

## America's worst college.

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 **ENABLE SOCIAL READING** America's Worst College

Let's choose our president by popular vote.

The best possible outcome for the 2004 presidential election would be for John Kerry to lose the popular vote but win in the Electoral College. Obviously it would satisfy a primitive hunger for payback to thwart Republicans in the most significant way that Democrats were thwarted in 2000. But there's a high-minded reason, too: It would give both parties a common interest in abolishing the Electoral College and establishing the popular vote as the means by which presidents are chosen. (That Kerry is, coincidentally, the superior candidate strikes me as self-evident, but I will elaborate between now and Election Day.)

The sheer idiocy of the Electoral College is a subject that got appallingly little attention amid the chad-obsessed frenzy surrounding the 2000 election. There's a bit more discussion of the problem now, possibly because it's summer and everybody's running out of things to say about the coming election. Concern, I'm happy to report, spreads across the ideological spectrum. In a June 14 cover package, *Business Week* ran two separate stories ([click here](#) and [here](#)) arguing for the Electoral College's elimination. In a July 29 column for the *Nation*, Katha Pollit complained that the Electoral College "awards outrageously disproportionate political power to rural conservative states with fewer voters than, say, the enlightened borough of Brooklyn." In a July 4 review of Hendrik Hertzberg's superb new anthology, *Politics*, Richard Brookhiser, a conservative, distanced himself from Hertzberg, a liberal, on all substantive matters save Hertzberg's call for electoral reform. If the Electoral College again chooses a presidential candidate who lost the popular vote, Brookhiser predicted, "the calls for change will be deafening."

Most recent discussions about abolishing the Electoral College have ended with the fatalistic observation that America will never be rid of it. "[T]he current system ... will never change," Pollitt wrote, "because the small states would have to approve a constitutional amendment and why would they do that?" Well, they might do it after it was pointed out to them that the Electoral College helps big states even more than it does the small ones.

The small-state advantage derives from the fact that the number of electors each state gets equals its total number of House seats (which reflects population size) plus two (for its two Senate seats). If the number of congressional seats is low enough, those two extra electors can make a big difference. Delaware, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, Montana, Vermont, and Alaska each have only a single House member, so their electors exaggerate their proportional representation by a factor of three. But this advantage is outweighed by the advantage conferred on large states by the winner-take-all allocation of electors in every state save Nebraska and Maine. In their book *Electoral College Primer 2000* (which, alas, was not updated for 2004), Lawrence D. Longley and Neal Peirce calculated that the states enjoying higher-than-average voting power under the Electoral College were the following (in declining order):

California

Texas  
New York  
Florida  
Pennsylvania  
Illinois

The states with the least voting power under the Electoral College were the following (in ascending order):

Montana  
Kansas  
West Virginia  
Maine  
Arkansas  
Utah  
Nevada

Small states tend to go Republican (though Democrats are starting to make inroads in the West). Big states tend to go Democratic (mainly by leveraging big-city coalitions of minorities, labor unions, and white professionals). Neither Democrats nor Republicans have much to lose or gain by abolishing the Electoral College, and that's why the subject didn't get much attention in 2000. But the lack of partisan advantage would make it a lot easier for a Let the People Vote amendment to the Constitution to clear the House and Senate by the necessary two-third majority. (If President Kerry found the bill insulting, no matter; constitutional amendments clear Congress as resolutions, and consequently can't be vetoed.) The amendment could then proceed to the states, where it would be ratified if 38 approved. Since only six states enjoy higher-than-average clout under the Electoral College, the remaining 44 might not be too resistant to abolishing it.

The key would be to persuade small states that losing their disproportionate clout relative to medium-sized states would be balanced out by the loss of disproportionate power enjoyed by big states. It's the big states, after all, that small states tend to perceive as the enemy. Alternatively, we might find that voters self-identify as citizens of a particular state far less than they self-identify as members of national constituencies (African-Americans, farmers, liberals, suburbanites, etc.), or even (gasp) as Americans. As the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette columnist Michael McGough recently observed, "There are good reasons why Americans say 'the United States is,' not the 'the United States are.' "

Quite apart from these questions of self-interest, some people think the Electoral College is superior to a popular vote for a variety of political-science reasons. They're wrong. In future columns, I'll take on their arguments.

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