A Really Bad Idea
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We pose a hypothetical question. Suppose a certain state, long a political power in national politics, was beginning to lose some of its clout, as its population growth slowed. Once the second largest state in terms of electoral votes, it had recently fallen to fifth place with only 20 electoral votes, well behind electoral behemoths like California (55 votes), Texas (38 votes) and New York (29 votes).

Let’s further suppose this state had, nevertheless, managed to preserve some of its national power because of the manner in which it picks its presidential electors combined with that state’s competitive two-party system. In essence, this hypothetical state, despite a slow growth population, had become a perennial presidential battleground state. The state in recent decades had been furiously fought over because of its Electoral College votes, and perhaps even could decide the outcome of presidential elections.

Continuing the hypothetical, let’s say that state’s Republican legislative leadership and governor decided, nonetheless, to propose legislation that would end the state’s national power and electoral prominence by awarding electoral votes not “winner-take-all” as now but piecemeal by congressional district. Good-bye national battleground, hello national has-been!

Why would anyone do that? Why indeed! But that’s exactly what Pennsylvania’s Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi is proposing as we approach the 2012 presidential election. His plan would have electors chosen out of congressional districts (one per CD) with the remaining two going to the statewide winner. Worse, there is nothing hypothetical about it. Plainly put: Pileggi’s proposal threatens Pennsylvania’s continuing preeminence in national politics. Awarding electoral votes by congressional district is an old, if odd, idea that few other states have found attractive. In fact only Maine and Nebraska, both relatively small and rural, have adopted it in recent years.

Four major consequences are likely if Pennsylvania moves to a congressional district system for allocating electoral votes. None of them are auspicious for the Keystone State.

1. Loss of Pennsylvania’s coveted battleground status. Even though Democrats have won Pennsylvania in the last five presidential elections, the state remains competitive. In just the past three elections, the state’s battleground status has meant repeated visits by presidential candidates and their surrogates, making the state one of the most visited states by candidates. In 2012, the state’s 20 electoral votes are up for grabs, under the existing “winner take all” system. But Pileggi’s proposal to award electoral votes by congressional districts will stop that. The state’s electoral vote clout will be diluted, since most of the state’s CD’s are not competitive and presidential candidates will either write them off or take them for granted. Unavoidably Senator Pileggi’s proposal would significantly reduce the influence of the state in presidential elections.

2. Overall voting turnout will go down. While a handful of competitive districts will get attention, there will be no incentive to push overall turnout in the state. The two electoral votes that go to the statewide winner
won’t motivate candidates sufficiently to campaign statewide to win them. Moreover, there is no clear evidence, as some claim, that congressional districts electoral votes will increase turnout. While Maine’s turnout in 2008 was third highest in the nation, Nebraska was only 30th. The difference in turnout has far more to do with voter interest in the election as well as socio-economic and demographic factors than with the way electors are chosen. Urban turnout in particular is likely to decline in the absence of competitive statewide campaigning.

3. **Further balkanization of state politics.** Currently all but a handful of congressional districts are “safe” for one party or the other, encouraging the divisive trend to polarization of our politics. The Pileggi proposal would only accelerate this disturbing direction. Division, not diversity, will inevitably occur. Pete DeCoursey of Capitolwire has shown that Pennsylvania’s electoral vote in 2008 under the district plan would have gone 11 for Obama 10 for McCain. McCain’s ten would have come from his victory in 10 CD’s, Obama’s in nine plus two for winning the statewide vote.

4. **Little or no improvement in national politics.** The enormous political cost to Pennsylvania of a district plan is daunting. But if it produced a different or better national result, it might be at least understandable. But that is not the case. If the congressional district plan had been in place in Pennsylvania in recent presidential elections, it would not have affected the outcome of any presidential election. That’s because the Electoral College spread was large enough for the winning candidate to achieve the 270 needed without Pennsylvania’s votes. Even in 2000, a split electoral vote count in Pennsylvania would have only added to Bush’s five vote victory over Gore.

There is no doubt that the Electoral College is broken. But individual states tinkering with it as Pennsylvania threatens will only make it worse. Fixing the Electoral College is a national problem, and Congress needs to act decisively to do it. It’s time for Congress to pass an amendment to the Constitution to eliminate the Electoral College altogether and provide for the popular election of the president. A huge majority of Americans support that action. Until Congress acts, individual states are going to continue to flail ineffectually at the problem as Pennsylvania is now doing.

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