

Time to End the Electoral College

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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By overwhelming majorities, Americans would prefer to elect the president by direct popular vote, not filtered through the antiquated mechanism of the Electoral College. They understand, on a gut level, the basic fairness of awarding the nation's highest office on the same basis as every other elected office -- to the person who gets the most votes.

But for now, the presidency is still decided by 538 electors. And on Monday, despite much talk in recent weeks about urging those electors to block Donald Trump from the White House, a majority did as expected and cast their ballots for him -- a result Congress will ratify next month.

And so for the second time in 16 years, the candidate who lost the popular vote has won the presidency. Unlike 2000, it wasn't even close. Hillary Clinton beat Mr. Trump by more than 2.8 million votes, or 2.1 percent of the electorate. That's a wider margin than 10 winning candidates enjoyed and the biggest deficit for an incoming president since the 19th century.

Yes, Mr. Trump won under the rules, but the rules should change so that a presidential election reflects the will of Americans and promotes a more participatory democracy.

The Electoral College, which is written into the Constitution, is more than just a vestige of the founding era; it is a living symbol of America's original sin. When slavery was the law of the land, a direct popular vote would have disadvantaged the Southern states, with their large disenfranchised populations. Counting those men and women as three-fifths of a white person, as the Constitution originally did, gave the slave states more electoral votes.

Today the college, which allocates electors based on each state's representation in Congress, tips the scales in favor of smaller states; a Wyoming resident's vote counts 3.6 times as much as a Californian's. And because almost all states use a winner-take-all system, the election ends up being fought in just a dozen or so "battleground" states, leaving tens of millions of Americans on the sidelines. There is an elegant solution: The Constitution establishes the existence of electors, but leaves it up to states to tell them how to vote. Eleven states and the District of Columbia, representing 165 electoral votes, have already passed legislation to have their electors vote for the winner of the national popular vote. The agreement, known as the National Popular Vote interstate compact, would

take effect once states representing a majority of electoral votes, currently 270, signed on. This would ensure that the national popular-vote winner would become president.

Conservative opponents of a direct vote say it would give an unfair edge to large, heavily Democratic cities and states. But why should the votes of Americans in California or New York count for less than those in Idaho or Texas? A direct popular vote would treat all Americans equally, no matter where they live -- including, by the way, Republicans in San Francisco and Democrats in Corpus Christi, whose votes are currently worthless. The system as it now operates does a terrible job of representing the nation's demographic and geographic diversity. Almost 138 million Americans went to the polls this year, but Mr. Trump secured his Electoral College victory thanks to fewer than 80,000 votes across three states: Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

This page has opposed the Electoral College for at least 80 years, and it has regardless of the outcome of any given election. (In 2004, President George W. Bush won the popular vote by more than three million, but he could have lost the Electoral College with a switch of fewer than 60,000 votes in Ohio.)

Many Republicans have endorsed doing away with the Electoral College, including Mr. Trump himself, in 2012. Maybe that's why he keeps claiming falsely that he won the popular vote, or why more than half of Republicans now seem to believe he did. For most reasonable people, it's hard to understand why the loser of the popular vote should wind up running the country.