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## Abolish the Electoral College

**W**hen Republican delegates nominate their presidential candidate this week, they will be doing it in a city where residents who support George Bush have, for all practical purposes, already been disenfranchised. Barring a tsunami of a sweep, heavily Democratic New York will send its electoral votes to John Kerry and both parties have already written New York off as a surefire blue state. The Electoral College makes Republicans in New York, and Democrats in Utah, superfluous. It also makes members of the majority party in those states feel less than crucial. It's hard to tell New York City children that every vote is equally important - it's winner take all here, and whether Senator Kerry beats the president by one New York vote or one million, he will still walk away with all 31 of the state's electoral votes.

The Electoral College got a brief spate of attention in 2000, when George Bush became president even though he lost the popular vote to Al Gore by more than 500,000 votes. Many people realized then for the first time that we have a system in which the president is chosen not by the voters themselves, but by 538 electors. It's a ridiculous setup, which thwarts the will of the majority, distorts presidential campaigning and has the potential to produce a true constitutional crisis. There should be a bipartisan movement for direct election of the president.

The main problem with the Electoral College is that it builds into every election the possibility, which has been a reality three times since the Civil War, that the president will be a candidate who lost the popular vote. This shocks people in other nations who have been taught to look upon the United States as the world's oldest democracy. The Electoral College also heavily favors small states. The fact that every one gets three automatic electors - one for each senator and a House member - means states that by population might be entitled to only one or two electoral votes wind up with three, four or five.

The majority does not rule and every vote is not equal - those are reasons enough for scrapping the system. But there are other consequences as well. This election has been making clear how the Electoral College distorts presidential campaigns. A few swing states take on oversized importance, leading the candidates to focus their attention, money and promises on a small slice of the electorate. We are hearing far more this year about the issue of storing hazardous waste at Yucca Mountain, an important one for Nevada's 2.2 million residents, than about securing ports against terrorism, a vital concern for 19.2 million New Yorkers. The political concerns of Cuban-Americans, who are concentrated in the swing state of Florida, are of enormous interest to the candidates. The interests of people from Puerto Rico scarcely come up at all, since they are mainly settled in areas already conceded as Kerry territory. The

emphasis on swing states removes the incentive for a large part of the population to follow the campaign, or even to vote.

Those are the problems we have already experienced. The arcane rules governing the Electoral College have the potential to create havoc if things go wrong. Electors are not required to vote for the candidates they are pledged to, and if the vote is close in the Electoral College, a losing candidate might well be able to persuade a small number of electors to switch sides. Because there are an even number of electors - one for every senator and House member of the states, and three for the District of Columbia - the Electoral College vote can end in a tie. There are several plausible situations in which a 269-269 tie could occur this year. In the case of a tie, the election goes to the House of Representatives, where each state delegation gets one vote - one for Wyoming's 500,000 residents and one for California's 35.5 million.

The Electoral College's supporters argue that it plays an important role in balancing relations among the states, and protecting the interests of small states. A few years ago, this page was moved by these concerns to support the Electoral College. But we were wrong. The small states are already significantly overrepresented in the Senate, which more than looks out for their interests. And there is no interest higher than making every vote count.

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