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**The Electoral College: The inside story**

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Montclair resident Philip Thigpen, president of New Jerseyâs Electoral College, signs his ballot Monday for President Obama. *John Munson/The Star-Ledger*

**By Frank Argote-Freyre**

I am now a member of a club to which I never wanted to belong: the Electoral College. Despite my opposition to the institution, as a historian, I could not resist the opportunity to serve in that capacity when I was contacted by the Democratic State Committee in September. Of course, most people do not know what an elector does. They believe they went to the polls on Nov. 6 to vote for president and vice president, but what they were really doing, as I tell my friends who voted for Barack Obama, is casting a vote for me and a slate of 13 other electors. If you voted for Mitt Romney or someone else, you voted for a different set of electors.

[The real vote](http://www.nj.com/politics/index.ssf/2012/12/nj_officially_casts_electoral.html) took place on Monday in Trenton and no surprise, Obama and Biden won again.

For those unfamiliar with the Electoral College, a bit of history is in order. It was designed by the Founding Fathers as an elite institution to check the will of the “people” who, engulfed in the political passions of the day, might elect someone unfit for office.

The rationale for the Electoral College is set forth very clearly in Federalist Paper No. 68 by Alexander Hamilton, writing under the pseudonym Publius. He envisioned the people — who, by the way, excluded persons of color, women and the poor — as voting for “men (electors) most capable of analyzing the qualities” of those seeking the highest office in the land. Hamilton won that debate and the Electoral College was codified in the U.S. Constitution.

This year, I was invited to serve on the Electoral College. As a lifelong Democrat, I was a safe bet for the party.

The members of the New Jersey delegation did receive two petitions from concerned citizens trying to influence our votes. One came from an organization in Arizona — Waking Up America — which urged us to reconsider voting for Obama because of concerns that his birth certificate may have been falsified. The second was from Rebecca J. Hamilton, of Pennsylvania, who claimed “illegal activity” on a grand scale contaminated the election.

It is true that as recently as 2000, the Electoral College went counter to the popular vote and elected George W. Bush, who received fewer votes in the general election than did his opponent, Al Gore. However, the chance of individual electors arriving at a different outcome than that determined by the voters of their state is extremely unlikely. The process is carefully controlled by the political parties selecting their slate of electors.

The carefully choreographed nature of the Electoral College ritual became apparent upon my arrival in Trenton about an hour before the 3 p.m. ceremony. The electors met in a conference room across from the state Senate Chamber, where the official ceremony was to take place. Officials from the state Board of Elections handed out seven prepared copies of our voter declarations to sign. These certificates recorded our votes — all in favor of Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

With some trepidation, I asked the obvious professorial question: What if someone decides to vote for someone else?

The Board of Elections official answered that new certificates would have to be drawn up indicating the vote change. Such an unexpected act would have added an air of crisis to the proceeding and quite likely delayed the official ceremony. The rogue elector would then be in the unenviable situation of having to sit in a room with 13 partisans of the spurned candidates.

Of course, no such deviation from the script occurred and the 14 of us spent a few minutes in cordial and pleasant discussion. The Electors represented a racially, ethnically and geographically diverse cross-section of New Jersey, a fact that made me very proud. They make a living practicing a wide range of professions and skills. They are the type of folks you meet across New Jersey.

Which brings me back to my original concern about the institution as a whole. Why the need for a separate body of a few, picked to be a representative sampling of the whole? The electors are imbued with no special wisdom not contained by the whole of the electorate.

I enjoyed my brief membership in a club dating to the 18th century, but I am left wondering about what, if any, purpose it serves.

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