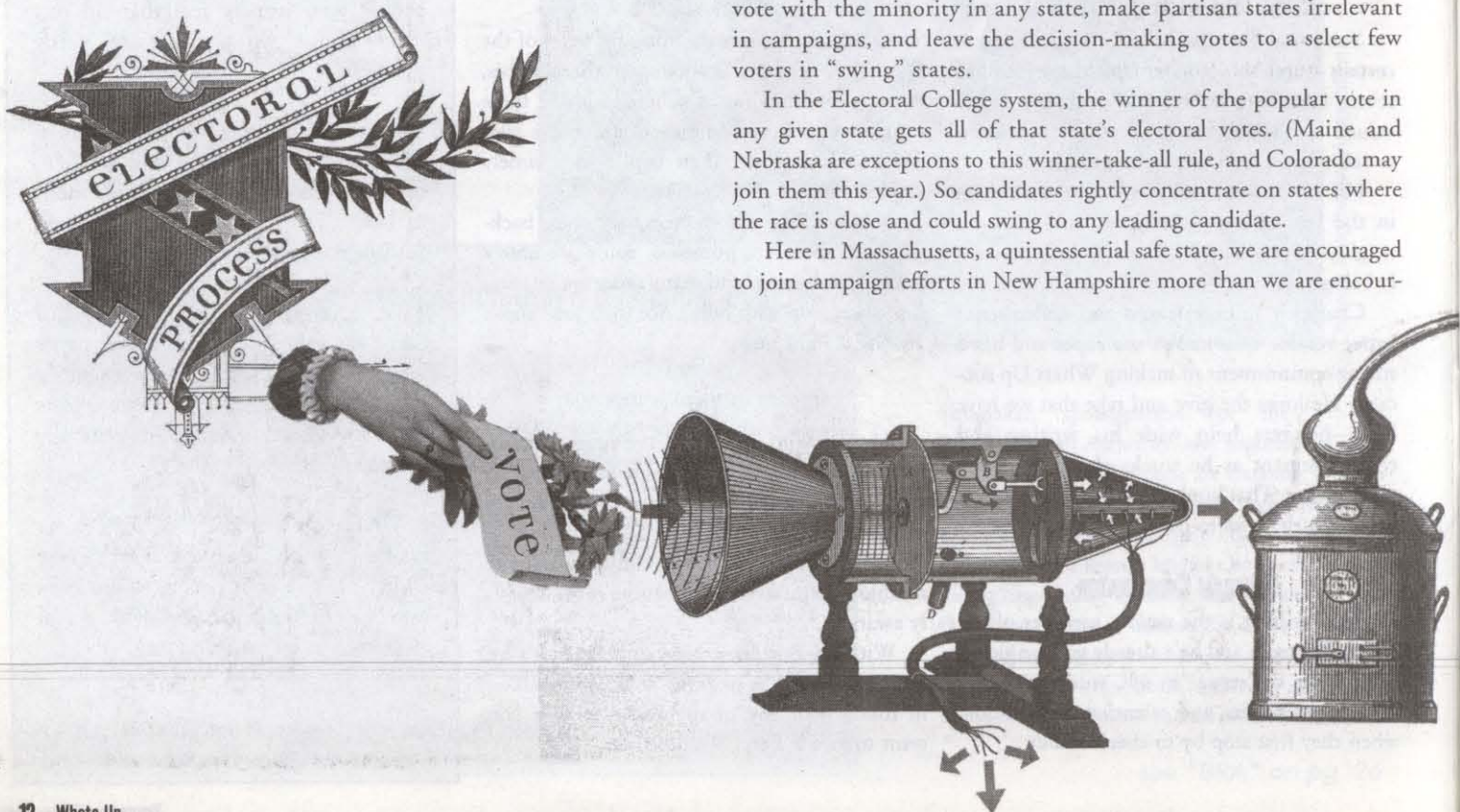


Be Counted

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.

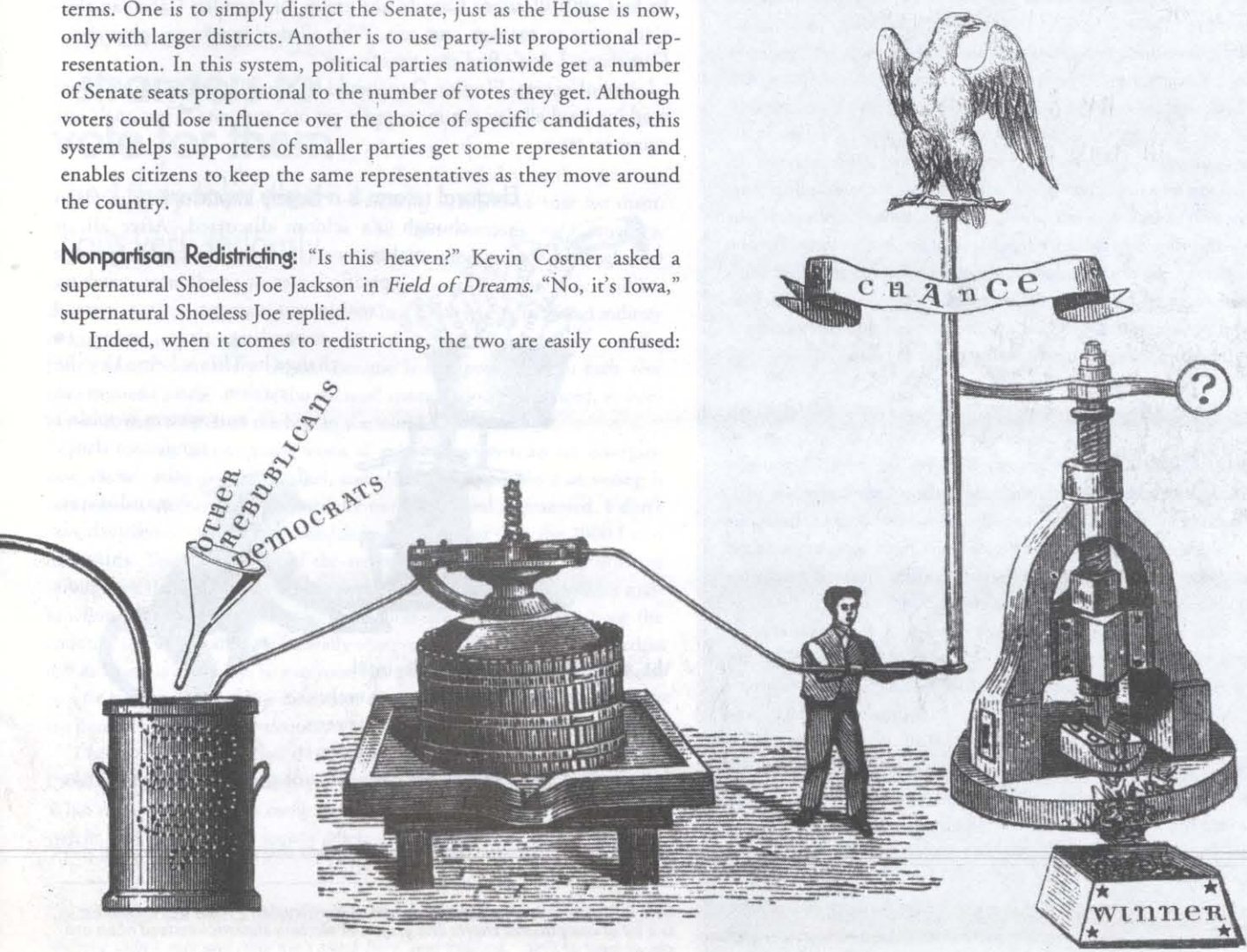
Indeed, when it comes to redistricting, the two are easily confused:

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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Recommended Viewing

Bob Roberts is a 1992 mockumentary starring Tim Robbins (who also wrote and directed) as the conservative folk-singing candidate in the 1990 Pennsylvania senatorial race. Roberts is a self-made millionaire who serenades yuppie fans with lyrics like, "Some people must have / Some people have not / And they complain and complain and complain."

The U.S. is about to invade Iraq for the first time and pictures of George H.W. Bush and American flags subtly play into the background. Roberts's opponent is the older liberal senatorial incumbent who speaks of the "enemy of the month club," in which dictators of small countries are made into monsters in order to justify the military budget. "What's this latest one's name?" he asks. "Saddam something."

This film is a parody of the way things were 14 years ago, but unfortunately, you will be left with the eerie feeling that not much has changed.

— Monica Canfield-Lenfest

Primary Colors the novel is *Newsweek* columnist Joe Klein's account of his rookie days following Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign. Klein witnessed the campaign staff's acrobatic dodging of the governor's various affairs, lies, and other shortcomings, and turned it into a fine novel. Mike Nichols turned that into a fine film that is required viewing for anyone who would like to maintain their faith in American democracy while pulling the wool away from their eyes.

The characters are all thinly-veiled versions of real-life players in the '92 election. When young Henry Burton joins the campaign because they need an idealistic black man to display to the press, he becomes our naïve point-of-view character. It's truly heartbreaking to watch Henry and the others put out brush fires and question themselves whenever Jack Stanton (the Clinton character) screws-up. But it's truly inspiring when Henry finds Jack alone in a coffee shop one rainy night talking to the soda jerk about his personal struggles, with no cameras around to capture the moment.

Primary Colors makes a strong case for the value of sincere yet deeply flawed leaders, and it's a riveting story, to boot.

— Jesse Post

Man With a Plan is the story of Fred Tuttle, a 73-year-old Vermont farmer who runs for congress for the money to fix his barn. He runs against the six-term incumbent who has received both parties' nominations. With the slogan, "Why Not Fred Tuttle?" he campaigns around the state, going door-to-door and kissing babies at state fairs. The people, ready for a change, couldn't think of a reason not to vote for him.

The film was a huge success in Vermont. A few years later, a Massachusetts businessman who had a summer home in the state decided to run against Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy. In response, Tuttle announced his candidacy for the Republican senatorial nomination against the "carpet bagger." Somewhere along the line, real live Vermonters agreed with their fictional counterparts in the film and voted for him. After winning the nomination, Tuttle encouraged his fans to vote for Sen. Leahy, since he'd been doing a mighty fine job down in Washington that Fred wouldn't really know how to do.

— Monica Canfield-Lenfest

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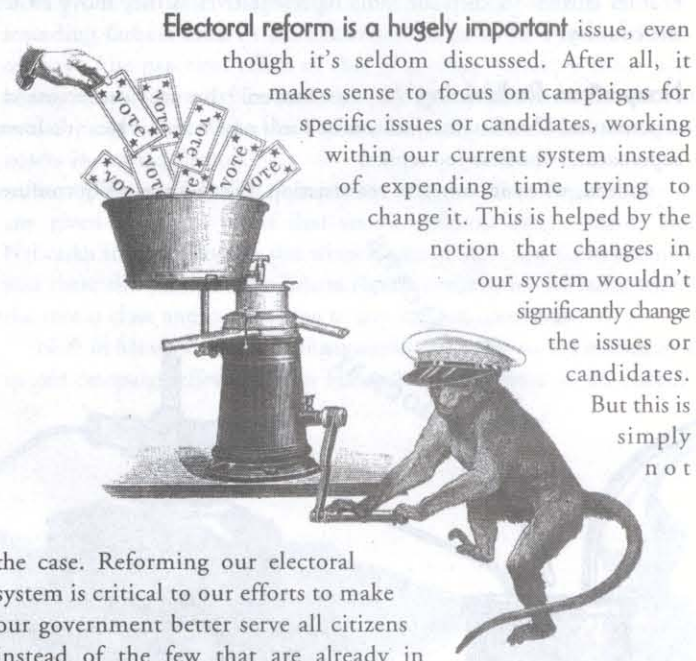
certain groups; minorities are often the target. Nonpartisan redistricting, such as is done in Iowa, is the key to making elections matter again.

Federal Nonpartisan Election Conducting: It's complicated enough that each state has its own standard for how to conduct elections. But there are often multiple standards within each state, leading to considerable confusion and opportunity for fraudulent activities. Many states use highly suspect touch-screen voting systems which many computer scientists say are easily hackable, and they don't leave a paper trail for manual recounts. I like the optical scanner systems we have here in Boston. They cost a bit more, but they're well worth it.

Each state also has its own standard for details such as when voters can register, whether felons or ex-felons can vote, and who can vote early or absentee. And in many states, partisan election officials tweak the rules to enable more of certain votes and fewer of others from being counted. For example, in Ohio this year, Kenneth Blackwell, the Republican Secretary of State, tried blocking new voter registrations if they came in on the wrong type of paper, knowing full well that Democrats had registered far more new voters than Republicans.

Countries whose elections are conducted by independent, nonpartisan bodies largely avoid these problems. It's been joked that we would be best off if Elections Canada, the group that handles Canadian elections, were to manage ours too. With all due respect to jokes about Canadians, I don't find that very funny.

And of course, Election Day should be a national holiday, so those working hard all day can more easily get out and vote. That one's just common sense.



the case. Reforming our electoral system is critical to our efforts to make our government better serve all citizens instead of the few that are already in power. And those people are certainly not going to change the system for us. **WU**

Nic Albert contributed to this story.

Seth is pursuing an engineering degree at Northeastern. What this means for us is a lot of complicated charts and graphs of election statistics instead of an article, at least at first.