

# A Vote for the Electoral College

"The Electoral College and the Development of American Democracy" by Gary Glenn, in *Perspectives on Political Science* (Winter 2003), 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802.

Though campaigning for the next presidential election has already begun, it's not too late to clear up a few illusions left over from the last one. Contrary to what you may have heard, Al Gore did *not* win the popular vote in 2000. And the Electoral College, far from being a fiendish anachronism thwarting the popular will, is actually *more democratic* than any practical alternative.

Yes, when the Florida dust had settled, Gore had almost 51 million votes, and George W. Bush about a half million fewer. But that's the

*national* popular vote, and, constitutionally, there's no such thing, notes Glenn, a political scientist at Northern Illinois University. Under the Constitution, there are 51 separate elections, and the candidate who assembles enough popular-vote victories in them to get a majority of Electoral College votes is the winner. That's the *federal* method of counting popular votes, and it's akin to the way the winner of the World Series is determined—by winning four out of seven games, not by scoring the most total runs in seven games.

## EXCERPT

### *Invisible Footprints*

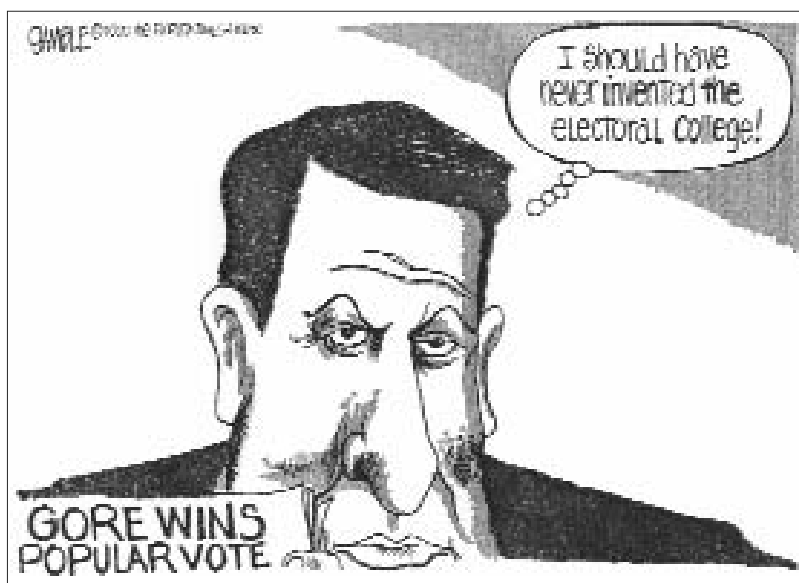
*Ironically, the effect of increased executive branch prosecutions, the Freedom of Information Act, and similar laws has often been the opposite of their intention. By forcing surrender of documents, they have often provoked presidents and those who serve them to commit less and less revealing information to paper. . . .*

*Some executive branch officials in recent years have invented subterfuges that, they hoped, would prevent their private words from being suddenly wrenched into public view. Some dictated reminiscences to private lawyers, hoping that they could be shielded, if ever necessary, by lawyer-client privilege. Others took notes in their own indecipherable hieroglyphics or asked friends or family to "interview" them about their job from time to time, with a tape recorder running. Still others rolled the dice and compiled journals at home, vowing that if ever asked under oath whether they kept a diary, they would say no, seeking dubious refuge in the intention to say, if the documents were ever discovered, that what they were writing were not diaries but "personal notes."*

*In recent administrations, high officials have sometimes bucked the system by inventing bizarre new classifications, instead of well-known ones like "SECRET" or "TOP SECRET," that the courts or Congress would not know to ask about. Some reserve their most sensitive (and often, ultimately, most important for history) communications for furtive notes exchanged outside the official system, which will stay out of official files and will never go to the National Archives. Top appointees sometimes brief their colleagues on important matters only after exacting a pledge that no notes be taken. Others write memos that deliberately falsify the record in case they are ever leaked or subpoenaed.*

*All of this is bad for executive decision making, which often depends on knowing exactly who did what and said what two weeks earlier. It is far worse for historians, who may be losing the basic sources that tell us what we most want to know about a presidency.*

—Michael Beschloss, a presidential historian, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (December 2002)



In the 2000 election, Al Gore won 50,999,897 popular votes against George W. Bush's 50,456,002, but the Electoral College vote went 271 to 266 in Bush's favor.

The Founders were not hostile to popular election of the president, Glenn says. But they feared that the concerns of small states would get short shrift if popular majorities could be formed chiefly from the populous states and big cities of the Northeast. They deliberately devised the Electoral College system to favor candidates "who made broad appeals to all parts of the country and across the inevitable small state–large state, rural–urban, and agricultural–commercial conflicts of interest," Glenn notes. Though the country is more urban now, the basic conflicts remain.

Even so, how can the existing system be more democratic? Because with a direct national popular vote, says Glenn, anyone with a sufficiently large following—including not only governors of large states but movie stars,

rock musicians, ethnic partisans, and assorted others—would be tempted to run. "The reason is that 15 percent, 30 percent, or even five percent might win." Many proposed schemes for reforming current practice provide for a runoff if no candidate gets at least 40 percent. But the existing system "already consistently gives us winners with more than that," Glenn points out, and runoffs, as France has shown, usually attract fewer voters because disappointed followers of excluded candidates stay home. By forcing serious candidates to assemble popular majorities in the states, he says, the Electoral College encourages—and usually produces—greater voter support behind the eventual winner. "This makes democracy more broadly representative, more consensual, and hence more governable."

#### FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### *Now, America the Imperial?*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

On one thing, at least, advocates and opponents of war in Iraq can agree: The conflict has momentous implications for America and its place in the world.

Michael Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center at Harvard University's Kennedy

School of Government, writing in *The New York Times Magazine* (Jan. 5, 2003), describes war in Iraq as "an imperial operation that would commit a reluctant republic to become the guarantor of peace, stability, democratization, and oil supplies in