direct popular vote. The Framers of the Constitution feared that voters, lacking adequate information about candidates from outside their own state, naturally would vote for a **favorite son** from their own state or region (which still tends to happen today). At worst, no president would emerge with a popular majority sufficient to govern the country. At best, the choice of president always would be decided by the largest, most populous states, and the smaller states would have little influence.

Finally, a Committee of Eleven at the Constitutional Convention proposed an indirect election of the

president through a College of Electors. The original idea was for the most knowledgeable and informed individuals from each state to communicate with one another and share their opinions. Then they would select a president based solely on his merit and without regard to his state of origin or political party. Each state would be given a number of presidential electors equal to its number of U.S. senators (always two regardless of the size of the state) plus its number of U.S. representatives (which is based on the number of residents). Thus, the smaller states would have a slightly larger voice in choosing the president than they would through a direct popular election.

The individual presidential electors themselves would be chosen by each state in whatever way the state decided. Until 1860, some states

decided to let their legislatures choose their presidential electors: In those states, there were no popular elections for president at all!

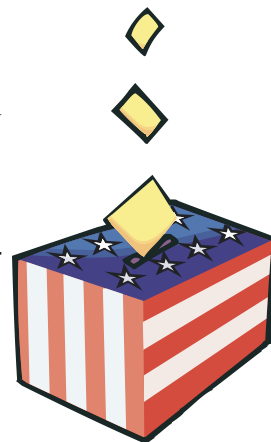
The Founding Fathers based the structure of the Electoral College on the Centurial Assembly system of the ancient Roman Republic. Under that method, the adult male citizens of Rome were divided, according to their wealth, into groups of one hundred, called centuries. Each century was entitled to cast only one vote either in favor of or against proposals submitted to them by the Roman Senate. In the Electoral College, the states can be compared to the Centurial groups, with the states relying on geography rather than wealth.

The resemblances between the Electoral College and classical institutions such as the Assembly are not accidental. Many of the Founding

Fathers were schooled in ancient history and understood its influences.

The Electoral College was designed by the Framers of the Constitution to solve a number of problems America faced more than two hundred years ago. And even with all the changes the United States has encountered (better transportation and communication, along with the rise of political parties and national campaigns, for example), the Electoral College continues to serve its purpose. The balances between the legislative and executive branches, between the state and federal governments, and between the large and small states are addressed by the College. And it continues to face and solve new problems as they arise over time. 🇺🇸

William C. Kimberling served as deputy director of the Federal Election Commission's Office of Election Administration. He has voted in every federal, state, and local election since 1964.



The mostly well-to-do, educated Framers of the Constitution hoped the Electoral College would address their fears about the voting process.

