

GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

Popular vote compact faces a long road

The state House of Representatives this week approved Senate Bill 870, which allows Oregon to join the states that have banded together in an attempt to bypass the Electoral College.

Gov. Kate Brown has said she favors the bill, so chances are good that Oregon soon will be a member of the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. The compact is a pledge between states to give their electoral votes to whichever presidential candidate wins the national popular vote. In other words, if a Democratic presidential candidate won the national popular vote, Oregon's seven electoral votes would go to that candidate, regardless of how the state voted. If a Republican candidate won the national popular vote, Oregon's votes would go to the Republican candidate.

Although the legislative Democrats who supported the measure swore that it was essentially a nonpartisan issue, the votes in the House and the Senate belied that: The measure passed the House on a straight party-line vote. The vote on the bill in the Senate last month was largely along party lines.

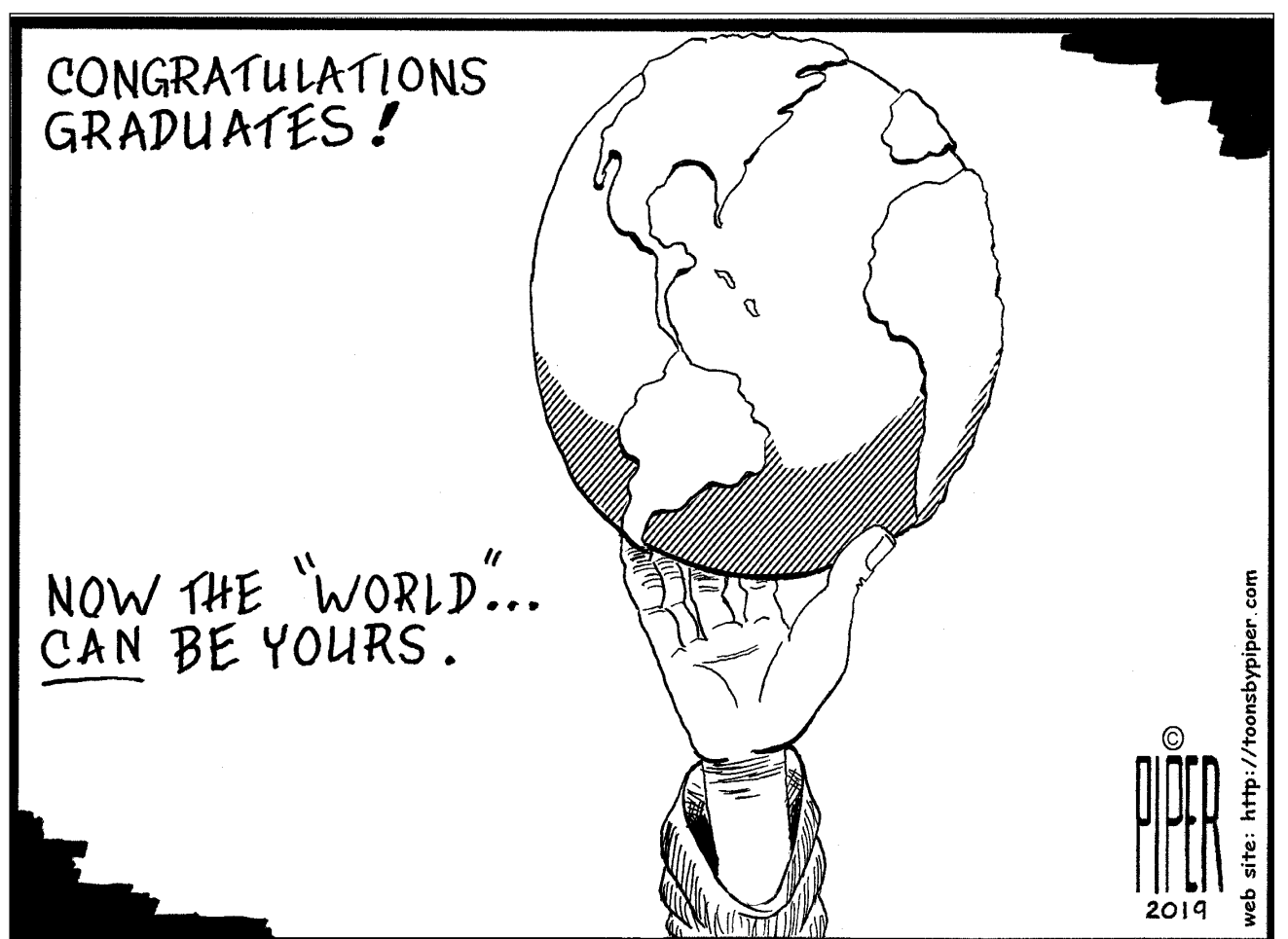
The popular vote compact is fueled by Democratic anger over a pair of recent presidential elections in which the Electoral College awarded the presidency to Republican candidates who did not win the popular vote. But if there's a little voice in the back of your head saying that Democrats might regret pushing for this at some point in the future, well, you're not alone.

That is, if the compact ever goes into effect. The compact only kicks in when enough states join to reach 270 electoral votes, the threshold needed to win the presidency. When you add Oregon's rich bounty of seven electoral votes, the compact will have 196, just 74 votes shy of that magic number.

But, as the national political commentators like to say on TV, the road map to 270 for the compact isn't clear. The compact already has enlisted vote-rich states like New York and California. The other big prizes remaining for the compact are in states like Florida and Texas, and those states, with a combined 67 votes, seem extremely unlikely to join. The same seems to be true for so-called battleground states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan, with a combined 54 electoral votes. Smaller states that have consistently voted for Republican presidential candidates also seem unlikely to join the compact, and that takes almost 200 potential votes off the table. Of the states that have yet to join, the only ones that seem as if they might be even reasonable candidates to sign on in the near future are Wisconsin and Minnesota, and adding those states only gets you to 222 electoral votes.

Opponents of the Electoral College say that the system gives an extraordinary amount of power to a handful of swing states, where presidential hopefuls spend the most of their money and attention. Supporters of the Electoral College include smaller, more rural states, which fear scrapping the system would mean candidates would pay more attention to densely populated areas to secure the maximum amount of votes. If this compact eventually falls into place, we suspect that's exactly what would happen — and we worry that those candidates who actually win the presidency will continue that general neglect of rural states and states with small populations when they move into the White House.

As we have argued in the past, dissatisfaction with the Electoral College sometimes stems from a failure to grasp the essential organizational foundation of the United States. We are one nation, but in presidential elections we act as a collection of federal states. Each one makes its own decision on presidential candidates. The result is a combination of the decisions in 50 states. Even if somebody thinks the system has flaws, that's no reason to sidestep the Constitution.



Time for WURA to enter 21st century

The history of the Railroad into Wallowa County goes back to the turn of the 20th century. There were many small mills in Wallowa County, but the area was protected from outside exploitation by its inaccessibility. Large outside lumber corporations, seeing huge potential profits, spear-headed the building of the railroad. Small local mills generally couldn't afford the train, but large mills, owned by outsiders, hired workers to strip the most profitable trees. The corporations sent logs and profits out of county. Lower prices and gradually less accessible trees caused mills to begin closing. The owners saw no likelihood of profitable rail traffic in the future and sold the right of way.

Union and Wallowa counties now own the right of way from Elgin to Joseph and have handed over management to Wallowa Union Rail Authority.

WURA refuses to pull any track ostensibly based on future viability of train traffic between the counties. This refusal limits use to the federally dependent excursion trains from Elgin and to private pedal car rental in Wallowa County. The federal government has been giving \$95,000 annually to keep the Eagle Cap Excursion Train going. The right of way was purchased by the two counties as an investment. Its current management provides minimal profit or enjoyment for the general population.

It's high time Union and Wallowa

counties enter the 21st century and revisit the vision and purpose for this spectacular publicly owned corridor. Highway connection between Wallowa County and the "outside world" is now excellent for cars and large trucks. The idea of viable commercial rail commerce along this corridor is absurd.

More tourism dollars could be generated and far more widely dispersed if the land was not being held hostage by Wallowa Union Rail Authority. As initially envisioned almost 20 years ago, a trail could connect Elgin with Joseph. Rails could be left for the excursion train in Union County and for pedal cars through the Wallowa Valley with plenty of room and good topography for a trail beside it. Pulling tracks through the canyon would connect the two trails and create free year-round, non-motorized connectivity from Elgin to Joseph.

Varied non-motorized recreation for all ages is what so many people now seek for vacationing. Our counties offer all the amenities for a steady, relatively even flow of tourists. The trail would provide that draw. Pulling the canyon tracks makes sense economically. Salvage money could offset trail building costs plus the rail bed itself would quickly and inexpensively become a trail.

Earlier plans for a trail were abandoned due to self-interested, outspoken opposition by adjacent property owners, which WURA management

My Voice ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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panders to. Let's finally do what's right for our overall well-being: economically, socially and recreationally. Imagine free recreation for residents that also attracts visitors whose money will be spent just in being here.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Federal funding for the excursion train has been withheld this year resulting in a dramatically reduced schedule. I support rail WITH trail from Elgin to the turnaround, and from Wallowa to Joseph but rail TO trail in the canyon. Please notify Oregon Rural Action, kristinO@oregonrural.org, if you would like to work toward this outcome.

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