



Mob Rule and the Electoral College

The term *mob* was first used around the London Crisis of 1678–81 and the Middlesex Election Dispute of 1768, during which time large crowds formed to protest against the government actions. Mobs were used to influence, pressure, or intimidate individuals. The term was used to describe the common people, who caused leaders to worry. James Madison believed that direct democracy would lead to the “tyranny of the majority.” In “Federalist, number #10,” Madison wrote about the mob as a group “united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens” Alexander Hamilton and early leaders of this nation held that the term *mob* was a useful tool for protest, as describing the Sons of Liberty, and that sometimes, that tool needed to be controlled.

The colonies remembered the London Crisis over a Roman Catholic son of King Charles II himself becoming king. Three bills were passed to exclude a Roman Catholic from becoming king. A new political party was formed—the County Party, which became the Whig Party. The crisis ended, and within seven years, the Glorious Revolution settled the issue. Later in 1768, John Wilkes, a journalist and member of Parliament, was arrested and imprisoned, and his followers gathered at St. George’s Field. The king’s troops opened fire on the crowd, and the colonists would remember that event later at another massacre at Boston.

Many of the leaders of the American Revolution saw “mob rule” as a danger to the new government. They addressed the matter with checks and balances. When the U.S. Constitution was written, only members of the House of Representatives were directly elected. The senators were elected by the individual state legislatures. The president was voted on by the general population, and then each state had electors to vote in the Electoral College.

The Electoral College was a check against the tyranny of the majority. The states in the beginning of the new country saw themselves as independent sovereign states. For example, when the Civil War started, Robert E. Lee said that he must go with his native state and not the Union. This attitude shifted with President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address—a shift from the idea of a collection of states to a nation—from “are” to “is.” His address went back to the Declaration of Independence and linked it to the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, which protect the minority.

The Electoral College is still a valuable part of the American democratic process in protecting the rights of the minority. Today, the population-concentration areas can sweep into an election with less than half of the states supporting the winner. The early leaders were worried about this and also how to protect the rights of the minority and still allow for the majority to rule. The Electoral College was one part of that protection. They understood and believed what Baron John Emerich Dalberg Acton (Lord Acton) said about power:

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com