



## Committee of Seventy

Clean and effective government. Fair elections. Informed citizens.

### **“IN THE KNOW:” EVERYTHING YOU NEVER KNEW YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT HOW PA ELECTS THE PRESIDENT**

More Americans voted for Al Gore for President in 2000, but George W. Bush won the election.

Chances are you remember this. But you may forget why.

It has to do with something that’s been around for about 225 years – the Electoral College.

If some legislators in Harrisburg have their way, there will be major changes to how Pennsylvania casts its Electoral College votes for President of the United States.

Pennsylvania is usually very important when it comes to presidential elections. An Electoral College reform proposal has been introduced in the state Senate. If it passes the Senate, then the state House, and is signed by Governor Corbett, it could actually determine who wins the White House.

As we write this, there has been a public hearing in a Senate committee but no further action has been taken. Proponents will need to act soon though if they want the changes in place for the 2012 presidential election.

The non-partisan Committee of Seventy hasn’t taken a position on this issue. We are using this **“IN THE KNOW”** to help you better understand the pros and cons of changing the state’s Electoral College process. You can expect more installments as the debate plays itself out. We hope you find this first edition a good start.

- October 21, 2011

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#### **First, what is this Electoral College? Does it ever play in March Madness?**

The Electoral College is not an actual “college.” It refers to a group of people selected from each state to elect the President of the United States. In the Bush-Gore example, the candidate who won the majority of Electoral College votes (Bush) became the president – although the other candidate (that would be Gore) won a majority of the popular vote.

#### **Wait a minute, I thought the president is elected by the voters.**

Voters do elect the president, but not directly. After everyone votes, a group of “electors” from each state meets to cast electoral votes for president. When you vote for president, you’re actually voting for that candidate’s slate of electors. Some want to change this to a direct popular vote system – more on that in a moment.

#### **Who picks these electors?**

It’s not the same in every state. But in most states, electors are nominated by their political parties. In Pennsylvania, electors are chosen by the presidential campaigns themselves.

#### **How many electoral votes does Pennsylvania have?**

This number is based on population, so it can change every ten years when the U.S. Census figures are



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released. The bigger the state, the more electoral votes it has. In 2000, Pennsylvania had 21 electoral votes. After the 2010 Census, it went down to 20. The total electoral votes for all 50 states are 538.

## **Sounds pretty complicated to me. What's the point?**

It's to make sure that elections aren't totally dominated by the biggest states – either because the candidates come from those states (and will win the home vote) or will only campaign there because that's where the most votes are. So each state gets the number of electoral votes equal to the number of seats it has in the U.S. House of Representatives (which can change according to whether the population went up or down after each Census). But in order to give smaller states a boost, each state also gets the number of electoral votes equal to the number of seats it has in the U.S. Senate. Since every state (regardless of size) has two U.S. Senators, these last two electoral votes are permanent.

## **What does any of this have to do with a college?**

Nothing really. The term dates back to the Roman Empire when “college” described a group of people who make formal decisions. By the mid-1800s, federal election law started referring to a “college of electors.” Today, most people just call our system of electing presidents “The Electoral College.”

## **How long have we had this system?**

Since the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1787.

## **That's a long time. Why change it now?**

State Senator Dominic Pileggi, who also happens to be the Senate's Majority Leader, thinks Pennsylvania's Electoral College system isn't fair to all of the state's voters.

## **How does the Electoral College work in Pennsylvania?**

Pennsylvania has what's called a “winner-take-all” system. The presidential candidate who receives the majority of votes across Pennsylvania wins all 20 electoral votes.

## **What would Pileggi's plan do?**

Pileggi's plan – which is called the Congressional District Plan (CDP) – breaks votes down by Congressional district. A presidential candidate would receive one electoral vote for each Congressional district where that candidate won the popular vote. On top of that, the candidate who receives the majority of the popular vote statewide would get two extra electoral votes.

## **What's good about the CDP?**

CDP advocates say that the winner-take-all process doesn't give any credit to people who vote for the losing candidate. In addition, cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with lots of voters can overwhelm smaller towns across the state. This ends up discouraging people from voting. Pileggi says that changing to the CDP would more accurately reflect the real wishes of Pennsylvanians and keep elections relevant here.

## **Give me an example of how this would play out.**

Let's take the 2008 presidential election. Barack Obama won the popular vote statewide, so in Pennsylvania's winner-take-all system, he received all then-21 electoral votes and John McCain got none. If the CDP had been in place, here's what would have happened: Since Obama won 9 Congressional



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districts and McCain won 10, Obama would have received 11 electoral votes (9 for each district he won plus 2 more for winning the statewide vote) and McCain would have received 10.

## **Doesn't my vote count the same under either system?**

That depends how you look at it. In the state's current winner-take-all system, your vote in favor of the candidate who wins the statewide vote will be represented by all of the state's 20 electoral votes. Under the CDP, your vote will be represented by one electoral vote when you vote with the majority in your district, regardless of how the rest of the state votes. So one way you can be a little fish in a big pond (with 20 electoral votes), the other a big fish in a little pond (with one electoral vote).

## **And if my candidate loses?**

Then you are a fish out of water. If you vote for the losing candidate in the winner-take-all-system or the CDP, your vote will be represented by zero electoral votes.

## **Pennsylvania is just one state. Can one state impact the election for the whole country?**

Remember 2000? Florida's winner-take-all Electoral College system put Bush over the top, even though Gore won the national popular vote.

## **Now I get it. Was 2000 the first time the Electoral College trumped the national vote?**

No, it's happened two other times: In 1876 (Rutherford B. Hayes over Samuel Tilden) and 1888 (Benjamin Harrison over Grover Cleveland). In 1824, Andrew Jackson won more votes nationally and in the Electoral College, but not a majority of either, so the election had to be decided by the U.S. House of Representatives. The House chose Jackson's opponent, John Quincy Adams.

## **Shouldn't every state have the same Electoral College system?**

People who oppose Pileggi's CDP idea argue that dividing electoral votes in Pennsylvania, where presidential races tend to be close, wouldn't be fair unless all of the states changed their Electoral College systems. They believe that treating Pennsylvania differently would lower its status in national elections since candidates would instead focus their campaigns on the winner-take-all states. More voters would stay home too.

## **Why doesn't every state have the same system then?**

Because the U.S. Constitution allows every state to do it their own way. Most states (48) have a winner-take-all plan, but two states -- Maine (since 1969) and Nebraska (since 1991) -- have a CDP.

## **Why not just let the candidate who wins the national vote become president -- without all this Electoral College stuff?**

Some people agree with this. There's another bill in the Pennsylvania legislature to adopt the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which would give electoral votes in every state to the candidate who wins the national popular vote. (This wouldn't do away with the Electoral College. That would require changing the U.S. Constitution.)

## **Has any other state adopted the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact?**

Yes, eight states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont and Washington, plus the District of Columbia. That's a total of 132 electoral votes out of 538. But the



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Compact won't take effect until enough states join so that the total reaches 270 electoral votes. (Until then, these states will stick with their winner-take-all systems.)

### I'm not sure how I feel about all of this.

You're not alone. Pennsylvanians are mixed. According to a recent Quinnipiac University poll, 52% of Pennsylvania voters prefer to keep winner-take-all over 40% for the CDP.

### So what's going to happen?

It's hard to predict. Not everyone likes Pileggi's plan. Since voters in most Pennsylvania Congressional districts tend to vote Republican, most Democrats think the CDP is all about making it easier for Republicans to get elected. Even some GOPers, including the Republican National Committee Chairman, have some concerns. They worry that the CDP would push Democratic candidates to campaign more in the smaller areas of the state – which could eat into their Republican base.

### Now what?

Pileggi wants the CDP in place for the 2012 presidential election. A first hearing was held in a state Senate Committee on October 4<sup>th</sup>. As we said earlier, to become law, the proposal has to be passed by the state Senate, then the state House and then signed by the Governor. Stay tuned for more from Seventy on this developing issue.

*We hope this helps you understand more about the Pennsylvania Electoral College. If you have any questions, or have thoughts about other topics for our IN THE KNOW series, please contact us at [futureofthecity@seventy.org](mailto:futureofthecity@seventy.org)*