



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Popular Vote vs. Electoral College

By State Representative Don Vruwink

One of my favorite experiences as a high school history teacher was teaching about the electoral college and its role in electing the President of the United States.

Deciding how to elect the president was one of the thorniest matters addressed at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. The Founding Fathers took 30 votes over 21 days before reaching consensus. They settled upon the electoral college as a compromise between electing the president by popular vote versus letting Congress choose the president.

“Popular vote” means the number of votes cast by individual voters. One person equals one vote. The electoral college is a different ballgame. Under the electoral college, each state has as many electors as it has members of the U.S. House and Senate. Wisconsin has eight members of the House and two U.S. senators, and so we have 10 electoral votes.

For some people, the electoral college is an essential legacy of the founders’ vision. For others, it’s a relic enabling a minority of states to undermine the will of the majority in the vote for the president. Since 2000, there have been five presidential elections. In two of them, the electoral college awarded the presidency to the loser of the popular vote.

Electors are chosen by state political parties. I participated in choosing Wisconsin’s 10 Democratic electors this year. In Wisconsin, as in 47 other states, the electoral college must cast all of its votes for the winner of the statewide popular vote.

Because of the electoral college, every vote in Wyoming is four times more powerful than a single vote in California. Every small state is currently over-represented in Congress compared to more populated states. New York and California alone make up 18 percent of the U.S. population and under the electoral college, they get the least representation.

The electoral college has been in question for decades. Should the current system of electing a president be left intact, improved, or abolished? Advocates for a national popular vote say that

70 percent of American voters are ignored, while campaigns shower attention on five to twelve battleground states.

In the 2016 presidential election, 66 percent of campaign funding and events took place in only six states. Add in the next six highest states, and the numbers show that 94 percent of campaign funding was done in just 12 states.

Ignoring so many voters has an impact beyond campaigns. Florida and other battleground states get more disaster declarations, more federal waivers, more presidentially controlled funding and so on.

Legislation to abolish the electoral college is underway in Congress. Since 2006, the national popular vote bill has passed in 15 states plus the District of Columbia. On Nov. 3rd, Colorado became the 16th state to pass it. These 17 jurisdictions hold 205 electors. The bill will take effect when enacted by 65 more electoral votes to reach a majority of 270.

Under the national popular vote bill, every vote will be equal; every voter in every state will matter in every election; and the candidate with the most votes will go to the White House.

To argue against the national popular vote, one would argue against voter equality. Ultimately the states will decide. According to a September Gallup poll, 61 percent of Americans favor getting rid of the electoral college. One-third of the original United States constitution no longer applies. Maybe some day the electoral college won't either.

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State Rep. Don Vruwink represents parts of Rock, Walworth, Jefferson, and Dane counties, which include the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and 15 surrounding townships. He can be reached at 608-266-3790, Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov, and P.O. Box 8953, Madison WI 53708.