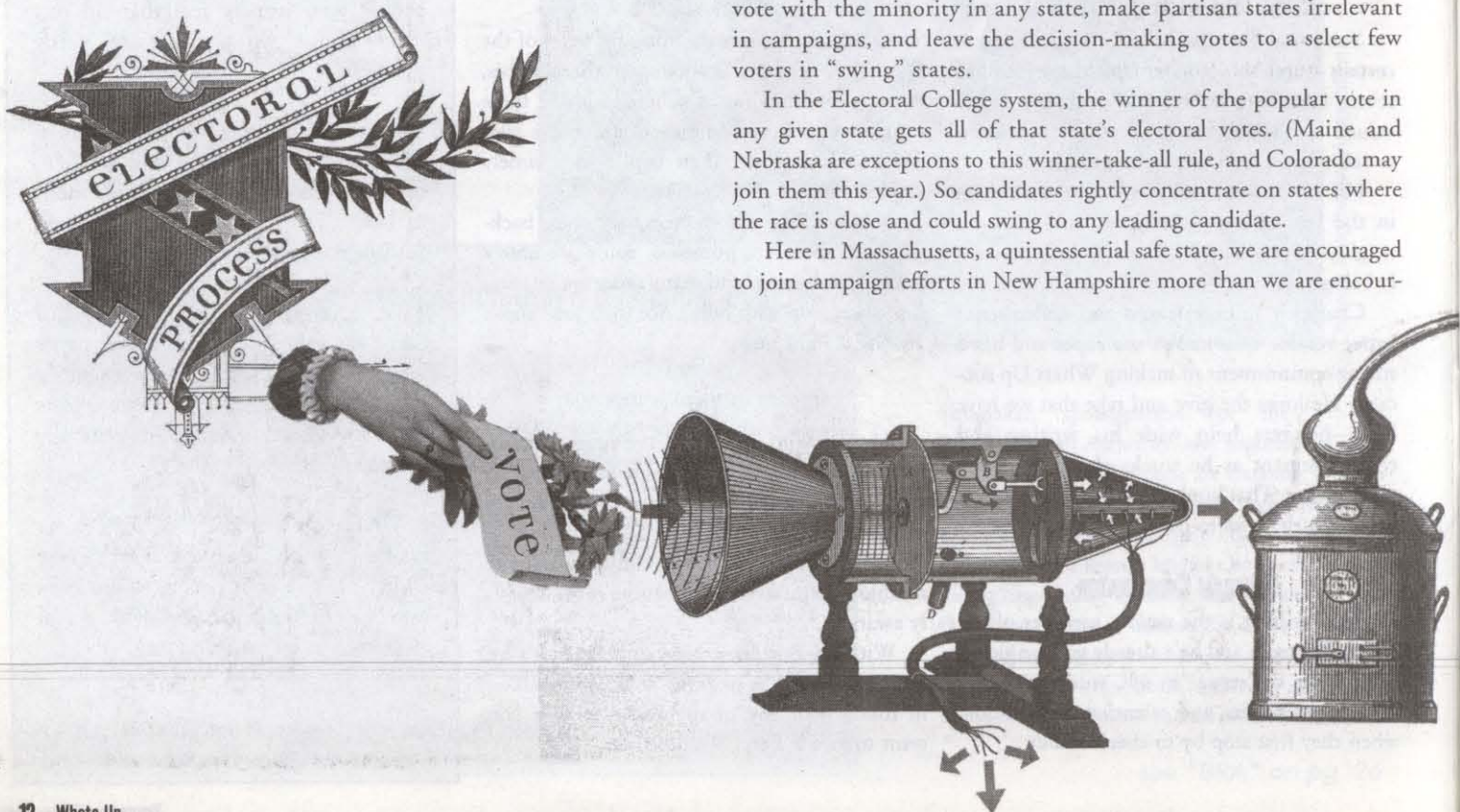


Be Counted

Since the passage of the U.S. Constitution in 1789, our government has been an experiment in democracy. The last four years notwithstanding, the experiment has been largely successful: The government generally caters to the desires of the people, as evidenced, for example, by politicians' obsessions with opinion polls on the issues. However, shortcomings are readily apparent, and they're not that hard to fix. These largely simple changes would provide us with a government more exactly "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

by Seth Baum

Illustrations by Jacy Edelman



Modernize the Voting System: Strange, isn't it, that conservative Republicans have been fighting to get the ultra-liberal Ralph Nader on the ballot across the country, while liberal Democrats have been fighting to keep him off? In our voting system, Nader's presence on the ballot can hurt the not-as-liberal Democrat John Kerry and thus help the ultra-conservative George Bush. But the system hurts Nader and other long shot candidates the most, because their supporters will often vote instead for an electable, lesser-of-two-evils candidate.

There are, however, other systems that enable voters to vote their true preferences without risk of throwing the election to a least-favorite. There are several possible systems, but the most straightforward is the instant run-off.

Remember your election last year for Boston City Councilor? Remember that there were actually two of them? The first, in September, narrowed the field of candidates. Those who placed highest moved on to the November election. This gives voters a chance to vote again if their favorite doesn't make it. That's a run-off. In an instant run-off, that process happens . . . instantly. Voters rank their choices, and if their first choice doesn't carry a majority, their vote is cast for their second choice, and so on until someone actually receives more than half the votes.

If this system were in place in 2000, many votes for Ralph Nader would have automatically been cast for Al Gore. The implications of this are wide-ranging and inspiring. Imagine a system where third parties heighten the debate instead of spoiling the election, where fearless voters might actually elect someone "unelectable." We can have that if we demand instant run-off voting now.

Abolish the Electoral College: In 2000 (as in 1824, 1876, and 1888) a candidate for president received the most total votes but lost the Electoral College and thus the election. The original reasoning behind it is complex, but the underlying one is that the founding fathers didn't trust backwater hicks to vote in an educated way. The practical effect of this is to disenfranchise those who vote with the minority in any state, make partisan states irrelevant in campaigns, and leave the decision-making votes to a select few voters in "swing" states.

In the Electoral College system, the winner of the popular vote in any given state gets all of that state's electoral votes. (Maine and Nebraska are exceptions to this winner-take-all rule, and Colorado may join them this year.) So candidates rightly concentrate on states where the race is close and could swing to any leading candidate.

Here in Massachusetts, a quintessential safe state, we are encouraged to join campaign efforts in New Hampshire more than we are encour-

aged to vote ourselves.

Some argue that a direct popular vote is unfair to small states, since candidates would rarely campaign in them. But a popular vote isn't unfair to small states; it's just not biased in favor of them. Every American should have equal say in who the president is.

Proportional Representation in the Senate: The Senate's system of equal representation to each state instead of to each person was established in the Connecticut Compromise of 1787 during the writing of the Constitution. Officially, it was a check against domination by residents of large states. Today, the system only serves to create unequal representation between Americans living in different-sized states. On the most extreme ends, Wyoming has 246,891 people per senator, whereas California has 16,935,824, so each Wyoming resident gets 68 times more representation in the Senate than a Californian. In fact, California has more people than the 21 least populous states combined, yet each of these states has as many senators as California.

Equal representation absolutely does not mean large states dominate the government. Consider, for example, Texas and California, the two largest states. They are very different from each other politically and are more likely to ally with smaller, like-minded states than with each other.

We need to replace equality between the states with equality between the people. There are at least two good ways of redesigning the Senate, each of which can keep it at 100 members with six-year terms. One is to simply district the Senate, just as the House is now, only with larger districts. Another is to use party-list proportional representation. In this system, political parties nationwide get a number of Senate seats proportional to the number of votes they get. Although voters could lose influence over the choice of specific candidates, this system helps supporters of smaller parties get some representation and enables citizens to keep the same representatives as they move around the country.

Nonpartisan Redistricting: "Is this heaven?" Kevin Costner asked a supernatural Shoeless Joe Jackson in *Field of Dreams*. "No, it's Iowa," supernatural Shoeless Joe replied.

Indeed, when it comes to redistricting, the two are easily confused:

Iowa is the nation's only state that conducts its redistricting through a non-partisan panel. Their criteria are, in decreasing order of importance, "population equality, contiguity, unity of counties and cities, and compactness." And would you look at those districts! Not only are they all in simple shapes, but they also often produce competitive races.

Compare that to Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, or Texas, three states among many that in the last few years have drawn scandalously partisan district lines. In Massachusetts, the infamous ex-Speaker Tom Finneran led a redistricting effort that diluted the power of minority voters. In Pennsylvania and Texas, state Republicans led efforts to maximize the number of Republican seats. In Texas, Democratic state legislators actually fled to Oklahoma to avoid being forced to vote on the scheme, and Republican House Majority Leader Tom Delay tried getting the Department of Homeland Security to bring them back. The redistricting eventually occurred, and now as many as five Democratic congressmen from Texas may lose their seats this year.

This kind of redistricting generally protects incumbents and leads to fewer competitive races by creating highly partisan districts, which in turn puts more extremists in power. It also typically dilutes the power of

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