Suggested headline:

*Let them compete, with ideas, for all the votes*

With Labor Day in the rearview mirror, the sprint is on for the presidential campaign finish line.

So I write about a topic that is passionate for me, one I’ve opined on several times over the years.

Abolish the Electoral College.

For me, it comes down to arithmetic and an overriding yet simple principle. The highest official in the nation should be chosen by the majority of the people. The Electoral College process has the capacity to thwart that outcome and has, indeed, several times. It’s happening more frequently now.

Though the details and voting processes differed in America’s first two centuries, the minority candidate won the White House three times – Adams over Jackson, 1824; Hayes over Tilden, 1876; Harrison over Cleveland, 1888. This century it’s happened twice already. In 2000 Al Gore won the popular vote over George W. Bush but lost in the Electoral College. In 2016 Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College to Donald Trump.

The 2024 race demonstrates that the primary consideration for the two contending candidates is the Electoral College tally. Almost all attention is going to seven so-called battleground states: Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Nevada, Arizona and North Carolina.

That’s a virtual concession the other states don’t matter and are locked in for one candidate or the other. The only thing that counts is winning the right combination of states to reach 270 electoral votes. It’s also a tacit admission that Democrats almost certainly will win the most popular votes and Republicans, for good reason, will rely on the Electoral College strategy to win the White House. Democrats have won the popular vote in seven of the last eight races.

After writing that paragraph, I can hear critics claim I must favor Democrats. Not true, and I’ll reveal my presidential ballots to prove it. As an adult I have voted in 13 presidential elections. I voted Republican 77% of the time.

I’ll also acknowledge folks where I grew up may consider my views heretical. I’m a farm kid. Rural. More cows and dogs than people. The Electoral College gives small towns and rural areas an artificially louder voice than would be the case with a popular vote system. Places like Wyoming, the Dakotas, Vermont, Delaware, even Mississippi and Iowa would have a diminished voice. My rural roots from downstate Illinois recognize the consequences that go with a popular-vote system.

But the alternative – especially if modern trends hold and the gap, currently millions of votes, continues to grow between the majority winner and the Electoral College winner – is repugnant. Call it what it is becoming: Minority rule.

History also is worthy of consideration. Why is there an Electoral College? One reason is the Framers of the Constitution had a certain wariness about the people of the day, writ large, believing too many might be susceptible to manipulation by passions and prejudices. That’s always a possibility.

The Framers also didn’t expect political parties to become so dominant and so manipulative, perhaps a bit naively believing only men (yes, men) of high character and broad learning would be chosen to lead and would exercise authority with even-handedness and grace. America’s best and brightest totally whiffed on that one.

Then there’s the great stain. Slave-holding states believed the more populous free north would dominate nationally because slaves couldn’t vote. The Electoral College balanced that score among the states, partly through a compromise that counted each slave as three-fifths of a person. So enslaved people counted, sort of, as population but not as voters for apportioning Electoral College numbers.

The dictionary defines the word anachronism thus: “A thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists, especially a thing that is conspicuously old-fashioned.”

I submit the Electoral College is an anachronism.

For those who might argue there’s something blasphemous about advocating constitutional change – altering this all but sacred document – I’ll let America’s most intellectual president respond:

“I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and Constitutions. But laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”

So said Thomas Jefferson.

It’s time to jettison the Electoral College and let all the people decide who will be their president, by majority vote. It’s time for presidential candidates to compete for every voter’s support. It’s time for the marketplace of ideas – not partisan dominance – to take precedence and decide the winner. It’s time for persuasion to rule.

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