Review of MS: AJPS-40238 “How Malapportioned is the Electoral College? A Multiple Indicators Historical Perspective”

This paper examines the degree of malapportionment in the Electoral College that stems from quirks in the apportionment process, namely the ‘federal bonus’ that arises because the allocation of Senate seats is not tied to population and the integer problem associated with trying to create equally sized districts. The authors use a number of metrics to demonstrate convincingly that historically the level of malapportionment in the EC has generally been low and has remained especially low post Baker v. Carr. The authors’ primary substantive finding is that levels of malapportionment in the EC are generally comparable to those found in Western Democracies that employ PR systems.

My overall takeaway is this analysis is competently executed, but does not contain a theoretical component nor does it go very far to come up with a novel test(s) of a key argument in the literature. I do not necessarily have an issue for any of this, but it does call into question whether the paper makes a broad enough contribution to merit publication in a top general interest journal. However, that is not my judgment to make and I will leave that decision to the editorial board.

I do think there are some places where the manuscript could be improved and I detail these points below:

1. The paper starts off with an assertion about how the public perceives the EC as being badly malapportioned. This may be the case, but this claim could use some justification. If the notion that the EC is badly malapportioned is common sense, then there should be a considerable amount of literature that the authors could cite in justification of their claim.
2. This first point ties in with my second, broader point. This point is that this paper does not really engage with the literature on the EC to any meaningful extent. There has been quite a bit of work done on the EC, but the authors do not cite it. I think this is an issue because it was hard for me as a reader to get a sense of what this paper’s primary contribution is? Is this paper answering a key question in the literature? Or perhaps a key debate that is central to efforts to abolish the EC? Right now the motivation for this paper is an unjustified claim that “people think the EC is malapportioned,” which as a reader, is not a particularly compelling justification for the analysis.
3. Along these lines, a number of pieces including the Grofman, Koetzle, and Brunell (1997) and more recently Zingher (2016) have shown that election-specific distribution bias in the EC has been minimal. This is not the same point as the authors make in this paper, which focuses on how seats are allocated opposed to which party wins these overrepresented seats, but it is certainly related. Namely, if other studies have shown that election specific distributional bias has been minimal, why is this analysis warranted? I think there are reasons that it is but it is incumbent on the authors to make this justification.