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The Electoral College is Likely Here to Stay

Katherine Licup

The mantras are beginning to fill the airwaves. National security. Health care. Social security. Tax cuts. Jobs. The promises and finger-pointing can only mean one thing: It's time to vote for President.

Like in 2000, this year's race will probably be a tight one. In the last election, for only the fourth time in American history, a candidate who lost the popular vote ascended to the presidency. George W. Bush received 357,852 fewer popular votes than Al Gore, but edged him in the electoral vote, 271 to 267. This seeming injustice has renewed calls for abolishment of the Electoral College.

"The Electoral College is the most profound example of bad rules leading to bad results," said Dan Johnson-Weinberger, director of the Midwest Democracy Center, whose organization wants to do away with the Electoral College.

"The Electoral College is an invention that never should have survived to the 21st century," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), who introduced a resolution calling for a Constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College before the 2000 presidential election. Like many bills before it, the proposal never got off the ground, although many groups such as the ACLU, League of Women Voters, and NAACP support a direct popular vote.

"It's very difficult to get rid of the Electoral College, because there are many who think they benefit from it," said George Anastaplo, a Constitutional Law professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

Candidates must take into account issues in small states who hold valuable electoral votes. They are concerned about how many states they win, not the margin by which they win, so they balance their campaigning between urban and rural areas. In 2000, Bush won 30 states compared to Gore's 20 states. Additionally, Anastaplo said, the system enables us to quickly know who will be the next President without waiting for individual votes to be counted.

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Those in favor of a direct-vote system, however, contend that the Electoral College gives undue
weight to small states; the number of residents per electoral vote runs from 165,000 in more populous states to 628,000 in rural states. The allocation of Electors is dependent on population rather than actual voters. Moreover, candidates who know they will not win an entire state, like Al Gore in Texas, or George Bush in New York, do not bother campaigning there.

The bottom line, Sen. Durbin said, "is the injustice of a few thousand votes in just a few states having a disproportional impact on a national election."

Johnson-Weinberger agreed, but admitted that the system is unlikely to change because small states will not allow it.

"I think we're probably stuck with this ridiculous institution for our lifetimes," he said. "The Electoral College does not immediately offend people's sense of fairness."

Anastaplo is more philosophical. "Ordinarily, the [electoral vote and popular vote] go together so there's not a problem," he said. But in the end, "it doesn't really matter much who wins. It's not life or death who is in the White House."

4. In Maine and Nebraska, the winner of the popular election gets the two electoral votes earmarked for the senators, and the other votes are apportioned by Congressional district.