Let's Ask the Voters
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Currently there is legislation before the Pennsylvania General Assembly proposing to change the way the state awards its presidential electoral votes. Next year, all of Pennsylvania’s (20) votes would go to whomever wins the popular vote statewide. The proposed changes would alter that by awarding the state’s electoral votes within each of 18 congressional districts according to the presidential candidate that won the popular vote in that district. The remaining two electoral votes would go to the statewide popular vote winner.

Introduced by the majority leader of the senate, supported by the governor, and financed by a well-paid lobby, the proposal’s passage has considerable political clout behind it. Nevertheless, it has also become highly controversial.

It is controversial for several reasons. One is that it would diminish if not destroy Pennsylvania’s long running status as a “battleground” state. No longer would Republican and Democratic presidential candidates fight furiously for the state’s electoral votes since those votes would be split up among congressional districts. In effect the Keystone State would slide in electoral importance from a “must win” state to an “also ran” state—in the process slipping in importance to that of smaller competitive states like Iowa or New Mexico.

The other main reason the proposal has been controversial is the widespread perception it is politically motivated. Republicans have not won Pennsylvania over the past five presidential elections and many believe the current “winner-take-all” system favors the Democrats because they tend to draw huge majorities in Pennsylvania’s big cities. The GOP, it is charged, is trying to win the next presidential election by changing the rules.

But politically inspired or not, changing the system could still be a good idea. Change advocates point passionately to the several misfires that have occurred in the Electoral College including the 2000 election which awarded the presidency to the loser of the popular vote. They argue that a congressional district system makes another such traumatic experience less likely since the popular votes and electoral votes would probably be more highly correlated. Champions of change also believe a congressional district system would be fairer to voters that feel their vote doesn’t count in a winner-take-all system.

So on balance this is an issue that has two sides. Indeed those two sides have been vigorously making themselves heard—in formal hearings before the legislature and numerous op-ed pieces in the states press, as well as by a small army of lobbyists and political consultants busily engaged in espousing their positions on the issue.

In fact just about the only people left out of the ongoing debate are the people it affects most, those who will vote in next year’s presidential election. If changing how Pennsylvania allocates electoral votes is really motivated by a desire to make presidential elections more salient to voters, how can we leave those very voters out of that process of change?
Fortunately it’s not too late to bring voters into the conversation. And it’s something the legislature can do easily, inexpensively and quickly--by placing the issue before the voters in a non-binding referendum in next year’s spring primary. The reasons for doing so are compelling:

- The proposal itself, as noted, is controversial; viewed by some as little more than a cynical power grab by the Republican majority in the legislature. A full public discussion and vote would go far to legitimize the change if it happens.
- More than 8 million potential voters are affected by the proposal that, if approved, would mark a sharp break with the method Pennsylvania has used to select presidential electors for more than 200 years.
- There is plenty of time to place a referendum question before the voters in next year’s April primary. Slates of electors will not be filed with the Department of State until after the parties conclude their presidential nominating conventions in early September of next year. So now voters have ample time to weigh in on the question. There is no need to rush to judgment on this issue.
- Finally, this is a chance for the Pennsylvania legislature to regain some of its credibility. The infamous 2005 legislative pay hike followed more recently by the prosecutions of 25 lawmakers, ex-lawmakers and legislative staffers for public corruption has lowered public esteem for the institution to near record low job performance levels. By allowing voters to decide on the merits of the proposal, the legislature would take some badly needed steps to renew faith in it.

Deciding how Pennsylvania allocates its electoral votes is one of the most important political questions considered by the state legislature in decades. It is not an issue that should be resolved by Pennsylvania power brokers trying to resolve it doing business as usual--in this instance by insider maneuvering and mobilizing the weight of large Republican majorities in the legislature. A public referendum is the perfect antidote to that kind of behavior. Our legislators already know that. It’s time to let them know we know it too.

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