

2001

# Institutional Lessons from the 2000 Presidential Election

Elizabeth Garrett

Follow this and additional works at: [https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/public\\_law\\_and\\_legal\\_theory](https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/public_law_and_legal_theory)

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Chicago Unbound includes both works in progress and final versions of articles. Please be aware that a more recent version of this article may be available on Chicago Unbound, SSRN or elsewhere.

---

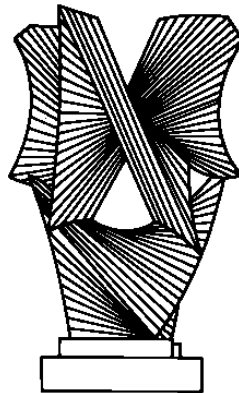
## Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Garrett, "Institutional Lessons from the 2000 Presidential Election" (University of Chicago Public Law & Legal Theory Working Paper No. 14, 2001).

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Working Papers at Chicago Unbound. It has been accepted for inclusion in Public Law and Legal Theory Working Papers by an authorized administrator of Chicago Unbound. For more information, please contact [unbound@law.uchicago.edu](mailto:unbound@law.uchicago.edu).

# CHICAGO

**PUBLIC LAW AND LEGAL THEORY WORKING PAPER No. 14**



## INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS FROM THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

*Elizabeth Garrett*

**THE LAW SCHOOL  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

This paper can be downloaded without charge at:  
The Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection:  
[http://papers.ssrn.com/paper.taf?abstract\\_id=269658](http://papers.ssrn.com/paper.taf?abstract_id=269658)

## **Institutional Lessons from the 2000 Presidential Election**

*Elizabeth Garrett\**

Although some scholarly and media attention in the wake of the presidential election of 2000 has focused primarily on its unusual aspects, such extraordinary events also lead us to analyze aspects of our legal and political systems that we tend to take for granted when elections run smoothly.<sup>1</sup> Among the latter set of lessons that can be drawn from the contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore are conclusions about the dynamic and complex relationships among our institutions of governance. In this essay, I will discuss two issues relevant to institutional design and institutional choice that have applicability beyond the most recent presidential contest.

First, the Bush-Gore election concretely illustrates that institutional design is a crucial consideration in determining which part of the government is best-suited to render particular decisions. When institutions must become involved in majoritarian political decisions, such as the selection of a president, it is often better to rely largely on the political branches than on the judiciary. This allocation of decisionmaking authority is justified not only because of the greater democratic credentials of Congress, but also because the legislature can adopt procedural frameworks to shape decisionmaking before a particular controversy arises. In this particular case, the United States Congress actually had a framework in place that would have allowed it to handle any challenges to the Florida election that lingered after state institutions had played their parts. Long before the country learned that the race between George W. Bush and Al Gore would be too close for the electoral system to handle smoothly, Congress had passed the Electoral Count Act.<sup>2</sup> This set of procedures would have allowed political discourse and decisions

---

\* Professor of Law, University of Chicago. I appreciate helpful conversations with Adrian Vermeule, the excellent research assistance of Crista Leahy, and the financial support of the James H. Douglas Fund for the Study of Law and Government and the Law and Government Program Endowment, both at the University of Chicago Law School.

<sup>1</sup> The authors of both the essays on which I am commenting in this symposium have drawn attention to elements of a presidential election usually overlooked. Luis Fuentes-Rohwer and Guy-Uriel Charles relate the design of the electoral college to democratic principles. Luis Fuentes-Rohwer & Guy-Uriel Charles, *Should We Rethink the Electoral College?*, \_\_ Fla. St. U. L. Rev. \_\_ (2001). Sanford Levinson and Ernest Young pay close attention to an overlooked constitutional amendment and discuss the appropriate roles for various institutions of governance in the selection of a president. Sanford Levinson & Ernest A. Young, *Who's Afraid of the Twelfth Amendment?*, \_\_ Fla. St. U. L. Rev. \_\_ (2001).

<sup>2</sup> 3 U.S.C. §§ 1-18. See also John W. Burgess, *The Law of the Electoral Count*, 3 Pol. Sci. Q. 633 (1888) (explaining Act and discussing its legislative history).

to be structured so as to channel and constrain partisanship and opportunistic behavior. More importantly, the framework would have ensured that decisions were made transparently so voters could have held politicians accountable.

In addition to highlighting this feature of institutional competence, the 2000 election also demonstrated the dynamic nature of institutions of governance. Members of institutions do not act in a vacuum. Instead, they react to one another; they anticipate the next institution's move, sometimes accurately and sometimes erroneously because of imperfect information; and they act strategically to influence the next moves so that the ultimate policy will be close to their preferred outcome. In particular, the interplay between the United State Supreme Court and the Florida Supreme Court is a fascinating case study of institutional dynamics, with the federal court decisively outmaneuvering the state supreme court in order to advance the outcome preferred by a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court justices.

## I

Rules that shape decisionmaking are seldom neutral in their effects; in many cases, the selection of one procedure rather than another will significantly affect which outcome is likely to emerge from the process. Once an issue becomes concrete enough for participants to be fully aware of their interests, they will work to choose rules that will advance their substantive interests and facilitate particular outcomes. In contrast, if procedures can be adopted before it is clear what issues will be considered and how participants will be affected, then the rules can be designed to further longer-term, more public-regarding objectives. Because decisionmakers act behind a partial veil of ignorance when they adopt ex ante procedural frameworks, their incentive to behave in self-interested ways is reduced and their ability to pursue self-interested goals is impeded.<sup>3</sup> So, for example, the congressional budget process framework that is adopted before any particular spending or taxing decisions are made and applies for several years in the future works to facilitate macrobudgetary goals like smaller federal deficits or better priority-setting.<sup>4</sup> Agreement on such collective goals is more difficult if interested

---

<sup>3</sup> For the classic statement of the veil of ignorance concept, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed. 1999). See also Michael A. Fitts, *Can Ignorance Be Bliss? Imperfect Information as a Positive Influence in Political Institutions*, 88 Mich. L. Rev. 917 (1990) (applying concept similar to the one I use here in analysis of the political process); Adrian Vermeule, *Veil of Ignorance Rules in Constitutional Law*, \_\_ Yale L.J. (forthcoming 2001) (discussing how ex ante constitutional rules can prevent self-interested decisionmaking that arises when the decisionmaker knows "both his own identity and the distribution of future benefits and burdens from a decision").

<sup>4</sup> See Elizabeth Garrett, *Rethinking the Structures of Decisionmaking in the Federal Budget Process*, 35 Harv. J. Legis. 387, 409-412 (1998).

groups concretely understand at the time an overarching budget framework is adopted how reductions in federal spending will affect the government benefits that they enjoy.

The partial veil of ignorance strategy is especially likely to succeed in reducing self-interested behavior when those affected are repeat players whose interests are likely to change over time. In the budget process, some interest groups may seek to enact subsidies in some years and to block enactment of subsidies for competitors in other years. Or they may hope to repeal laws in the short-term, but to protect some laws from repeal in the longer-term. Thus, a particular set of rules may advance their objectives in some cases but hinder them in others. Under such conditions of uncertainty, players are more likely to favor relatively neutral procedures that do not skew outcomes in one direction.

On the other hand, special rules that structure deliberation in the House of Representatives of particular, identified bills are usually written by the majority party to ensure the defeat of hostile amendments and to make passage of the legislation more likely, perhaps by protecting members from politically difficult votes.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the special rule might require a certain order of amendments not because the process would be fairer to all parties but because the process is very likely to result in enacting a bill favored by majority party leaders. Even with ex post procedures like these, however, strategic behavior is somewhat constrained. The Rules Committee, the parliamentarians, and both houses of Congress make parliamentary and procedural decisions in the context of a system of precedents, which are not as binding as judicial precedents but which do act as restraining norms and guidelines. Past precedents rule some decisions out of bounds, and the realization that current decisions will act as precedents in the future provides them some flavor of ex ante decisionmaking. Furthermore, lawmakers must publicly explain their procedural decisions in politically palatable terms, and the “civilizing force of hypocrisy”<sup>6</sup> reduces the ability of lawmakers to give into naked opportunism that cannot be explained plausibly in other terms.

Of course, the line between decisionmaking structures constructed ex ante and procedures adopted ex post is not entirely clear. As the discussion above reveals, some ex post decisions have elements of ex ante decisionmaking because they will determine not only the outcome of the immediate dispute but they will also serve as precedents that will shape the future. Similarly, ex ante frameworks will inevitably face some amount of

---

<sup>5</sup> See Stanley Bach & Steven S. Smith, *Managing Uncertainty in the House of Representatives: Adaptation and Innovation in Special Rules* (1988) (discussing rise of special rules in the House); Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress* (2d ed. 2000) (describing how special rules and omnibus legislation are designed to insulate members from politically difficult votes).

<sup>6</sup> Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Transmutation and Misrepresentation*, 3 *Legal Theory* 133 (1997).

ex post influence. No ex ante procedural framework will be fully specified, and the necessity of applying the general framework to specific decisions that must be made under it allows for strategic behavior. For example, politicians and interest groups can manipulate the congressional budget rules in a number of self-interested ways once they have a clear picture of how their concrete interests will be affected. Legislative provisions can be written to evade the discipline of the budget rules, or the rules can be waived or ignored when they would prohibit legislators from reaching outcomes they strongly favor.<sup>7</sup> But the procedures nonetheless act to channel partisan and strategic behavior and to constrain it somewhat.

Because procedures adopted behind a partial veil of ignorance are less likely to serve self-interested ends and more likely to be either neutral with respect to outcomes or to facilitate goals with relatively broad public support, decisions concerning highly charged political issues will be perceived as more legitimate when they are made pursuant to ex ante frameworks.<sup>8</sup> A contested presidential election is a prototypical example of a decision that is best made according to rules and procedures determined long before the identities of the two candidates are known. One of the most perplexing aspects of the 2000 election contest is that the decision ultimately halting the dispute was made by an institution that tends to proceed case-by-case, adopting rules with fairly complete knowledge of how they will affect the fortunes of parties before it. Courts are institutionally ill-suited to adopt far-reaching ex ante frameworks; and in the case of *Bush v. Gore*, this institutional shortcoming was made more evident because the Court used a novel legal theory to resolve the election in Bush's favor. Not only did the Court articulate this equal protection rationale for the first time in this case, but it also explicitly limited the doctrine's applicability to the case before it, evading entirely the protection against self-interested decisionmaking that generality in rules can provide.<sup>9</sup>

The Supreme Court's eagerness to become involved in the election contest is even more perplexing when one realizes that the institution charged with determining the outcome of a dispute presidential election<sup>10</sup> – the United State Congress – actually had an ex ante framework in place that would have shaped its deliberation had objections to Florida's electors been made on January 6. I have described that framework previously:

---

<sup>7</sup> See William N. Eskridge, Jr., Philip P. Frickey & Elizabeth Garrett, *Cases and Materials on Legislation: Statutes and the Creation of Public Policy* Chapter 4, Part 2B (2001) (discussing timing gimmicks to evade discipline and recent provisions adopted to waive spending caps and other rules entirely).

<sup>8</sup> See Luis Fuentes-Rohwer & Guy-Uriel Charles, *supra* note 1, at [21] ("If the rules of the game are described *ex ante* and the parties play by these rules, then any outcome is by definition legitimate.").

<sup>9</sup> See Adrian Vermeule, *supra* note 3, at [11-14].

<sup>10</sup> See Sanford Levinson & Ernest A. Young, *supra* note 1, at [43-50] (discussing whether the power to resolve elections is constitutionally committed to Congress).

The Electoral Count Act is designed to provide a framework to structure debate, deliberation, and decisionmaking to avoid the debacle of the Hayes-Tilden election of 1876. ... Adopting a structure for deliberation and decisionmaking before it will be used and at a time it is not clear what particular interests will benefit from certain procedural choices and what interests will be harmed is a strategy often relied on to reduce partisanship and opportunistic behavior. One of the difficulties in 1876 was that Congress established the Election Commission after the election dispute had arisen and the stakes were clear and concrete. Each decision was suffused with partisanship because supporters of Hayes worked to advance his interests, as the supporters of Tilden worked to advance his. In the aftermath of that controversy, legislators wisely sought to avoid a repeat by ex ante specification of procedures that would channel political behavior.<sup>11</sup>

The legislators who worked to pass the Electoral Count Act with its ex ante specification of the rules of any future presidential election contest were aware of the benefits of such a procedural framework. Senator Sherman observed that one advantage of ex ante specification is that the design could be constructed “upon some basis of principle” because Congress was acting before the next presidential election, hopefully long before another contested one, and at a time that the makeup of the House and Senate ensured that neither of the parties would have disproportionate influence over the legislation.<sup>12</sup> The preference for using rules determined before a particular contest is reflected in the provisions of the Electoral Count Act. For example, Section 5, the safe harbor provision, gives special weight to “laws enacted prior to the day fixed for the appointment of the electors.” One representative explained this requirement in terms consistent with my analysis: “I think it would be wise if the contest should be made in the face of existing law rather than the law should be made in the face of the existing contest.”<sup>13</sup>

The Electoral Count Act’s framework is by no means perfect; it has gaps that could have undermined its effectiveness and that would have required some ex post amplification. Some of its gaps were probably inadvertent, caused by the limited ability

---

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Garrett, *Leaving the Decision to Congress, in The Vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* \_\_\_\_ (R. Epstein & C. Sunstein eds. 2001) (footnotes omitted).

<sup>12</sup> 7 Cong. Rec. 815 (Jan. 21, 1886).

<sup>13</sup> 18 Cong. Rec. 47 (Dec. 8, 1886) (remarks of Rep. Cooper). See also Samuel Issacharoff, *Political Judgments, in The Vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* \_\_\_\_ (R. Epstein & C. Sunstein eds. 2001) (suggesting that Section 5 can be understood “as codifying an important principle of electoral democracy requiring the rules of engagement to be explicated ex ante and to be fairly immutable under the strain of electoral conflict”).

of its drafters to anticipate all the problems that might arise in an election contest. For example, how should Congress react to the following set of circumstances that might well have emerged from Florida? The governor has certified the slate of electors for the Republican candidates on the basis of the certified results of the election. The state supreme court orders a recount; the Democratic electors win after the recount<sup>14</sup> so the state supreme court orders the governor to withdraw the first slate and send the other slate of electors to Washington, D.C. The governor refuses, perhaps risking being held in contempt by the state supreme court or some other sanction. Finally, the state legislature enters the picture by ordering the governor not to comply with the court order and to maintain his certification of the Republican electors. Which slate of electors should be considered as “the electors whose appointment shall have been certified by the executive of the state,” the final decision rule provided in Section 15 of the Act in case the House and Senate cannot agree after an objection has been lodged? Other gaps in the Electoral Count Act are the result of doubts about how far the Act could go constitutionally in influencing the internal state electoral processes.<sup>15</sup> And some gaps are intentional because the drafters wanted to preserve some domain for partisanship and politics, albeit in a more structured setting.

Thus, the 2000 election provides a concrete example of the possibility of Congress’s taking advantage of its institutional capabilities and turning to a structure that had been passed previously to shape decisionmaking about a very difficult political issue. It was preparing to conduct what would surely have been a highly charged and often partisan debate within this framework that could not be repealed or ignored with political cost. What broader lessons can be drawn from this example? First, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> the presence of the ex ante framework, among other things, would have averted any political or constitutional catastrophe had the dispute lingered on until January 6. Others have defended the Supreme Court’s repeated intervention into the election contest as a courageous move to save the country from crisis – courageous because the justices adopted an aggressive role at some risk to the reputations of their institution and themselves. Such fears of a political disaster are overstated, and they reflect an elitist distrust of the relatively messy arena of politics. Congress would not have discharged its responsibility to determine any election contest without some amount

---

<sup>14</sup> It now appears that under most recount standards, Bush would have continued to win the Florida election. See John M. Broder, *Study Finds Some Ballots Unaccounted For*, N.Y. Times, April 5, 2001, at A16.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *The Triumph of Expedience: How America Lost the Election to the Courts*, Harper’s Mag., May 2001, at 31, 32 (interview with Richard Posner, who calls the Electoral Count Act “an ambiguous statute, which is itself of dubious constitutionality”).



of heated rhetoric, opportunistic behavior and partisan wrangling. However, it was the best of several imperfect alternatives<sup>17</sup> to play the deciding role in this dispute, had the state processes failed to produce an uncontested slate of electors.

While others, including the dissenting justices,<sup>18</sup> have worried that the Court's decision to play a substantial role in the selection of the forty-third president will damage its long-term reputation, my concern focuses on the damage to the legislative branch. When judges work so hard to keep a case away from our elected representatives, using a dubious legal rationale that is not supported with the kind of argument and analysis of precedent that similar holdings have been, their distrust of the political branches is palpable. Furthermore, when those who harshly criticize the Court's opinion as lawless and unprincipled nonetheless defend it as a necessary protection against the chaos that they predict would have consumed the country,<sup>19</sup> this analysis feeds the distrust of Congress already prevalent. Congress is the least admired branch of government,<sup>20</sup> and the signals that justices and commentators are sending reinforce voters' sense of alienation. We may well find that our distrust of politics has led to a self-fulfilling prophecy as fewer qualified people seek the office and those who do have little incentive to transcend the public's perception of them. As Congress becomes less important, more policies will be left to unelected judges who work in an institution poorly-designed to craft comprehensive policies that can be modified and improved over time.

Second, this analysis suggests that institutions that are likely to play roles in political disputes such as election contests should adopt detailed ex ante frameworks before actual controversies arise. In the election context, election codes provide an ex ante blueprint to govern disputes. We discovered in November, however, that such codes have gaps or inconsistencies that should be resolved through regulations and guidelines formulated by state officials before the identities and partisan affiliations of disputants are known. For example, many dismissed Secretary of State Harris' interpretation of Florida election law governing extensions of the deadline for counties to submit vote totals

---

<sup>16</sup> See Elizabeth Garrett, *supra* note 11.

<sup>17</sup> See generally Neil K. Komesar, *Imperfect Alternatives: Choosing Institutions in Law, Economics, and Public Policy* (1994) (providing an institutional analysis of how to locate decisions among government entities, none of which is perfect).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *Bush v. Gore*, 121 S. Ct. 525, 550 (Breyer, dissenting) ("We do risk a self-inflicted wound – a wound that may harm not just the Court by the Nation."). But see Michael J. Klarman, *Bush v. Gore Through the Lens of Constitutional History*, \_\_ Cal. L. Rev. \_\_ (forthcoming 2001) (arguing that the case does not have the characteristics that would cause long-term damage to the Court's legitimacy).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Cass R. Sunstein, *Order Without Law, in The Vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* \_\_ (R. Epstein & C. Sunstein eds. 2001).

<sup>20</sup> See John R. Hibbing & Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions* (1995) (summarizing recent literature on voter dissatisfaction with Congress).

because her ruling occurred in anticipation of litigation and when it was clear that her interpretation would benefit the candidate she had actively supported. Furthermore, it seems very unlikely that, until now, state legislatures ever gave a great deal of thought to the interaction of state election codes and the Electoral Counting Act, including its safe harbor provision. Given the abbreviated time period for any contest of a presidential election, states should consider revising their laws to allow for expedited procedures. Not only will moving quickly on these issues allow state institutions to act behind a partial veil of ignorance and thus avoid the temptation to advance the cause of particular candidates, but it will also make clear to all who plan to run for office what the rules of the game will be so that they can plan their strategies accordingly. Modern campaigning is sufficiently sophisticated that changes in election laws are taken into account when allocating financial and human resources.

For all elections, including presidential ones, legislatures and administrative officials must consider how the new equal protection right recognized by *Bush v. Gore* implicates the standards for discerning voter intent in election recounts, as well as how it affects other election processes that may vary from county to county.<sup>21</sup> Although the per curiam decision attempted to limit the holding only to the case before the Court (without much analysis justifying the limitation), lawsuits are already being filed claiming that certain election practices result in unacceptable arbitrary and disparate treatment of the electorate.<sup>22</sup> More broadly, all levels of government should take advantage of the increased salience of the issue of election reform to update their voting machines, analyze ballot design, and improve the system. Unfortunately, large-scale reform seems unlikely. The initial interest displayed in Congress for election reform is already beginning to wane;<sup>23</sup> and current efforts in most states have been characterized as “tinkering” rather than wholesale reform.<sup>24</sup> It is still early, however, and some state proposals could be adopted without substantial financial investment, which makes them more likely.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps ironically, judicial involvement may actually retard legislative reform as

---

<sup>21</sup> See Richard L. Hasen, *Bush v. Gore and the Future of Equal Protection Law in Elections*, \_\_ Fla. St. U. L. Rev. \_\_ (2001).

<sup>22</sup> For example, a class action suit in Florida challenges the voting machines used by some counties using the rationale from *Bush v. Gore*. See *Coyner v. Harris*, discussed at 69 U.S.L.W. 2408 (2001). This is only one of several such lawsuits that have been filed in the weeks following the Supreme Court’s decision.

<sup>23</sup> See Katherine Q. Seelye, *Action on Voting Lags, Experts Warn*, N.Y. Times, April 4, 2001, at A16.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Will Pinkston, *Major Election Reform Falters*, Wall St. J., April 18, 2001, at B17.

<sup>25</sup> See *Elections Officials Determined to Make Changes*, April 24, 2001, found on [www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/04/24/electionreform.ap/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/04/24/electionreform.ap/index.html) (discussing possible reforms and likelihood of their passage); Katherine Q. Seelye, *Little Change Forecast for Election Process*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 26, 2001, at A10 (discussing current efforts and noting that lack of money will block substantial reform).

lawmakers are tempted to delay making difficult and costly choices until they can blame an activist judiciary for requiring extensive reforms.

Similarly, judicial intrusion into the 2000 election contest may also reduce the chances for thoughtful re-evaluation of the Twelfth Amendment along the lines suggested by Levinson and Young. They question the wisdom of requiring the House to vote by state when selecting a president; indeed, they argue that this “ultimate stupidity” or “dysfunctionality” might well prompt a constitutional crisis in the future.<sup>26</sup> Had the 2000 contest wound up in Congress, or gotten closer to that stage, the country might well have focused on this problem, as well as other troubling aspects of the constitutional and statutory structure, making it more likely that support for change would develop. The impetus for the Electoral Count Act was the debacle of the Hayes-Tilden election and the strong desire to avoid designing structures of deliberation and decisionmaking in an ex post way; the more controlled ending to Bush-Gore denies reform movements necessary vitality.

## II

The institutional-design and institutional-choice issues highlighted by the 2000 election are not the only institutional lessons to be drawn. We can also learn a great deal about the ways institutions react to one another and about how such reactions are anticipated and manipulated by savvy political players. One kind of manipulation occurs when later players in the political game signal how they will react, seeking to influence the moves of early players. Sometimes, these signals are truthful ones; in other cases, sophisticated players work to fool others with false signals that appear credible and that will influence the game in a particular direction. If the signals are credible, early players are likely to take account of them; in all cases, earlier players will try to anticipate the reactions of subsequent players so that the ultimate resolution is closer to their policy preferences. A branch of scholarship, positive political theory, draws on insights from game theory to help us understand how signaling and the anticipation of certain responses affect decisions of institutional players and the end result of a political process.<sup>27</sup> Although there were certainly many examples of such behavior throughout the 2000 presidential election, I will focus on what I consider the most important: An institutional analysis allows us to reevaluate the influence of the first Supreme Court decision, *Bush v. Palm Beach County Canvassing Board*.<sup>28</sup> It suggests that far from being an admirable

---

<sup>26</sup> See Sanford Levinson & Ernest A. Young, *supra* note 1, at [55-57].

<sup>27</sup> See William N. Eskridge, Jr., Philip P. Frickey & Elizabeth Garrett, *Legislation and Statutory Interpretation* 102-114 (2000) (describing positive political theory and applying to a case study of legislation).

<sup>28</sup> 121 S. Ct. 471 (2000) (per curiam).

minimalistic intrusion early in the election dispute,<sup>29</sup> this opinion may have profoundly affected subsequent play so that the state institutions of Florida were effectively denied a chance to settle this contest.<sup>30</sup>

Following the Florida Supreme Court's decision to postpone the date of certification of vote totals, George Bush petitioned the Supreme Court to grant cert on three questions. The Court granted the petition with respect to two of the questions: whether the Florida Supreme Court's decision had violated the safe harbor provision of the Electoral Count Act, and whether it "is inconsistent with Article II, § 1, clause 2 of the Constitution." In addition, the Court asked the parties to consider the consequences if it decided that the state supreme court's decision did not comply with the federal safe harbor provision. The Court declined to hear Bush's claim that the manual recounts violated the equal protection or due process clauses of the Constitution.<sup>31</sup> The Court's decision not to hear the equal protection and due process claims did not surprise many lawyers watching the proceedings; this claim was a novel one, concerning the "nuts-and-bolts" of election law that courts in the past had refused to entertain.<sup>32</sup>

The Court did not need to render any decision in this initial challenge to the 2000 presidential election. By the time of the argument in *Bush v. Palm Beach County Canvassing Board*, it was clear that the additional votes counted because certification had been delayed several days had not changed the outcome of the vote in Florida. Bush remained the winner. Although he had lost 393 votes in his certified total, it was not clear whether this fact would make a difference in the long run. If it did matter in a subsequent election contest, perhaps because the certified vote totals were given a presumption of correctness that votes found in subsequent recounts were not, courts could address the issue then. The best decision for the Court at this stage was to dismiss

---

<sup>29</sup> For an argument that the first opinion was minimalistic, see Cass R. Sunstein, *supra* note 19. Others have viewed the opinion as more activist. See, e.g., John Yoo, *In Defense of the Court's Legitimacy, in The Vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* \_\_ (R. Epstein & C. Sunstein eds., 2001) (but, in contrast to my analysis, approving of the Court's decision to become involved).

<sup>30</sup> Of course, no one decision is the sole determinant of the outcome in the 2000 election. The decision of the state supreme court to extend the protest phase of the dispute had the effect of abbreviating the contest phase and allowed the majority in *Bush v. Gore* to halt any further recounts because so little time remained before the safe harbor date. The Gore team's strategic decisions to ask for the extension of the protest period and to emphasize the importance of the December 12 date, which was only relevant to the safe harbor that would shape congressional consideration of objections to electors, were also crucial in shaping the way this event developed and concluded. My argument is only that the Court's first decision – one that was completely unnecessary – played a substantial role in determining that Bush would be the forty-third president.

<sup>31</sup> *Bush v. Gore*, 121 S. Ct. 510 (2000) (granting writ of certiorari)

<sup>32</sup> See Richard L. Hasen, *supra* note 21, at [1-2]; Samuel Issacharoff, Pamela S. Karlan, & Richard H. Pildes, *When Elections Go Bad: The Law of Democracy and the Presidential Election of 2000* 47-50. See also *Siegel v. LePore*, 120 F. Supp. 2d 1041 (S.D. Fla. 2000).

the petition for certiorari as improvidently granted and issue no opinion on the matter. But the Court did not choose this minimalistic route; instead it issued a 9-0 per curiam opinion, full of heavy-handed hints about the justices' views on the substantive issues. This unfortunate opinion shaped the rest of the judicial proceedings, and, combined with the refusal to grant cert on the equal protection claim, it put the Florida Supreme Court in an untenable position.

A close reading of the per curiam reveals several passages seemingly indicating how the Court might decide subsequent challenges based on Article II and the Electoral Count Act. First, the Court suggested that the context of a presidential election might require a change in its traditional deference to a state court's interpretation of a state statute. Citing *McPherson v. Blacker*,<sup>33</sup> an opaque and hoary precedent without direct application to the question before the Court, the Court demanded clarification from the state supreme court "as to the extent to which the Florida Supreme Court saw the Florida Constitution as circumscribing the legislature's authority under Art. II, § 1, cl. 2."<sup>34</sup> In a presidential election the "direct grant of authority [to the state legislature] made under Art. II, § 1, cl. 2, of the United States Constitution" might change the permissible bounds of judicial interpretation. The tone of the opinion suggests that the Court did not believe that a state constitution can circumscribe the behavior of a state legislature when it enacts laws governing presidential elections. Therefore, a state court cannot legitimately rely on state constitutional principles to interpret unclear statutory language and might be limited in other ways that would affect its interpretive task. Certainly, the Florida supreme court could have reasonably viewed these passages as warnings that its traditional approach to interpreting vague and ambiguous laws might be overly aggressive here and ultimately lead to a reversal by the United States Supreme Court.

The per curiam discussed the safe harbor provision in the Electoral Count Act in the same ominous terms. The justices appeared to identify a "legislative wish to take advantage of the [Act's] 'safe harbor' [that] would counsel against any construction of the Election Code that Congress might deem to be a change in the law."<sup>35</sup> The Court noted that the safe harbor provision assured finality to a state's decision regarding electors if that decision was made "pursuant to a state law in effect before the election." The intimations of this passage are less clear than those found in the Court's discussion of Article II. On the one hand, the Court placed great weight on Section 5 of the Electoral Count Act and referred to the Florida legislature's intent to take advantage of

---

<sup>33</sup> 146 U.S. 1 (1892).

<sup>34</sup> *Bush v. Palm Beach County Canvassing Board*, 121 S. Ct. at 475.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 474.

the safe harbor. Such an intent is probably entirely fictive because it is very unlikely those who drafted the state election code knew about the federal provision. The Supreme Court's emphasis on the federal law – which is better understood as a rule of decision for Congress, not a mandate on state institutions – would make the Florida Supreme Court wary in subsequent opinions of any statutory interpretation that might be characterized as a change in law. On the other hand, the passage from the per curiam opinion suggests that Congress would determine whether a state court decision violated the Electoral Count Act. This reference to congressional involvement could be understood as an acknowledgment by the Court that Congress would be the key player in the rest of the election drama and a signal of reduced involvement by the federal judiciary in future developments.

How credible are all these signals? In hindsight, the clues about the Court's view on the Article II issue led a majority of the state supreme court justices to draw inaccurate conclusions. Notwithstanding the per curiam opinion's hints that Article II would play a decisive role in any subsequent decision, only three U.S. justices were willing to sign an opinion deciding the case in favor of Bush on that ground.<sup>36</sup> But the fact that nine justices joined the first per curiam opinion, when we all knew that the Court had the option of dismissing the case without opinion, led to the reasonable conclusion that the Article II argument had some persuasive power. At the least, the state supreme court justices, who did not want their decisions to be reversed by the United States Supreme Court, believed that they had to tread warily and should refrain from their traditional methods of filling statutory gaps and interpreting a complex, sometimes contradictory state election code.

It is evident from reading the two subsequent state court opinions that the U.S. justices successfully bluffed the Florida jurists, at least on the Article II ground. In the revised decision extending the time for certification, the state supreme court wrote: “[O]ur construction of the above statutes results in the formation of no new rules of state law but rather results simply in a narrow reading and clarification of those statutes, which were enacted long before the present election took place. We decline to rule more expansively in the present case, for to do so would result in this Court substantially rewriting the Code. We leave that matter to the sound discretion of the body best equipped to address it, the Legislature.”<sup>37</sup> More crucially for the final outcome of the 2000 election, the state supreme court did not feel comfortable specifying substandards to discern voter's intent in a manual recount, even though justices at oral argument had

---

<sup>36</sup> *Bush v. Gore*, 121 S. Ct. at 533 (Rehnquist, concurring).

<sup>37</sup> *Palm Beach County Canvassing Board v. Harris*, 772 So. 2d 1273 (Dec. 11, 2000).

expressed concerns about the varying standards used by the counties and the general level of expertise of those who would conduct and oversee the recount. Instead, the Florida supreme court adhered closely to the text of the statute, finding that the sole standard for a legal vote was based on a “clear indication of the intent of the voter.”<sup>38</sup> Its opinion gave no guidance to the lower court or to county officials regarding how to treat hanging, dimpled, or pregnant chads. More precise substandards were surely possible; other states have enacted more detailed statutes governing manual recounts, although most also include a catch-all provision that allows people counting to consider other evidence of voter intent.<sup>39</sup> But the Florida justices clearly worried that judicially-crafted guidelines would conflict with Article II and perhaps the federal statute, and it appeared that nine justices credited these arguments. The equal protection implicated by a failure to articulate substandards was not deemed certworthy before, was not an argument taken seriously by most knowledgeable commentators, and seemed inconsistent with the ideology of a majority of justices.

Thus, it was rational for the state justices to forego specifying substandards for the manual recount, tailoring their opinion to survive review by the U.S. Supreme Court. Ironically, further specification of substandards would not have been plagued by many of the problems that usually face ex post formulation of decision rules because it was not entirely clear which standards benefited which of the candidates. (Clearly, any recount benefited the loser because it provided him the only chance to change the outcome.) The results from the recounts were ambiguous; Gore did not seem to be picking up as many votes as his supporters had hoped for. Moreover, the state supreme court had ordered a statewide recount, not a manual recount limited to the counties Gore’s lawyers had cherry-picked. There was a much more credible veil of ignorance with regard to determining additional standards to govern a recount than would be possible at any subsequent stage in the proceedings.

Had the state supreme court disregarded the signals in the first per curiam opinion and ordered that a recount conducted according to more rigorous standards be completed before December 12, the safe harbor date, or before December 18, the date on which electors cast their ballots, the decision in *Bush v. Gore* would have been unnecessary. Perhaps the five U.S. justices who joined the per curiam were determined to end the

---

<sup>38</sup> Id. at 1283 (quoting Fla. Stat. §§ 101.5614(5)-(6)).

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Tex. Elec. Code Ann. § 127.130 (West 2001). In his remarks at this symposium, Steve Bickerstaff expressed doubt that the standard for a manual recount could ever be entirely specified and offered his opinion that the ultimate standard was always a “clear indication of voter intent.” Nonetheless, it seems indisputable that more detailed instructions were possible and could have ensure greater uniformity across counties and across voting teams within counties.

election contest and short-circuit the political process and thus would have ruled for Bush no matter what the state supreme court did. (Indeed, the most experienced, and possibly more realistic, state supreme court justices dissented<sup>40</sup> and would have halted the manual recounts, perhaps because they anticipated a loss in the United State Supreme Court regardless of the state court's analysis.) But in the absence of an equal protection or due process rationale, the federal justices would have had to base their decision on Article II or the Electoral Counting Act. While those arguments are not compelling,<sup>41</sup> a decision based on this reasoning would truly have been minimalistic, applying only in the context of presidential elections. Thus, the first intervention by the Supreme Court was decisive, shaping the subsequent play of state and federal actors and, perhaps, a spate of cases that will be brought and decided under the new equal protection rationale of *Bush v. Gore*.

The bottom line of this analysis is an institutional one. Players in the political process, unlike players in hypothetical games set up by scholars, act with imperfect information, and therefore they sometimes miscalculate. Such was the fate of the Florida Supreme Court. The state justices, and the four dissenting federal justices, may have been outsmarted by five wily justices who included misleading signals in the first per curiam opinion. Or, the Supreme Court may have acted too quickly and with too little analysis in the first per curiam, not thinking how its decision would be understood by subsequent state actors.<sup>42</sup> Whatever the reason – whether as part of a strategy or as part of sloppiness brought on by haste – this episode in our political history provides a case study of the dynamic interactions of institutions of governance.

### III

The real tragedy of the institutional miscalculations was not that the Florida supreme court was reversed but that Congress, the institution most suited to make any final determination in the event that the Florida dispute lingered until January, was prevented from playing that role. The one hint in the first per curiam that was ignored by all – and correctly so – was that it would be the responsibility of Congress to determine whether Florida could take advantage of the Electoral Court Act's safe harbor provision.

---

<sup>40</sup> Justice Shaw is the most senior member of the state supreme court, appointed in 1983; he is followed in seniority by Justice Harding, appointed in 1991, and Justices Wells and Anstead, both appointed in 1994. Anstead joined the majority, which otherwise consisted of justices appointed in 1997 or later.

<sup>41</sup> For excellent analysis of the Article II argument, see James Gardner, *The Regulatory Role of State Constitutional Structural Constraints in Presidential Elections*, \_\_ Fla. St. U. L. Rev. \_\_ (2001); Robert Schapiro, *Bush v. Gore and the Threat to State Constitutional Law*, \_\_ Fla. St. U. L. Rev. \_\_ (2001). Other commentators have been more persuaded by the Article II argument, see, e.g., Richard A. Posner, *Florida 2000: A Legal and Statistical Analysis of the Election Deadlock and the Ensuing Litigation*, 2001 S. Ct. Rev. 1.



Watching legislative deliberation on that issue would have been fascinating because it would have revealed how members of Congress view the appropriate role of the judiciary in interpreting complex and poorly drafted statutes. Legislators, who have a more sophisticated understanding of the legislative process and legislative drafting than most judges, have distinct views on the appropriate interpretive method, and this debate, as well as other deliberation, would have been illuminating for the country, for judges, and for politicians. The Court's aggressive stance in the 2000 election, however, denied us the opportunity to learn how Congress would have behaved in an environment shaped by an *ex ante* framework for decisionmaking, if congressional involvement had been necessary. It may well also deny us the chance to formulate and refine other *ex ante* structures that could head off election contests at all levels. Instead, the Court's analysis and actions reinforced the unfortunate tendency of our political branches to rely on the unelected federal judiciary to step in and save us from the "chaos" of democracy. A more responsible judiciary would act so as invigorate the political system, not marginalize it.

Readers with comments should address them to:

Professor Elizabeth Garrett  
University of Chicago Law School  
1111 East 60th Street  
Chicago, IL 60637  
773-702-9605  
E-mail: e-garrett@uchicago.edu

---

<sup>42</sup> David Strauss seems to suggest that the errors in the Court's early reasoning were due to haste, rather than strategy. See David A. Strauss, *Not Partisan, but Lawless*, in *The Vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* \_\_ (R. Epstein & C. Sunstein eds., 2001).

University of Chicago Law School  
Public Law and Legal Theory Working Paper Series

1. Cass R. Sunstein and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, Second-Order Decisions (November 1999; *Ethics*, v.110, #1).
2. Joseph Isenbergh, Impeachment and Presidential Immunity from Judicial Process (November 1999; *Yale Law and Policy Review* v.18 #1, forthcoming) .
3. Elizabeth Garrett, The Law and Economics of “Informed Voter” Ballot Notations (November 1999, *University of Virginia Law Review*, v. 85).
4. Cass R. Sunstein, Is the Clean Air Act Unconstitutional? (August 1999; *Michigan Law Review* #3).
5. David A. Strauss, Do Constitutional Amendments Matter? (November 1999)
6. Cass R. Sunstein, Standing for Animals (November 1999)
7. Cass R. Sunstein, Culture and Government Money: A Guide for the Perplexed (April 2000).
8. Emily Buss, Without Peers? The Blind Spot in the Debate Over How to Allocate Educational Control between Parent and State (April 2000).
9. David A. Strauss, Common Law, Common Ground, and Jefferson’s Principle (June 2000).
10. Curtis A. Bradley and Jack L. Goldsmith, Treaties, Human Rights, and Conditional Consent (May 2000; *Pennsylvania Law Review* v. 149).
11. Mary Ann Case, Lessons for the Future of Affirmative Action from the Past of the Religion Clauses? (May 2001, *Supreme Court Review*, 2000).
12. Cass R. Sunstein, Social and Economic Rights? Lessons from South Africa (May 2001)
13. Jill Elaine Hasday, Parenthood Divided: A Legal History of the Bifurcated Law of Parental Relations (May 2001).
14. Elizabeth Garrett, Institutional Lessons from the 2000 Presidential Election (May 2001).