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HOW PHILLY WORKS Can the GOP Take PA in 2016?

No Republican presidential candidate has won Pennsylvania's popular vote since George Bush – Sr., that is. Which also means that no Republican has received any of the state's 20 electoral votes.

But a powerful Chester County state Senator is pushing a new plan to radically change this.

We're thinking about the Electoral College because, today in Pennsylvania and in every state in the country (plus in the District of Columbia), Electoral Colleges are getting together to officially cast votes for President and Vice President of the United States.

The meeting is purely ceremonial, of course, since the outcome of the 2012 presidential election was decided on November 6. But it's a process that's been around since the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1787.

Some say it's about time to overhaul the Electoral College. And are hoping Pennsylvania, whose electoral votes are a big prize for presidential contenders, will lead the way.

The non-partisan Committee of Seventy hasn't taken a position on this issue yet. You can make up your own mind as this edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** helps you understand how Pennsylvania's Electoral College meeting in 2016 could look very different than today's.

- December 17, 2012

What is the Electoral College?

The Electoral College is not an actual "college." It refers to a group of people (called electors) who are selected from each state (and from the District of Columbia) to elect the President and Vice President of the United States.

Don't I elect the President and VP?

You do, but not directly. When you vote for president, you're actually voting for that candidate's slate of electors. Each state's electors actually cast the official vote for President and VP.

Who picks these electors?

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

How many electoral votes are there?

The total electoral votes for all 50 states (including three for the District of Columbia) are 538. 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 every ten years according to Census figures on whether the population went up or down. The more populous the state, the more electoral votes it has. In order to give smaller states a boost, each state also gets the number of electoral votes equal to the number of



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seats it has in the U.S. Senate. Since every state (regardless of any Census changes) has two U.S. Senators, these last two electoral votes are permanent.

How many electoral votes does Pennsylvania have?

In 2000, Pennsylvania had 21 electoral votes. After the 2010 Census, it went down to 20.

How will does Pennsylvania cast its electoral votes?

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. Obama beat Romney by 2,990,274 to 2,680,433. So, when the formal voting takes place today, Obama will get all of Pennsylvania's 20 electoral votes.

Do other states have a "winner-take-all" system too?

All but two: Maine and Nebraska. As a result of winning the popular vote in 26 states (plus D.C.), Obama will come out on top in Electoral College votes too – 332 compared to 206 for Romney. (The magic number to win, as you heard over and over this fall, is 270 electoral votes.)

Can a candidate win the Electoral College vote and lose the popular vote?

Yes, Remember 2000? George Bush (we mean Jr. this time) won the majority of Electoral College votes even though his opponent, Al Gore, won the national popular vote. It's only happened twice before: 1876 and 1824.

If the Electoral College system has worked for 225 years, why change it now?

State Senator Dominic Pileggi, a Chester County Republican who is the Senate's Majority Leader, thinks Pennsylvania's Electoral College system isn't fair to the 2,680,433 Pennsylvania voters who wanted to send Mitt Romney to the White House.

This rings a bell. Didn't Pileggi wanted to change PA's Electoral College system before the election?

Good memory. He did, in 2011. But it was criticized even by people within the GOP and didn't go anywhere.

What did that plan say?

That plan would have broken down Pennsylvania's electoral votes by Congressional district. A presidential candidate would receive one electoral vote for each Congressional district in which the candidate won the popular vote. On top of that, the candidate who received the majority of the statewide popular vote would get two extra electoral votes. (Maine and Nebraska already allocate electoral votes this way.)

If that plan had been in place this year, how would PA's electoral votes have been divided?

Instead of 20, Obama would have gotten seven of the state's Electoral College votes. Romney would have gotten 13 instead of zero.

Seems pretty good for the GOP. Why would any Republican oppose it?

Some worried (and remember Pileggi's plan was introduced before the 2012 election) that tying electoral votes to the outcome in Congressional districts would motivate Democratic candidates to campaign more in the smaller areas of the state – and eat into their Republican base. Actually, after the GOP posted big



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wins in the 2010 midterm elections, many Republicans were willing to take their chances with a “winner-take-all” system in 2012.

Suppose all states adopted Pileggi’s 2011 plan, would Romney be heading to Washington?

Yes, so says one bean counter (Think Progress): “Indeed, if the [Congressional District plan] had been law in several key Republican-controlled states that President Obama won...America would now be looking at a very different future. Assuming that Mitt Romney won every congressional district that elected a Republican House candidate in these key states, [that plan] would have given Romney 17 electoral votes in Florida, 9 in Michigan, 12 in Ohio, 13 in Pennsylvania, 8 in Virginia, and 5 in Wisconsin — for a total of 64 additional electoral votes. Add those 64 votes to the 206 votes Romney won...and it adds up to exactly 270 — the amount he needed to win the White House.”

Now that the election is over, Pileggi is obviously giving his plan another shot.

Yes, in the sense that the plan he intends to introduce this year also does away with Pennsylvania’s “winner-take-all” system. But his 2012 proposal takes a different approach. This time, Pileggi wants to award electoral votes according to the percentage of the statewide popular vote won by each candidate. The candidate with the majority of the popular vote would then get two extra electoral votes.

If Pileggi’s new plan had been in place this year, how would PA’s electoral votes be divided?

Instead of 20, Obama would get 12 electoral votes: two for winning the statewide popular vote and 10 (of the remaining 18) for capturing 52.1 percent of the popular vote. Romney, who won 46.7 percent of the statewide popular vote, would get eight electoral votes.

Pileggi’s 2012 plan is not as favorable to the GOP as his 2011 plan, but it would still help.

It would, but Pileggi says his 2012 plan has nothing to do with partisan politics. He believes it’s only fair to give a voice to Pennsylvanians who vote for the losing candidate. Pileggi also believes that getting rid of the “winner-take-all” system will encourage presidential candidates to campaign here – not abandon the state because they think one candidate has all 20 electoral votes sewn up.

Suppose all states adopted Pileggi’s 2012 plan, would Romney be heading to Washington?

Let’s hear it from another bean counter (Bloomberg News): “If all states had used Pileggi’s [2012] method, the final outcome November 6 wouldn’t have changed, though it would’ve narrowed Obama’s margin of victory...The president would’ve won 281 electoral votes compared to Romney’s 256.” (Remember Obama won 332 to 206.)

I assume Democrats like Pileggi’s 2012 plan better than his 2011 plan?

It’s all relative. First of all, the “winner-take-all” system has been good to the Democrats. Why fix it? But it’s true that Pileggi’s new proposal dilutes opponents’ argument that his 2011 Congressional district proposal would give huge sway to districts “misshaped” by highly partisan redistricting by the party in charge (in PA’s case, the GOP). But state Democrats who have already spoken out say Pileggi’s 2012 plan still reflects thinly-veiled Republican intentions to suppress the Democratic vote and ensure that large cities with heavy Democratic edges don’t dominate statewide elections (and the electoral votes).



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What about Pileggi's argument that his plan would make PA's elections more relevant?

Rather than draw more candidates to Pennsylvania, key Democrats predict Pileggi's plan would do the opposite: Treating Pennsylvania differently would lower its status in national elections since candidates would instead focus their campaigns on the "winner-take-all" states. If the candidates stay away from Pennsylvania, more voters will stay away from the polls, they say.

Are other states talking about changing their Electoral College systems?

There's some talk in Ohio about moving to a Congressional district plan like Pileggi proposed in 2011. As far as we know, Pileggi is the first to recommend a plan to allocate electoral votes based on percentages of the statewide popular vote.

Wouldn't it make sense for every state to have the same Electoral College system?

Terry Madonna, a professor at Franklin & Marshall College and a frequent PA pollster, thinks so. He says Pileggi's 2012 proposal is better than the current system. But he favors abolishing the Electoral College altogether (which requires amending the U.S. Constitution) and adopting a national solution.

Sounds reasonable to me. Do others agree?

Eight states – California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont and Washington, plus the District of Columbia – have adopted the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which would give the presidency to the candidate who wins the national popular vote. But the Compact won't take effect until enough states join so that the total reaches 270 electoral votes. (Until then, the eight states, plus D.C., will stick with their "winner-take-all" systems.)

What's next with Pileggi's plan?

Pileggi says he wants a robust debate on his Electoral College plan and intends to introduce it in early 2013. He clearly would like to stay as far away from the 2016 election (and the 2014 midterm elections) as possible.

We'll keep you posted on the status of Pileggi's Electoral College plan. In the meantime, if you have any questions, or have thoughts about other topics for our [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#) series, please contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org