

Resolved: that the Electoral College be abolished

In my high school Senior year, 1953-54, our Kewanee High School debate team and all Illinois high school teams debated the question: "Resolved, that the Electoral College be abolished."

For the first time in three years I was on the "negative" team, which argues for the status quo, so I defended the Electoral College system of electing a president and vice-president of the United States. I discovered it's much easier being on the "negative" rather than "affirmative" team. It's so much harder to argue for new ideas and change, rather than just defend what has always been — no matter how bad.

A researcher's pot of gold is the Internet, and I discovered the testimony of Becky Cain, president of the United States League of Women Voters, who appeared before a U.S. House subcommittee in 1997 arguing in favor of an amendment to the Constitution to abolish the electoral college and establish direct election of the president and vice president of the United States. One paragraph foretold the bizarre situation existing today. "Political developments since the 1970s have only underscored the need for elimination of the electoral college system. The downward trend in voter participation, coupled with increased cynicism and skepticism amongst the public about the ability of elected leaders to provide meaningful representation are the warning signs of a potential electoral fiasco."

At this moment in history, the word "fiasco" really stood out. What most voters don't understand is that when we mark our ballots for president and vice-president we are actually voting for electors, who may or may not be committed to a particular candidate. The candidate with a plurality of votes in the state receives all the electoral vote. Electors are nominated at-large by the political parties and consist of party regulars. The sum of the number of electors of each state equals the state's number of Representatives in Congress, including the two Senators.

The electors meet in their respective State capitals on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December in



presidential election years, which this year is December 18th. They vote by ballot separately for president and vice-president. Certified lists of votes cast for the two offices are transmitted to the General Services Administration. On the following January 6th, the president of the Senate presides at a joint session of Congress, opens the certificates and the votes are counted by tellers. The election is decided by a majority of the total electoral college vote.

In the absence of a majority of electoral votes for president, the House of Representatives quickly proceeds to elect a president by ballot from the three highest candidates. Each state has only one vote, cast as a majority of its Representatives determines and a majority of all the states is necessary for election, now 26. For vice president, if a majority is lacking in the electoral college, the Senate elects from the two highest candidates, with a majority vote needed for election. Of course, this opens the door for a president and vice-president representing different political parties.

Mrs. Cain's next comment is equally telling. "Imagine the public outcry today, after a long primary campaign and grueling race for the Presidency. Imagine the public's rage at being denied their candidate of choice." Ho-boy. She continues, "In the 20th

century, we have only narrowly avoided a series of constitutional crises in which the electoral college could have overruled the popular vote."

She listed some serious flaws in the electoral college system. Federal and State constitutions have dictated the "one person, one-vote" principle, which is why our Knox County board had to change from the Board of Supervisors, representing Townships (tracts of land) to a county board with representation based on population. With this principle, the electoral college is hopelessly outdated.

Under the current system, a citizen's individual vote has more weight in a small state of small population than a citizen of a state with a large population. For example, says Mrs. Cain, each electoral vote in Alaska is equivalent to approximately 112,000 people. Each electoral vote in New York represents about 404,000 eligible voters, based on 1990 census data, and that's if everyone votes!!

The electoral vote doesn't reflect the volume of voter participation within a State. If only a few voters go to the polls, the same electoral votes of the State are cast.

Mrs. Cain says the electoral college system is flawed because it doesn't bind presidential electors to vote for the candidates to whom they have been pledged. She says "defecting electors in a close race could cause a crisis of confidence in our electoral system." (So, December 18th could be interesting.)

The League also recommended that if a candidate doesn't receive 40 percent of the popular vote, a national runoff election should be held.

Mrs. Cain concludes, "the time has come to take the next step to ensure a broad-based, representative democracy. Fairness argues for it. Retaining the fragile faith of the American voters in our representative system demands it." The League has supported an amendment to abolish the electoral college since 1970.

Talk about a forward-looking group. Too bad nobody listened. What the American public needed was a good wake-up call. I think it's here.

Nov. 16, 2000