Episode #3. Units of Quantity - Part 1: Some, No, Not Any

Chris: I have to admit I have no idea what the founding fathers had in mind when they created the Electoral College.

Emily: You don’t have any idea?

Chris: Ok, maybe I have some idea, but so far, nobody has managed to fully explain to me the reasoning that some of the founding fathers had when they came up with such an elaborate concept.

Emily: Tell you what, Chris, I can give you an idea, and I won’t even charge you an arm and a leg for it!

Chris: Haha, thanks. So, here’s how I understand it: The President of the United States is elected by the Electoral College. A state’s number of electors is the sum of its representatives and senators. Essentially, the popular vote in most states is winner-take-all and obliges the electors of that state to vote for the winner of the election.

Emily: Technically, they actually do not have to, but as a practical matter, that’s correct.

Chris: There is no doubt in my mind that the founding fathers were some of the most brilliant, the most educated and the most genius people any country has seen in modern history. They literally reinvented democracy and made it a lasting and successful model for the rest of world. Why do I not see any brilliance in the Electoral College?

Emily: You mean why not design a system with a straight up popular vote across the states?

Chris: Yeah. Five times in our history now, the person who had the most votes across America did not become president. That is undemocratic, it’s stupid and I do not see any fairness in that.

Emily: Well ...

Chris: Well what?

Emily: Ask yourself what would happen if there were no electoral college.

Chris: Then the person with the most votes would actually be president.

Emily: But campaigning for office would then only happen in large, urban population centers. No more Iowa straw poll, where politicians actually have to listen to some farmers, no more campaigning at New Hampshire Tea Party gatherings. Basically, the entire middle of the country would be expendable.

Chris: The Electoral College is designed to give small states without any population to speak of some power?

Emily: Precisely, and that is a very smart thing to do. Some small states are already overrepresented for exactly that reason. The founding fathers designed a federal system by choice and wanted every corner to be heard to prevent a breakup and a second Europe. Why not force politicians to confront some of the regional and cultural differences of this country?

Chris: But I have been to farm towns, and with all due respect, I would not actually let the inhabitants choose my breakfast cereal, let alone the president. The real question you have to answer is why a vote in California or New York should matter less than a vote in a swing state. Millions of voters feel they have no reason to vote because the state they live in is so traditionally Republican or Democratic that their vote simply does not matter.
Emily:  That is a good point. However, the brilliant founding fathers knew that no system is perfect. The electoral college was a compromise to begin with, between those who wanted the president to be elected by an educated congress and those who trusted the people with the popular vote. The majority agreed on the electoral college as an additional check in case the uneducated masses chose a demagogue. Most importantly, our Electoral College has withstood the test of time.

Chris:  Yeah, sorry, still doesn’t make any sense to me.