

DITCHING THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

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California legislators are ready to do away with the Electoral College, and they have made their views loud and clear. On August 30, they approved a proposal that could change the way in which California's electoral votes are allocated. The measure is awaiting gubernatorial action.

If Schwarzenegger signs the measure, it will authorize California's participation in a newly proposed interstate compact. Under this compact, participating states would agree to allocate their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote. The compact will go into effect only if states with a majority of electoral votes agree to the plan. In essence, the compact would create a direct popular election for the presidency. The Electoral College would exist in name, but not in practice.

Opponents of the Electoral College are calling upon Schwarzenegger to sign the bill. The Governor has not yet said what he will do.

Perhaps Schwarzenegger wonders if his state will be better served without an active Electoral College. After all, who can deny that California would reap all sorts of benefits if the system were eliminated? Presidential candidates would flock to the state, and the needs of Californians would immediately receive more federal attention. Indeed, some readers of this column may feel empathy with such a sentiment. Without an Electoral College, Texans would receive more attention, too.

But first impressions can be misleading. Californians will receive a handful of immediate benefits if the interstate compact is enacted, but these benefits will be temporary and inconsequential. The more enduring impact of the plan will be its destruction of the health and stability of America's political system. Ultimately, Californians won't prosper if their country is suffering.

Enactment of the interstate compact would immediately undermine one great benefit of the current process: The Electoral College typically grants certainty regarding the name of our next President. It produces quick and undisputed outcomes on Election Day because the electoral vote results tend to magnify the margin of victory between candidates, even when popular vote totals are close. This system makes disputes, such as those that occurred in 2000, very unusual. On those rare occasions when they do occur, the Electoral College isolates any contests or voting problems to one or a handful of states. The country is given an easily identifiable and limited set of questions to resolve before moving on to declare one candidate the victor.

In an age of terrorism, the importance of definite election outcomes cannot be emphasized enough. The nation needs to know the name of its Commander-in-Chief.

A second benefit would soon be lost as well: The Electoral College, combined with the winner-take-all method of electoral vote allocation, encourages compromise and moderation in American politics. Presidential candidates cannot win elections unless they campaign broadly. They must work to build coalitions across lines that might otherwise divide the electorate. Direct popular election systems encourage the opposite scenario: These elections tend to result in multi-party races, a deeply fractured populace, and the persistent possibility that an extremist candidate could win with a small plurality. Worse, the increased number of candidates lowers individual popular vote totals. The decreasing margins of victory between candidates lead to more recounts and election contests.

Perhaps those in solidly red or blue states feel doomed to a world in which they will never matter. But no state is permanently "safe" or "swing." Even the stalwart Democratic state of California voted Republican as recently as 1988. Texas, it will be remembered, was once a safe state for Democrats. Historically speaking, the identity of safe and swing states fluctuates because the incentives created by the Electoral College discourage stark lines between red and blue America. The process instead encourages us to work together, understand each other, and moderate our views where appropriate.

Such a system is healthy for Americans and, thus, for residents of its biggest states. Schwarzenegger does not need to choose between serving his country and his state. Vetoing the bill that has been presented to him will benefit both.