Don't Knock The Electoral College

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Senator Hillary Clinton's first legislative proposal since her election was to call for the abolition of the Electoral College. It's no surprise that she will use her new celebrity status to advance a series of bad ideas, but this is one of the worst.
The Electoral College is one of the legacies of the inspired genius of our Founding Fathers. It was part of the great compromise which transformed us from a bunch of rival colonies into a constitutional republic.

This great compromise brought together the large states and the small by means of a national Congress, with one House based on population and the second House based on state sovereignty. The Electoral College is grounded in this same brilliant compromise: it allows all states, regardless of size, to be players in the process of electing our President.

The Electoral College induces presidential candidates to gear their time, money and policies toward the whole country, not merely toward the half dozen most populous states. If we had a popular-vote process, the temptation would be irresistible for presidential candidates to offer the moon wrapped in federal dollars to the handout hunters where big-city machines can pile up extra millions of votes.

The Electoral College is the vehicle that gives us a President who has achieved a majority in a functioning political process. It saves us from the fate of other nations that suffer from the complexities, uncertainties and agonies of coalition governments patched together when no candidate or party wins a majority.

The Electoral College is particularly fortuitous in circumstances of close elections because it saves us from the calamity of having to recount votes in all 50 states. If the election of Bush or Gore were dependent on the country's total popular vote, we would now be suffering demands for recounts and legal challenges in practically every state, including those states that carried big for one or the other candidate, as the parties try to scrape up an additional few hundred votes.

It would be very easy to make credible charges of election fraud in almost every state. Our voting procedures and mechanisms make frauds a scandal that has been waiting to burst into the open.

The old-fashioned way of stuffing the ballot box was ghost voting from the graves of those who are deceased or moved away but whose names were never removed from the voting rolls (a favorite practice in Cook County, Illinois, where Gore's campaign chairman Bill Daley grew up). Now there are so many other ways: voting by illegal aliens and by felons, busing in the mentally challenged from nursing homes, hauling persons to more than one voting place for multiple voting, giving away cigarettes to induce the unregistered homeless to vote, and keeping polling places open beyond the legal closing time.

Many recent "reforms" opened up other opportunities for fraud. These include same-day voter registration, motor voter registration, voting by mail, manipulation of absentee ballots, and reprogramming or fixing the counters on voting machines.

Al Gore has shown us that a candidate can demand a third count of Florida ballots, not because there was any election fraud or even machine malfunction, but just because the election was close and he didn't like the outcome of the first recount.

The Senate was engaged for months during 1975 in trying to resolve the disputed election for a New Hampshire Senate seat. After personally inspecting the ballots, the Senators were unable to agree on the winner and finally ordered a new election.

Because of third parties, a popular-vote process would make it very difficult for a candidate ever to receive 50 percent of the popular vote. We would always be saddled with minority presidents without an adequate basis of support for leadership.

In 1975 the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments approved a proposal to elect Presidents who get a plurality of at least 40 percent of the popular vote. But that poses all the same problems of recounts and legal challenges if a presidential candidate received 39.99 percent of the vote and would also contain a built-in incentive to encourage straw candidates to prevent an unwanted candidate from achieving the 40 percent.

Another advantage of our unique Electoral College is that, except as a last resort, it keeps the meddling fingers of Congress out of the election process. The Electoral College is the only function of our national government that is performed outside of Washington, D.C.

The President is elected by electors chosen in their states according to their own state election laws, who meet and cast their ballots in their own state capitals. No Senator, Representative, or other federal official is permitted to be an elector in the Electoral College.

Whereas other countries handle their succession of chief executives by revolution or angry mobs, the only street ruckus during our present dilemma has been a little pushing and shoving by Jesse Jackson's friends. The Electoral College has served us well for more than 200 years and there is every reason to believe it can continue to serve us for the next 200.