

# Why did the United States nearly disintegrate in 1801?

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The short answer is because of the electoral college for electing the president.

The electoral college was an ill-conceived idea born of unrealistic idealism: the United States would be a new kind of democracy in which elected representatives would make decisions based wholly on the merit of ideas instead of on alignment with political factions. This idealism defied both world history and American history, but the founders banked on it anyway. The result was a poorly designed presidential election procedure that nearly caused the United States to disintegrate in 1801 as a result of the unresolved presidential election of 1800.

I'll relate some of the fascinating and troubling details of the crisis as explained by Bruce Ackerman in *The Failure of the Founding Fathers: Jefferson, Marshall, and the Rise of Presidential Democracy* (2005).

We'll cover fundamental concepts that characterize the structure of representative democracy, and we will apply them to understanding defects in the current presidential election procedure and to understanding what rational alternatives there are for electing the president. In this context, I will explain my solution to the problem of how the president should be elected.

***To put this in personal terms, have you ever felt that your vote for president doesn't count for anything — not because you have only one vote, but because of the current structure of the presidential election procedure? I'll explain when, in fact, your vote doesn't count for anything and how the election procedure should be modified so that your vote will always count.***

## Meeting format

I will present the history and the relevant concepts interactively, and we'll discuss these events and ideas as we proceed.