

December 14, 2008
Hartford Courant Op-Ed

There is a Better Way to Pick a President

By Susan Bysiewicz

Tomorrow, I will preside over a special meeting of Connecticut's seven electors at the state Capitol in the Senate chambers. There, they will officially cast votes for president and vice president of the United States. Hundreds of students from local schools and members of the public are expected to watch this 200 year-old exercise in Democracy after one of our most historic presidential elections.

Although this special ceremony connects us to our great history and the founders of our republic, the Electoral College serves little practical value and has outlived its usefulness. I believe it divides Americans across state lines and should be abolished because it violates the principle of one person, one vote. We need only look back at the 2000 Presidential campaign to see how flawed and troubling it is that the candidate who won the popular vote still lost the election.

As President-elect Barack Obama has often said, we are one people. We are not just a loose confederation of states with profoundly different languages or cultures. A working mother in Idaho is just as concerned as a working mother in Connecticut about keeping healthcare for her children if she or her spouse loses a job.

Many important issues are largely ignored in our national conversation due in part to the way we elect the president. For instance, when was the last time you heard a Republican or a Democratic presidential nominee make a serious proposal to tackle urban poverty or campaign for votes in some of our most destitute and densely populated areas?

The reality is, the needs of the urban poor are largely ignored because many millions of city dwellers don't vote. They don't feel like they have a stake in the presidency. In cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City, Houston, Atlanta, Buffalo and right here in Hartford and Bridgeport — in solid "blue" and "red" states — the outcome of the presidential election is a foregone conclusion. We can't continue to disregard our cities because the "real" votes are in the suburbs and then be shocked when these areas are plagued by blight and violence.

It doesn't have to be this way. Our Constitution was written to accommodate change, and this is one of those rare historic moments.

Let's remember why the Electoral College was originally put into the Constitution: It was a significant concession to the slave-holding South. Since slaves were not eligible to vote, the South would be at an electoral disadvantage compared to northern states with higher populations of eligible voters (white, adult property owning males). With the number of electoral votes allotted to each state based on Congressional representation, every state was guaranteed a minimum of three Electors. This checked the voting power of the northern states and preserved significant electoral influence for the South. The Electoral College was put in place to protect the institution of slavery. It is long past time for this last vestige of that shameful era to go.

The most direct way to eliminate the Electoral College is to amend the Constitution to mandate that the president be elected by a majority of voters, with provisions to deal with plurality elections such as in 1992.

There is a movement in several states to circumvent the Electoral College by changing state laws to mandate that electors vote for the national winner of the popular vote. I oppose this idea because electoral votes would not necessarily be awarded to the candidate who won the most votes in a given state.

To abolish the Electoral College, a constitutional amendment must pass with the support of at least two-thirds of the Congress and be ratified by three-quarters of the states. It has happened before. Slavery was abolished in 1865. Women were granted the right to vote nationally in 1920. The minimum voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971.

Many detractors say it's never going to happen. The smaller states given disproportionate electoral power under our current system will never agree to the change, they say, and it will only take 13 states voting no to scuttle the proposed amendment. But to all those who say it's never going to happen — before 2008 nearly everyone would have said the same thing about electing an African American president.

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