

Keep the Electoral College

Harry Neuwirth

Harry Neuwirth writes from Silverton OR.

In the wake of the 2000 presidential election many people, including Senator-elect Clinton of New York, are demanding that the electoral college be abolished in favor of direct popular election on the thesis that the current system is unfair. It's obvious that these arguments grow out of either emotional shortsightedness, self-interest or ignorance of the protective qualities of the college.

If we look carefully at the legislative processes that ultimately govern us we will see a clear connection between the momentum of elections and the laws that emerge from our legislative bodies.

Legislation is constituency-driven, as are elections. Those constituencies unabashedly strive to elect legislators, governors, presidents who represent their point of view, who will use their political skills and charisma to effect laws favorable to their constituents and to their own careers. A list of those constituencies is long, but would typically include democrats/republicans, industry/labor, rich/poor, rural/urban, male/female, married/unmarried, young/old. A delicate national balance has been maintained by the need to genuflect before each of these special interests, by the need for political parties to carry their appeal to all those constituencies in all fifty states.

Direct election would destroy that balance and alter elections by dramatically redirecting political energies away from people to the states they reside in. And let it not be doubted that our fifty states are special interest groups of the highest order.

We are all aware that society is an evolutionary institution. Change comes constantly, slowly, inevitably. We look back fifty years and see a nation far different from the one we live in today, yet the child of today can scarcely envision that ancient world since change, under the force of evolving law, is incremental, gradual, life-changing, and perceptible only to historians and those who lived through those changes while paying careful attention.

So what significant changes might our nation suffer under direct popular elections?

Obviously no one can answer that question definitively, but you can be sure that national party chairmen and election professionals already have plans in mind on how they might use direct popular presidential election as leverage in the process of getting their guy elected.

They would almost surely begin by concentrating their resources in the ten most populous states, states that can assure any candidate a seat in the oval office, states including Senator Clinton's adopted one. Under such a scheme, little

resource would be wasted on the marginal states: good-bye Arizona and Oregon. Wring your hands Rhode Island and Utah!

Formula in hand and after a couple of successful elections under “popular” rules, you could expect political professionals to expand their attentions to seven more states that come close to the profile of the big ten. This would assure that “their” president’s vetoes would almost never be overridden in the senate. The legislative process would be significantly altered, while the power to “deliver” a veto-proof presidency would effectively muffle the indignant cries of the disenfranchised states, the impotent states. Sorry Dakotas; who needs Maine or Idaho?

Presidential elections on an almost-sure-thing footing, with veto-proofing accomplished, the next step would probably be to divide and conquer the “impotent” states, many of which could be persuaded to slide over and join the winners rather than to stay and whine with the losers, establishing unassailable majorities in both houses of congress. Then look for significant increases in federally mandated control over state functions. States have only been a drag on the process anyway, right?

Slowly, incrementally, almost imperceptibly, over many years, the pride of citizenship would decay, gradually inspiring more and more potential young voters to abandon a system that has frustrated their mentors through many election cycles.

As power consolidated, the pace of packing the courts and bureaucratic leadership echelons would accelerate, increasing the invincibility of the party in power. The division of the U.S.A. into an increasingly disparate “them” and “us” would destroy any remaining vestiges of unity. Sorry Utah; good luck Mississippi.

That plot may sound very much like a slide into fascism, a slide that some would suggest has been under way since 1933. But of course such a thing could never REALLY happen here. Not in the land of the free and the home of the brave!

The electoral college protects much more than just elections, and we’d best keep that in mind as the clamor for popular elections heightens in the months and years ahead. Ω