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## Why We Should Graduate From the Electoral College

### ELECTION FORUM COLUMN

By Mark A. Neubauer

If there is to be a presidential election next week in California, you certainly would not know it from listening or watching our local airwaves.

There are no legions of vituperative political advertisements, pillaring one candidate or the other, very few rallies of cheering supporters and certainly no personal appearances by either presidential candidate, Barack Obama or John McCain.

Instead the war for ballots is taking place in what seems to be far-off, distant lands, at cities with names like Wauwatosa (Wisconsin) or Chillicothe (Ohio). The only time a presidential candidate makes any contact with California is an occasional trolling for dollars.

California's presidential votes have been rendered virtually meaningless. Even though California has more electoral votes than any other state, 55, and, even though its 36 million population is the largest by far, that is 11.95 percent of the entire country or almost one of every eight Americans, California is a nonentity in this presidential election. Having been designated a "blue" state, it is assumed to be safely in Democratic candidate Obama's camp and therefore ignored by both him and McCain, who instead fight the battle in the so-called "key states," such as Ohio and Pennsylvania.

But California is not alone. Texas, with the second highest population and almost 8 percent of the country's people, along with 34 Electoral College votes, is considered a safe "red" or Republican state, and therefore is equally ignored by both candidates.

As a result, these two states - which together constitute almost one in five Americans - must be content to watch the election from the sidelines.

Instead, this election, like so many before it, will be decided by a handful of far smaller states, such as Missouri, which has less than 6 million inhabitants, under 2 percent of the population and only 11 electoral votes.

Whether Obama wins California by a 1,000 votes or a million-the result is the same-he still only gets the full 55 electoral votes and McCain gets nothing.

Obama may carry California by a landslide of a million votes and McCain may carry Texas by an equal landslide but their victory margins are rendered meaningless by an Electoral College system where all but two states' electoral votes are decided on a "winner take all" basis.

Instead, just as in 2000 in Florida, a handful of voters in the so-called swing states - not the millions in California or Texas - will decide our next president.

The reason for this undemocratic election of a democratic president lies in a system designed more than two centuries ago. In its infancy, the United States was a collection of separate state governments, each jealous of the other.

To maintain each individual state's power, they set up a system where the president of our country is elected by an Electoral College of state representatives, rather than a direct vote by all of the individual citizens. Only Nebraska and Maine divide their Electoral College delegates between the candidates. Margins of victory in individual states become irrelevant if the state is already clearly predicted to be in one political camp or the other.

For example, California's millions of voters can vote overwhelmingly for Obama, but that margin of victory has no impact on the final decision, compared to the close races in the Midwest and Southeast. Indeed, the three largest states, California, Texas and blue state New York, with approximately 25 percent of the nation's population, are effectively watching this election from the sidelines.

The dominance of smaller and rural areas in choosing a president starts from the primary process in the traditional early battlegrounds of Iowa and New Hampshire. Thanks to the Electoral College, it continues through the November election and the formal vote of the Electoral College in December.

Of the 538 electors, 270 are necessary to win. The mathematical possibilities create an intricate chess game where minor states become major players.

Go on to any major news Web site, such as CNN or the Los Angeles Times, and you can find a computer program to design your own maze of how one candidate or the other can snatch Electoral College victory from popular vote defeat merely by switching a few undecided states from one camp to the other, even if the Electoral College winner is elected by a minority of the general population as a whole.

But in our balance of power between urban and rural America, a direct popular election has potential ills as well. Under a purely direct popular vote, the election campaign would ignore much of the geographic U.S. and concentrate - just like our mass media - on California, Texas, New York and a handful of large urban areas.

It could threaten the two-party system by allowing third-party candidates to prevent a majority winner-causing a series of "runoffs" with no candidate winning at least 50 percent of the total popular vote.

The balance between individual states and a unified federal government is a delicate one.

One advantage of the Electoral College is it does give additional weight to the electoral votes of smaller states. Californians get just one electoral vote for approximately every 650,000 voters, while Wyoming gets one electoral vote for approximately every 175,000 voters.

Throw out that weighting of votes and Wyoming may never see a presidential campaign again.

A better solution is perhaps to follow the wisdom of Nebraska and Maine by requiring states to split their electoral votes in proportion to the candidate's electoral vote. Suddenly the margins of victory in California, Texas and New York become important. Even though those states will go for one candidate or the other, the closer the loser keeps the margin, the more electoral votes that losing candidate can pick up, keeping the overall election close.

It gives meaning to the margin of victory in a popular vote, while still giving some weighted benefit to smaller states and rural areas as a result of their picking up at least two electoral votes beyond what their population justifies.

The presidential election should not be decided by a handful of votes in just one state, as we suffered in 2000.

States that are firmly committed to either the red or the blue camps should not become marginal players. Rather, a more reasonable balance needs to be created in the Electoral College. Requiring states to apportion their electoral votes will make sure that every state becomes an important battleground rather than just a few. Proportionality will mirror what happens in the Congress.

With the election just days away, those of us in California are forced to sit passively, knowing that our 55 votes will go firmly for Obama, just as Texans know their 34 electoral votes will go clearly for McCain.

We can only watch as our futures are decided distantly by a handful of voters in a few states whose population is but a fraction of ours. That is not democracy.

**Mark A. Neubauer** is a trial lawyer and partner in Steptoe & Johnson's Century City office. He is a former newspaper reporter in Miami and Washington, D.C.

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