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Hey hey! Ho ho! The electoral college has got to go!



DIARY OF A MALCONTENT

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Last week, I proposed that we begin voting digitally on touch-screen kiosks, in order to eliminate any questions of the legitimacy of our elections. But there is a second pillar to my election reform plan, and that's the Electoral College. Recently, pundits and columnists have been vigorously defending this stalwart of the voting process. But it's all hogwash. The electoral system has absolutely got to go.

Conservatives might be expected to support the Electoral College. They are, after all, conservative. The very name means they are resistant to change — and especially to something as hallowed as the Constitution.

I think there's a little opportunism involved also, though. Texas Gov. George W. Bush seems poised to win this election even though he didn't receive the most votes. I mean seriously, if the election had gone the other way, and Gore had lost the popular vote but won the electoral vote, the U.S. Congress would now be voting on scrapping the whole electoral business.

Opportunism aside, let's treat the arguments for retaining the Electoral College seriously. What goodies does it give our democracy to not have a popular vote?

The first bonus offered by supporters of the electoral system, such as writers for the Washington Post, Business Week and the Christian Science Monitor, is that it makes candidates have to campaign in all the states, not just the major metropolitan areas with a large population.

Mmmm, no. Not true. For example, this year neither Gore nor Bush visited Wyoming or South Dakota. The outcome in those states was assumed, and with so few electoral votes, they just didn't matter. Florida, on the other hand, was visited by the two candidates a combined 38 times. Florida was seen as a battleground state (in hindsight, I can't imagine why), so the candidates focused efforts there.

If the popular vote was instituted, candidates would have to woo the whole country. After all, if the vote was expected to be close in California, or say, Florida, 30,000 votes in Wyoming would matter.

Why is there such a focus on a "nationwide campaign," anyway? We live in the TV and Internet era. Buying TV ads makes it a nationwide campaign. Having debate transcripts and party platforms available on the Internet makes it a nationwide campaign. Candidates no longer have to ride on horseback to the next town meeting.

A nationwide campaign is fine, but what about a nationwide re-count? Opponents of the popular vote worry that a close election would require an almost impossible national re-count. That wouldn't be necessary if we institute digital voting. With a digital system, every vote would be counted instantly and correctly the first time — all 100 million of them.

The only other significant defense of the Electoral College, offered by, among others, Emerald columnist Bret Jacobson on this page last week, is that it's a necessary part of our tradition and the Constitutional values of representative democracy that make our country great.

But the electoral system isn't representative

democracy. It isn't as though the high-class, educated elite are the people who cast electoral votes for president. Electors are little more than the party faithful, who are just as likely to be drooling morons as the average voter. So where is the benefit of having our intellectual betters make wiser decisions than we ourselves would make? There is no wiser decision, and there is no benefit. The electors simply mouth the popular vote of each state. But they mouth it in a magnified manner.

This magnification of the electoral vote compared to the actual voters is the problem. See, the Electoral College was designed to give preference to places with a larger population, not a larger number of voters. As explained by Walter Williams in the March 1998 issue of *Headway*, and Abraham McLaughlin in the Nov. 15, 2000 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor*, some people have argued this was a method to help preserve slavery, because slaves were counted in the population of a state even though they couldn't vote. So even though they had less voters, states with more slaves had more pull in the presidential election. Slavery and unequal representation — are these the American values that conservatives are speaking of when they defend the Electoral College?

The way this inequality works out today is to give more power to voters in states with more children. A voter in Utah has more say in the presidential election than I do. I defy anyone to explain to me how this is fair or sustains a representative democracy. We need to blow this system out of the water.

Thanks to some of the electoral system's supporters, I have a few more compelling reasons that people should demand the abolition of the Electoral College.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., defending the electoral system in the Nov. 13, 2000 issue of *Time*, wrote, "The abolition of state-by-state, winner-take-all electoral votes would speed the disintegration of the already weakened two-party system. ... Cumulating votes from state to state, [third parties] could force a runoff if no candidate got more than 40 percent of the vote — and then could extract concessions from the major parties."

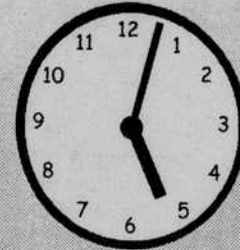
Hurrah! You mean third parties would have to build coalitions with other parties? You mean major parties would actually have to listen to other voices in our country? Count me in.

Another tactic used by supporters of the Electoral College is that individual states could simply change their method of allocating electors. According to a Nov. 21, 2000 article by Robert Tanner of the *Associated Press*, Illinois and California are both considering bills to have each congressional district award its elector based on how that district voted. So, theoretically, Oregon could have five electoral votes for Gore and two for Bush, based on how the different districts voted.

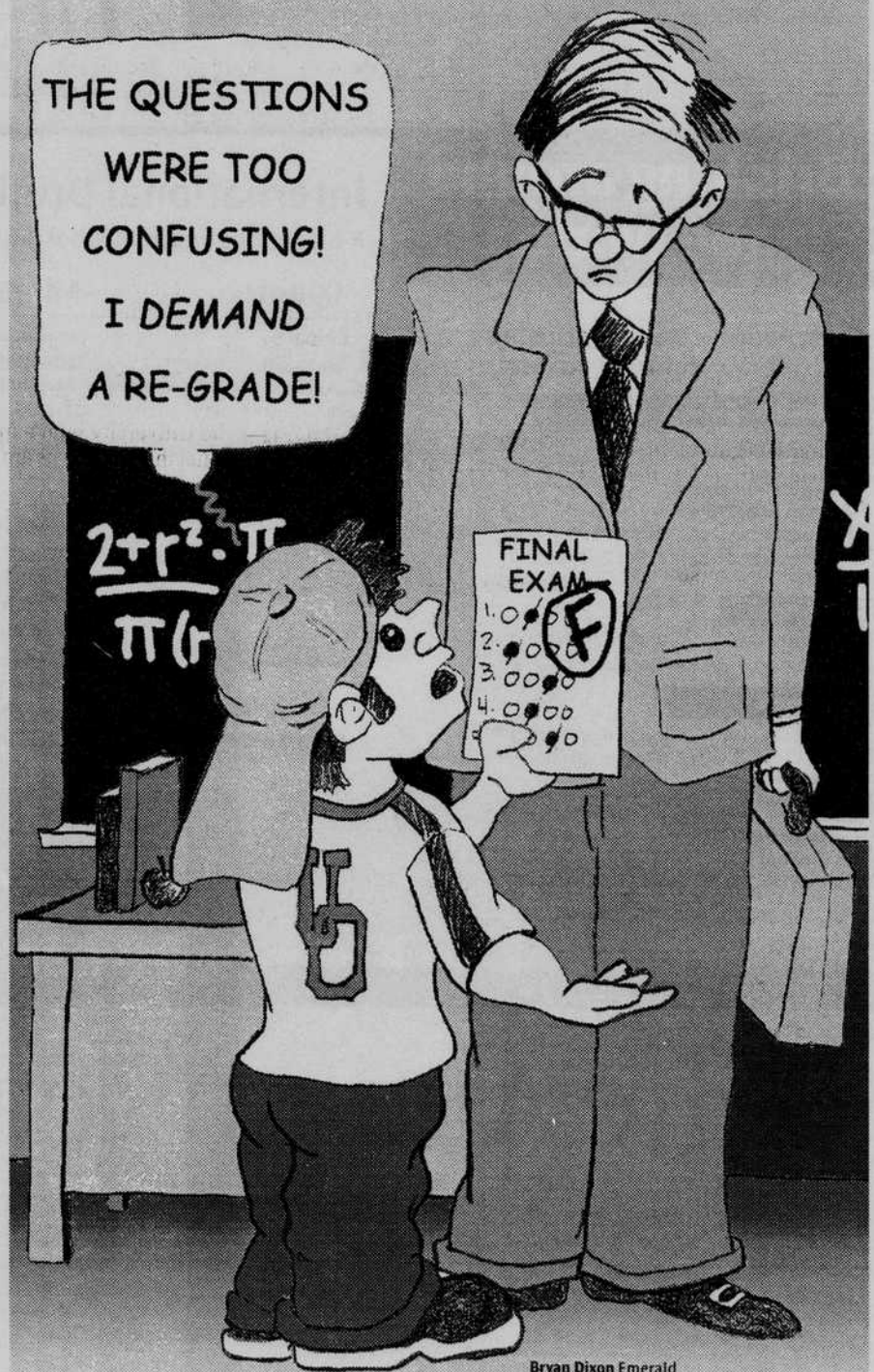
Wait a minute. Giving each district its own vote based on the popular vote is darn near just having a popular vote. And there are benefits. As Republican Illinois Representative Bill Mitchell explained in Tanner's article, "This bill acknowledges that there are differences in the political preferences in different parts of our state."

And guess what? Having a popular vote would acknowledge that there are differences in the political preferences of each and every citizen. It's about time we made those differences count.

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THE QUESTIONS
WERE TOO
CONFUSING!
I DEMAND
A RE-GRADE!



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