

Letters to the Editor

Electoral College: No

To the Editor:

The debate on the electoral college (*PS*, Spring 1984) between Ted Arrington and Saul Brenner is a useful exchange. Yet there are other factors that seem to be as pertinent to that issue as those they offer.

Simplicity: Without question, the most persuasive rationale for the direct election of the president is the simplicity of that process. It is readily understandable and adheres to the decision rule that is followed in nearly all elections with which our citizenry is familiar. Simplicity is not an insignificant attribute; U.S. voters are faced with a bewildering constellation of electoral arrangements: the long ballot, the direct primary system of nomination, and the preference primary/party caucus system of presidential nomination. That, of course, is only a partial list of our obfuscating electoral arrangements, but it reminds those of us who teach about parties and elections of the complexity of the American electoral processes; a complexity that is apparent as we follow public discussion on the presidential nominating system or are confronted with a party primary contest for a local governmental office for which 15 candidates have filed. Anything that simplifies our electoral processes warrants favorable assessment, especially when, as with direct presidential election, it conforms to the public's conception of how elections should function.

Increased turnout and valid counts: Despite the removal of historic barriers to voting, the rate of turnout in this country is low and seems to be declining. Direct presidential election could be the key to increasing turnout. If direct election were adopted, the political parties and their

presidential tickets would have a powerful incentive to concentrate campaign efforts on those states and parts of states where turnout is now low: "Hunting where the ducks are," as the Goldwater camp called their strategy two decades ago. Not only would turnout increase, there would be a concomitant incentive for the parties to insure that every vote was legally cast. Thus, voter participation should increase and electoral corruption decrease. Since the poor and the disadvantaged minorities have the lowest turnout rates their electoral influence would be magnified by an upswing in turnout derived from areas of previously low participation. There is probably no greater incentive for expanding voter participation than the prospect of gaining the Oval Office.

Wasted votes; Distorted support: If elections are expected to reflect public preferences, one can argue that the electoral college encourages distortion of public preference in presidential elections. Just as the electoral college discourages parties and candidates from making major campaigns in states where their chances are slim, it also discourages voters in such states from voting for their preferred presidential candidate. How so? Some faculty colleagues (not political scientists, of course!) tell me that here in Indiana they regularly either skip the presidential race or vote for the Libertarian or some other minor party candidate. Why? Because as Democrats they know the likelihood of any Democratic candidate winning Indiana is so remote that they deem a vote for Humphrey, McGovern, or Carter to be futile. Surely parallel reasoning applies to Republicans in Massachusetts. I have no idea how widespread this practice is, but it suggests that, contrary to Saul Brenner's contention, the presence of the electoral

college may stimulate an inflation of minor party strength.

Minor parties: Brenner's hypothetical case that the 1964 scenario was ripe for third-party candidacy had it not been for the electoral college is weak, but rebuttal to that is too extensive to set out here. His general case about third-party candidacies does deserve comment. The current disincentive to third-party presidential candidates is *not* the electoral college which, as the campaigns of James Weaver, Robert La Follette, Sr., Strom Thurmond, and George Wallace attest, seems to encourage regional third parties. It is the state laws regulating nomination and ballot qualification, as well as the rules of the Federal Election Commission in providing matching monies, that discourage third party presidential aspirants. Court action wrought by George Wallace and John Anderson has mitigated some state imposed strictures, but those constraints are still the principal obstacle to a freshly anointed third-party candidate. A check of the public statements from the Wallace and Anderson camps would reveal much decrying of state regulation and probably nothing about the electoral college as an impediment.

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Federalism: Brenner's defense of the electoral college is striking in that it has no explicit mention of federalism. The commentary on balancing arrangements between large and small states is the closest approach to discussing federalism. Yet congressional debate on proposed electoral college amendments frequently features speakers from *less populous* states defending the college as a manifestation of federalism. Whether that is puffery or not, it would seem that as political scientists we should address this issue of political philosophy. Or is political philosophy so out of vogue that we can ignore it? I expect not, if we wish to influence Congress or even present a

well-rounded argument to our students.

Clearly, direct presidential election is preferable to the electoral college. The primary difficulty with that change would arise in close elections when it could be days before a winner was certified. That has occurred infrequently in local, state, and congressional elections. Given the current proficiency in vote counting, it is conceivable that the outcome of a presidential election could be uncertain for weeks as the recounts are conducted. If that is to be sufficient grounds to forego direct election, we should realize that we are adopting a line of reasoning comparable to that of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in opposing proportional representation: They contend that an election should choose a government clearly and promptly and that the representativeness of that government (party) as determined by the distribution of popular vote is largely irrelevant.

Although awaiting the result of a close election could be agonizing for the nation, that agony is possible under the current system should no candidate attain an electoral college majority. Then we wait until the House of Representatives decides. The prospect of a close outcome in a direct presidential election should enhance efforts to improve vote casting and tallying. It might also induce the broadcast media to be less audacious in predicting presidential victors. Should we resist any change that might produce the latter?

Thomas P. Wolf
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Forget Metaphysical Ideals

To the Editor:

Thomas Wolf has advanced a number of interesting arguments in defense of the direct election of the president. He has not, however, said one word about my most important argument, namely:

Since the distribution in favor of the people in the smaller states in the Senate and House will not be modified, it is unfair to ask the people in the

Letters to the Editor

larger states to abandon their advantage in the Electoral College. It would result in an unequal balance.

I urge him to confront this argument and not spend his time worrying about metaphysical ideals.

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Post-Khomeini Iran

To the Editor:

The article on "Forecasting Policy Decisions: An Expected Utility Approach to Post-Khomeini Iran" in the Spring 1984 issue of *PS* is fascinating. The new forecasting approach developed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita seems to be the best way to predict international events. I think it's time for our policymakers to direct their attention to the work of the academic people in order to make better decisions in the field of foreign policy. My thanks to the American Political Science Association for publishing such useful articles.

Majid Mosleh
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