

[Cover Story](#)[Internet Exclusive](#)[Law Hall](#)[Faculty Profile](#)[Faculty/Staff News](#)[Digest](#)[Campus News](#)[Alumni News](#)[Letters](#)[Cornelliana](#)[Editor's View](#)[Feature Photo](#)[Contact Us](#)[Past Issues](#)[Class News Policy](#)

FALL 2000

Time to abolish Electoral College, set uniform elections standards

Craig W. Allin

2

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it" seems to summarize the attitude of most citizens about the electoral process in America. Alas, it is broke, and it has been for a very long time. The aftermath of Election 2000 should make the shortcomings of the present system apparent to all. While the present difficulties are sorted out in the courts, we should look to the future and craft an electoral system worthy of American democracy and consistent with the needs of the 21st century.

Such a system has two essential features. First, it must express the democratic will of all Americans through a process that counts all of us equally. That means a constitutional amendment abolishing the Electoral College. Second, it must be professionally managed so as to instill confidence that the will of the people has determined the outcome. That means passing a federal law setting uniform standards for the administration of all federal elections.

The Electoral College is an anachronism. It was written into the Constitution to assure that educated elites would select the president in an age when average voters had little opportunity to evaluate the candidates. It reflects the same spirit that called for U.S. senators to be selected by state legislatures. Since then, the Constitution has been amended to grant the right to vote to blacks, women and young people and to give the voters direct power to elect their senators. Property ownership has been abandoned as a qualification for voting and the poll tax has been abolished. The Supreme Court has made the principle of one person, one vote a constitutional requirement in virtually all elections except those for the Senate and the President.

The Electoral College regularly disenfranchises most Americans. In the recent contest only 16 states were considered to be "in play." In 34 states and the District of Columbia the message to voters was "there is no contest here." Instead of complaining about low voter turnout, we should abolish the system that tells most voters their votes don't count.

As Americans are now being reminded on a daily basis, the constitutional backup procedures are worse than the Electoral College itself. If no candidate achieves a majority in the Electoral College, the House of Representatives must chose among the three individuals getting the most electoral votes. In this process each state gets one vote, making Wyoming as powerful as California. Indeed, if California's 52 House seats were divided equally among Democrats and Republicans, California would get no vote at all. Such a procedure mocks the concept of one person, one vote, and

its use would undermine the legitimacy of the result.

American electoral administration is a national disgrace. Our elections are governed by a crazy quilt of state and local practices that vary from efficient and effective to corrupt or ridiculous. Our elections are supervised by elected state and local officials who are often able to exercise discretion for the benefit of their own party's candidates. Our elections are often conducted using archaic and unreliable technologies. As a nation, we have just spent \$5 billion on campaigning, but we are unwilling to invest in reliable technologies to count the votes.

Electoral reforms are long overdue. Ballots need to be regularized. Presidential candidates should be able to qualify nationally and to be on the ballot in every jurisdiction. The resulting ballots for national office should be uniform across the country for absentee and mail voters as well as for those who cast ballots at polling places. Ballot uniformity would reduce the partisan influence of local election officials.

Election Day should be the deadline for receipt of absentee and mail ballots, so that all ballots can be counted at once. And the process of marking and counting ballots should utilize the best available technology. The punch card ballots used in 26 Florida counties and elsewhere were bad technology when they were new. Modern optical scanning technology allows voters to mark clearly organized paper ballots that are less susceptible to machine miscount, easier to verify visually and less ambiguous.

Congress has ample authority to require these reforms for all federal elections. And a probable consequence of uniform federal requirements is that states would adopt them as well. It can't happen too soon.

Craig W. Allin, professor of political science, teaches electoral politics and constitutional law at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa.

<< SEARCH >>

CONTACT US

<< TURN THE PAGE >>