

2020 Democrats' new litmus test: Abolish Electoral College

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI
Associated Press

The Green New Deal and "Medicare for All" are old news. The hottest position in the Democratic presidential field this week is abolishing the Electoral College.

Elizabeth Warren kicked things off at a CNN town hall on Monday night when the Massachusetts senator drew enthusiastic applause by saying: "Every vote matters, and the way we can make that happen is that we can have national voting, and that means get rid of the Electoral College."

The next day, former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke said there was "a lot of wisdom" in abolishing the Electoral College. California Sen. Kamala Harris told late night host Jimmy Kimmel on Tuesday night that she's "open to the discussion." Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Indiana, tweeted a clip of him saying the Electoral College "has got to go."

It's the latest push by White House hopefuls to embrace a procedural tactic to rally the Democratic base, following similar calls to scrap the filibuster and increase the size of the Supreme Court. The 2020 candidates are tapping into Democratic anger after Donald Trump became the second Republican in five presidential elections to win the presidency through the Electoral College while losing the popular vote.

The Electoral College, a group that comes together every four years to technically elect the president, is enshrined in the Constitution and won't be easy to eliminate. O'Rourke suggested a constitutional amendment to award the presidency to the winner of the popular vote.

Several Democratic-controlled states are pushing for a national popular vote.



Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren speaks to a group of about 400 potential voters at a high school on Sunday in Memphis, Tenn.

But rather than pass a constitutional amendment, these legislatures are joining the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, a group of states that pledge to give their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote.

The compact only goes into effect when it includes states representing 270 electoral votes, the majority needed to win the White House. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis brought the current total to 181 when he signed a bill last week to join the compact, and the Democratic governors of Delaware and New Mexico also have bills on their desk.

Still, with legislative sessions winding down, there are no other states expected to join this year.

Warren endorsed the compact after her town hall. Patrick Rosenstiel of the group pushing the idea said in an interview that converting to a national popular vote is not a partisan issue.

"The way to do it is through state action and we

would welcome Sen. Warren, President Trump, anyone who believes" in the popular vote, said Rosenstiel, a self-described "lifelong conservative Republican" who grew tired of his vote not factoring into presidential elections in reliably Democratic Minnesota.

Though the Electoral College favored Trump in 2016, and some analysts predict it could give him an edge in 2020, it is not necessarily a pro-GOP institution. During Barack Obama's presidency, many predicted he may benefit from an Electoral College advantage.

That led to criticism of the institution at the time from some Republicans, notably, Trump himself. "The electoral college is a disaster for democracy," Trump tweeted on the evening of the 2012 election, before it was apparent Obama had also won the national popular vote.

Now that the institution made him president, Trump takes a warmer view. "The Electoral College is actually genius in that it brings all

states, including the smaller ones, into play," he tweeted Tuesday.

Critics say the Electoral College focuses attention on a handful of swing states at the expense of candidates campaigning throughout the country.

But defenders say the current system almost always lines up with the popular vote and is part of the way the country's founders wanted to check popular passions and encourages attention to small states that may otherwise get passed over.

Some Democrats agree.

Andrew Yang, an entrepreneur running for the party's presidential nomination, tweeted: "The problem with deciding Presidential elections via popular vote is that candidates would naturally campaign in urban areas with big media markets and their policies would follow suit. Better to have proportional electoral college votes in each state so you campaign everywhere."

National Guard to help fireproof California towns

By DON THOMPSON
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California is calling in the National Guard for the first time next month to help protect communities from devastating fires like the one that largely destroyed the city of Paradise last fall.

It's pulling the troops away from President Donald Trump's border protection efforts and devoting them to fire protection, another area where Trump has been critical of California's Democratic officials — even threatening to cut off federal disaster funding.

Starting next week, 110 California National Guard troops will receive 11 days of training in using shovels, rakes and chain saws to help thin trees and brush, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokesman Mike Mohler said.

They will be divided into five teams that will travel around the state starting in April to work on forest management projects, mainly clearing or reducing trees and vegetation in an effort to deprive flames of fuel.

"They will be boots on the ground doing fuels projects alongside CalFire crews," Mohler said. "We've had them out for flood fighting, several different operations, but this would be the first time their mission would be fuels thinning and forest management."

They have helped fight fires before, however.

Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was the first in recent decades to deploy California National Guard troops as firefighters. That occurred on July 4, 2008, after lightning storms sparked hundreds of fires, Guard Lt. Col. Jonathan



In this Nov. 9, 2018, file photo, firefighters work to keep flames from spreading through the Shadowbrook apartment complex as a wildfire burns through Paradise, Calif.

Shiroma said.

While many of the troops are being reassigned from the border this time, the Guard also is asking other service members if they want to participate, Shiroma said.

The training is similar for firefighting and fire protection. Mohler said the troops also will receive some training in forest management, "so they're not just out there cutting brush" but understand why they're doing what they're doing.

For instance, firefighting crews generally cut fire lines down to mineral earth during active wildfires. Fuels management crews often do less-intensive thinning of trees and chaparral to slow advancing flames.

That often involves creating fuel breaks. They can range from stripping away all woody vegetation on wide strips of land to thinning larger trees and removing shorter trees, brush and debris to discourage fires from climbing into treetops and jumping from tree to tree.

Critics say the work damages forests and can be useless against wind-driven fires, like the one in the Sierra Nevada foothills

community of Paradise last year, killing 85 people in the Northern California city of 27,000 people.

"CalFire is taking the Trump approach, logging the forest and weakening critical environmental protections, and that's the exact opposite of what we need to be doing," Center for Biological Diversity scientist Shaye Wolf said.

She said the better approach is to make homes more fire resistant while pruning vegetation immediately surrounding homes.

CalFire this month listed 35 fuel-reduction projects it wants to start immediately, covering more than 140 square miles, double the acreage in previous years. But state officials estimate 23,438 square miles of California forestland need thin-

ning or other restoration.

"It's not a problem that's going to get fixed overnight," Mohler said.

Such thinning operations are getting more attention in recent years, with the U.S. Forest Service estimating last month that 18 million trees died in California over the last year.

The agency estimated that more than 147 million trees have died across nearly 15,625 square miles during a drought that began in 2010, while about 1.5 million dead trees have been cut.

Investigations have often blamed recent wildfires on utilities not doing a good enough job of clearing vegetation around power lines and equipment. Democratic state Sen. Bill Dodd of Napa has proposed legislation that would require CalFire to tell utilities which trees and brush to remove and then inspect the work.

Aside from Guard troops, CalFire also is creating 10 civilian fuels management crews this year. The 10-member crews could help with initial fire suppression if need be but will primarily reduce fuels, Mohler said.

"It's going to be a pretty amazing sight to see as these crews get out there on the ground," he said. "There's hundreds of, unfortunately, Paradises across the state, (so) the public needs to understand this."



AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, file

In this Nov. 3, 2018 file photo, Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., speaks at a rally outside Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla.

GOP senators defend the late McCain against Trump's attacks

By LAURIE KELLMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Key Republicans on Wednesday defended the late Sen. John McCain as a "hero" against ongoing attacks from President Donald Trump, daring to say what most in the GOP still won't seven months after the Arizona senator's death from brain cancer.

A trio of senators, from the most senior to the greenest freshman, defied Trump's apparently unprovoked declaration that he's "not a fan" of the decorated Vietnam War veteran because McCain cast the deciding vote against the Republican repeal of national health care. They took great care to describe McCain as a "hero," clear pushback against Trump's longtime assessment that McCain is not one because he had been captured in Vietnam.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell did not mention Trump directly, but said that he misses his friend McCain "today and every day."

"It was a blessing to serve alongside a rare patriot and genuine American hero in the Senate," the Kentucky Republican, who is up for re-election in 2020, tweeted. "His memory continues to remind me every day that our nation is sustained by the sacrifices of heroes."

McCain, a Navy pilot, was held as a prisoner of war and tortured for more than five years. Trump has never served in the military because he got a deferment for a bone spur in his foot.

Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., said the nation

"deserves better" than Trump's disparagement.

"The McCain family deserves better, I don't care if he's president of United States, owns all the real estate in New York, or is building the greatest immigration system in the world," Isakson told The Bulwark, a conservative news and opinion website. Later, Isakson called Trump's remarks "deplorable."

"It will (be) deplorable seven months from now if he says it again," Isakson said Wednesday on Georgia Public Broadcasting's Political Rewind radio show.

Pushback also came from Sen. Martha McSally, a Republican Air Force veteran appointed to McCain's seat from Arizona.

"John McCain is an American hero and I am thankful for his life of service and legacy to our country and Arizona," she tweeted Wednesday. "Everyone should give him and his family the respect, admiration, and peace they deserve."

That McSally declined to criticize Trump directly reflects a broader wariness among Republicans to cross a president famous for holding a grudge and mobilizing his followers against GOP lawmakers he deems disloyal.

Many Republicans have stayed silent this week, declining to join the GOP senators defending McCain and more broadly, America's millions of veterans.

But this week, Trump seemed to inspire a new determination among some Republicans to draw a line, however delicately.

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