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Electoral System Offers Winner Mandate to Govern

IMAGINE this scenario: Bill Clinton wins 43.3 percent of the vote to George Bush's 42.7 percent, with Ross Perot gaining only 13.5 percent.

Not only does no one win an absolute popular majority, but the two front runners are virtually tied.

These are the exact results produced by the 1968 election when Richard Nixon squeaked past Hubert Humphrey. Although George Wallace, the third candidate, carried five states and took 46 electoral votes, Nixon still won a solid majority (56 percent) of the electoral vote and claimed a clear mandate to govern.

Our electoral vote system must be distinguished from the electoral college, in which faceless party electors cast their state's votes after the popular election. I don't defend the anachronistic college as an institution, but the electoral vote system has served us well.

Since the United States has been conducting mass popular elections for president, we have experienced only one election that failed to identify a winner quickly and decisively, in 1876 when Democrat Samuel Tilden won 51 percent of the popular vote, but Republican Rutherford Hayes became president.

The United States is the largest country that selects its leader by nationwide vote and the only country that has done so for over 150 years. Few citizens realize how difficult it is to ensure millions of votes are fairly counted. Indeed, due to mistakes — whether accidental or intentional — all national elections produce results that are

really estimates rather than true counts of the exact vote distribution. Why then didn't Nixon or Humphrey demand a recount in 1968?

It was due to the system of electoral votes, in which presidential votes are counted separately by states, and the candidate who carries the state gets all its electoral votes. Even if the election is very close in a state, there is no point in demanding a recount unless the state's votes are critical to the electoral vote outcome.

Admittedly, election of the president by states according to electoral vote is not as simple as popular election. But the method has the advantage of having decisively elected our presidents while manufacturing a majority electoral vote to bolster their authority to govern.

Those who would replace our system with a direct popular vote should contemplate the political skulduggery likely to ensue in a nationwide recount after a close election. Those who would replace the winner-take-all system for state electoral votes with an apportionment of electoral votes by congressional districts (as in Maine and Nebraska) should understand that this change would encourage political entrepreneurs who could trade their support for political favors.

Indeed, we do not have the best presidential election system in democratic theory, but we may have the best in governmental practice.

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