

## America's worst college, Part 4.

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 **ENABLE SOCIAL READING** America's Worst College, Part 4

Why the "bye, bye Nevada" argument is wrong.

A common argument in favor of keeping the Electoral College is that if America chose its president by popular vote, presidential candidates would no longer visit smaller states, and therefore would no longer take the trouble to familiarize themselves with those states' idiosyncratic needs. In a Nov. 2000 article in *Business Week*, Paula Dwyer and Paul Magnusson argued that

[F]armers and ranchers in the Nowhere Zone would get short shrift for their concerns—and rarely see a Presidential prospect. Candidates "wouldn't need to worry about putting nuclear waste in Nevada," says Steve Frank, president of the National Federation of Republican Assemblies, a conservative grass-roots group. Adds Scott Reed, who managed Bob Dole's 1996 bid for the White House: "You'd be hunting ducks where the ducks are, and leaving large swaths of the country essentially untouched."

But as noted in a chapter of the 2002 anthology *Choosing a President* by William G. Mayer, Emmett H. Buell Jr., James E. Campbell, and Mark Joslyn—of Northeastern University, Denison College, State University of New York-Buffalo, and the University of Kansas, respectively—the *Business Week* writers overstated the frequency with which presidential candidates visit the Nowhere Zone now. (Incidentally, *Business Week* has more recently come down against the Electoral College, in a 2004 article and editorial.)

How frequently do presidential candidates visit small states these days? Not very. In his recent book, *Why the Electoral College is Bad For America*, George C. Edwards, a political scientist at Texas A&M, tabulated all the visits by presidential candidates during the 2000 election. Edwards found that among the seven states with the fewest possible electoral votes (three), only Delaware got a visit. Eleven of the 17 smallest states received no presidential-candidate visits at all. Edwards found a similar pattern when he tabulated visits that year by vice-presidential candidates. "It is clear that, contrary to the arguments of its proponents," Edwards wrote,

the Electoral College does not provide an incentive for candidates to be attentive to small states and take their cases directly to their citizens. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how presidential candidates could be less attentive to small states.

Some people may judge this neglect of sparsely populated areas to be tragic. I'm not one of them. It seems to me that the states with the smallest populations ought to have the least clout in our political system, precisely because they represent the interests of the fewest number of people. Where better to dump nuclear waste than in an isolated area? (Getting it there is a problem, but that's a story for another day.)

That presidential candidates usually shun small states should come as no surprise to readers of the first

column in this series, in which I explained that the "winner take all" basis on which all but two states (Maine and Nebraska) award electors overrides what would otherwise be a strong Electoral College bias in favor of smaller states. Read silently while I read to you aloud: The big winners in the Electoral College aren't the small states. They're the large states.

There is a widespread myth that the Electoral College can never be dispensed with because it would require small states to relinquish the awesome power it gives them. But the only way for the small states to realize that awesome power would be for 48 states to shift from winner-take-all to a proportional system for awarding electors. That would be the hard sell, because it would require big states to relinquish much of their clout in presidential elections. (On Nov. 2 Colorado will vote on an initiative to adopt a proportional system for awarding electors, but because this would apply to the presidential vote conducted on the same day, it's pretty transparently a partisan play by Kerry supporters to scare up a few more electoral votes; Bush is expected to win the state.) When you factor in the effects of winner-take-all allocation, fully 44 states stand to gain power should the Electoral College be eliminated. It takes only 38 to approve a constitutional amendment that's cleared Congress. Let's get started!

An excellent piece by Alexander Keyssar in the "Ideas" section of the Oct. 17 Boston Globe noted that the last time a bill abolishing the Electoral College got anywhere in Congress was 1969, when it passed the House. The hang-up in the Senate wasn't that small states opposed it; it was that states that were especially dedicated to preserving states' rights (then indisputably a code word for segregation) opposed it. These days, the Weekly Standard essayist Christopher Caldwell noted in the Oct. 17 New York Times Magazine, states' rights are largely a dead letter. Consequently, Caldwell concluded, the states' rights objection to the Electoral College is a dead letter, too.

The presidential candidates are obviously aware that the small states don't have much clout under the Electoral College, and have adjusted their travel schedules accordingly. The states where Bush and Kerry are spending disproportionate time aren't the small states, but the swing states, especially the swing states with the most electors. The gravitational pull of swing states would weaken considerably if the Electoral College were eliminated, because candidates could pick up votes almost anywhere. People in Clark County, Ohio, would no longer have to endure receiving copyrighted spam from John Le Carré ("Give us back the America we loved") and other British pests participating in the Guardian's ill-conceived pen-pal project, "Operation Clark County."

How would small states' idiosyncratic needs be addressed in a popular vote? About the same way they're addressed now, which is to say: adequately. "Idiosyncratic needs" is mostly a euphemism for "special interests," and we surely don't want more of those in national elections. Edwards points out that the main thing distinguishing small states from big ones in most people's minds is agriculture. Does this country really need more farm subsidies? The World Trade Organization doesn't think so, and I'm inclined to agree. Anyway, Edwards notes, "most farmers live in states with large populations, such as California, Texas, Florida, and Illinois," the very states likely to get the most attention under a popular vote. The farmers would do just fine.

America's Worst College Archive:

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Aug. 17: "Why the '50 Floridas' argument is wrong."

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