



THE THREE-FIFTHS COMPROMISE AND THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The Electoral College was not created to protect slavery. Rather it was created to keep the president independent of Congress and to protect small states (which existed in both the North and the South). But did it, because of the “three-fifths compromise” that counted that fraction of enslaved people for purposes of Congressional representation, nevertheless wind up electing supporters of slavery that would otherwise not have won?

The answer is no, with just one possible exception. And in one clear case, the Electoral College prevented a pro-slavery candidate from winning.

Most elections from 1788 until 1860 were not close enough for electors allocated as a result of the three-fifths compromise to make a difference. Thomas Jefferson won re-election in 1804 by 162 to 14 electoral votes (running against pro-slavery candidate Charles Pinckney of South Carolina). In 1816 James Monroe won 183 electoral votes to Rufus King’s 34 and won a nearly unanimous re-election in 1820.

In 1824 the Electoral College prevented the election of pro-slavery candidate Andrew Jackson, who won the popular vote as well as the most electoral votes but did not receive a majority of either. Even without electors allocated to states under the three-fifths clause, Jackson still would have had a plurality of the Electoral College. Because he did not have a majority, the election went to the House of Representatives, where the anti-slavery candidate John Quincy Adams was elected.

The only presidential election where the three-fifths clause may have had an impact was the 1800 election of Thomas Jefferson, where up to a dozen electors allocated under the three-fifths clause possibly helped him defeat John Adams 73-65 in the Electoral College. But it is impossible to know who would have won without it as both Jefferson and Adams won electoral votes in states that benefited from the three-fifths clause.

There is no evidence that a direct-election system would have prevented the election of pro-slavery presidents. Slave-owning presidents including Andrew Jackson, James Polk and Franklin Pierce all received a majority or plurality of the popular vote during their elections.

KEY POINTS

- The Electoral College was not created to protect slavery, and with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, the three-fifths compromise did not have a role in electing or defeating any candidate.
- In 1824 the Electoral College prevented pro-slavery Andrew Jackson from winning after he received a plurality but not a majority of electoral votes and the House of Representatives instead elected anti-slavery John Quincy Adams.
- Pro-slavery presidents including Andrew Jackson in 1828 and 1832, James Polk in 1844, and Franklin Pierce in 1852 all won the popular vote as well as the Electoral College.