AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES AND POWERS

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Supplementary Material

Chapter 12: The Contemporary Era – Elections and Political Parties

**Michael Pence, Letter on Counting Electoral Votes** (2020)

*The 2020 presidential election was hotly contested and rendered all the more unusual by the effects of the global pandemic. States altered their voting procedures to accommodate a wider range of voting methods and a more extended process of counting votes. Although public opinion polls had suggested through the Trump presidency that he would struggle to assemble an electoral majority to win reelection, he nearly managed to pull off the same feat that he did in 2016 and win narrow majorities in just the right states to pull off a victory in the Electoral College. Nonetheless, by late in the night on Election Day it was evident that the president had failed to repeat history and pull off the upset victory over his Democratic rival.*

*President Trump and his most ardent supporters refused to concede defeat, however. The Trump campaign launched an unprecedented effort to overturn the apparent election results in the weeks following the election. Those efforts repeatedly met failure, but the president eventually landed on one last option. On January 6, 2021, the two chambers of Congress would meet in joint session to perform their duty under the Twelfth Amendment to count the votes cast by the presidential electors on December 14, 2020. The Twelfth Amendment dictates that, “the President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and the House of Representatives, open all the certificates and votes shall then be counted.” Republican Representative Louie Gohmert had filed a federal lawsuit seeking to judicial declaration that the vice president could unilaterally refuse to count votes from any state’s slate of presidential electors, but the suit was rejected. President Trump and his attorneys lobbied Vice President Mike Pence to accept that theory and reject a sufficient number of Democratic votes to give Trump the victory. When the day for counting the electoral votes arrived, the president held a rally outside the Capitol demanding that Congress “stop the steal.” When hundreds of those rally attendees stormed the Capitol building to stop the vote count, President Trump tweeted that “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done.” That tweet spurred Twitter to remove several of Trump’s posts and eventually to permanently suspend his account.*

*Vice President Pence had not publicly announced prior to January 6 how he would approach his duties at the joint session. Before the session started, however, he released a letter affirming that he did not have the authority to set aside votes and that only Congress acting as a body could set aside votes as invalid.*

Dear Colleague:

Today, for the 59th time in our Nation’s history, Congress will convene in Joint Session to count the electoral votes for President of the United States. Under our Constitution, it will be my duty as Vice President and as President of the Senate to serve as the presiding officer.

. . . .

Given the controversy surrounding this year’s election, some approach this year’s quadrennial tradition with great expectation, and others with dismissive disdain. Some believe that as Vice President, I should be able to accept or reject electoral votes unilaterally. Others believe that electoral votes should never be challenged in a Joint Session of Congress.

After a careful study of our Constitution, our laws, and our history, I believe neither view is correct.

The President is the chief executive officer of the Federal Government under our Constitution, possessing immense power to impact the lives of the American people. The Presidency belongs to the American people, and to them alone. When disputes concerning a presidential election arise, under Federal law, it is the people’s representatives who review the evidence and resolve disputes through a democratic process.

Our Founders were deeply skeptical of concentration of power and created a Republic based on separation of powers and checks and balances under the Constitution of the United States.

Vesting the Vice President with unilateral authority to decide presidential contests would be entirely antithetical to that design. As a student of history who loves the Constitution and reveres its Framers, I do not believe that the Founders of our country intended to invest the Vice President with unilateral authority to decide which electoral votes should be counted during the Joint Session of Congress, and no Vice President in American history has ever asserted such authority. Instead, Vice Presidents presiding over Joint Sessions have uniformly followed the Electoral Count Act, conducting the proceedings in an orderly manner even where the count resulted in the defeat of their party or their own candidacy.

As Supreme Court Justice Joseph Bradley wrote following the contentious election of 1876, “the powers of the President of the Senate are merely ministerial. . . . He is not invested with any authority for making any investigation outside of the Joint Meeting of the two Houses . . . [I]f any examination at all is to be gone into, or any judgment exercised in relation to the votes received, it must be performed and exercised by the two Houses.” More recently, as the former U.S. Court of Appeals Judge J. Michael Luttig observed, “[t]he only responsibility and power of the Vice President under the Constitution is to faithfully count the Electoral College votes as they have been case,” adding “[t]he Constitution does not empower the Vice President to alter in any way the votes that have been cast, either by rejecting certain votes or otherwise.”

It is my considered judgment that my oath to support and defend the Constitution constrains me from claiming unilateral authority to determine which electoral votes should be counted and which should not.

. . . .