

SNG-Nowlan-Feel left out of presidential election?-7-16/23-12

Feel left out of the presidential election?

By Jim Nowlan

The presidential campaigns have once again counted you and me in Illinois out of this year's election battle. At present only eight states are being targeted as toss-up or "battleground states," Iowa among our neighbors in that group, which is where all the action takes place.

We have been left out for several presidential campaign cycles now, but it doesn't have to be. We don't have to be taken for granted as a "blue" or Democratic state, where Republicans have no voice whatever.

First, some background. Illinois has been trending Democratic statewide for several decades now, as older, white, Republican-leaning residents have been leaving the state for the South and Southwest, replaced in large part by younger Democratic-leaning Hispanics.

Pollsters monitor each state's political complexion closely and assay our state as solidly Democratic, so why waste money and time campaigning here.

Only in the Quad-Cities on the Illinois-Iowa border are presidential campaign ads being seen in Illinois, but they aren't aimed at residents of the Prairie State.

We are not alone. The Deep South is solidly "red," or Republican, so no campaigning there either. Most of New England is blue, so ditto. Indeed, most of the country is left out of this election.

The reason is that all states with the exception of Nebraska and Maine have winner-take-all elections of a state's electors, who actually cast the ballots for president and vice president. This system was set up in 1787 by the writers of the U.S. Constitution, who thought esteemed

men would be selected as electors to vote for the best men for president. Then political parties developed and turned the election of electors into contests between parties, which nominated their own electors.

Each state has electors equal to the number of congressional districts plus two for the U.S. senators, so Illinois has 20 electoral votes. Whichever candidate wins the popular vote in a state receives all of the state's electors, and Illinois' have been conceded to Obama in advance.

The options to this are basically two: popular election of the president, that is, a pure vote of the people, in which every vote would count and candidates would have to campaign in a large state like Illinois, regardless of whether it was blue or red.

The second option is the "congressional district method," which Maine and Nebraska use, and which any state could adopt by statute (whereas the popular election method would take an amendment to the U.S. Constitution).

In the congressional district method, the presidential winner of each congressional district's popular vote receives one elector per congressional district won. The winner of the statewide vote receives the two electors allotted for the two senate seats in each state.

I don't favor the popular election for the following reason: American elections are often so close in the popular vote that recounts might be called for on a national basis. This could create chaos and throw our elections into national crisis. We saw how problematical the recount in the single state of Florida was in the Bush-Gore race of 2000.

The congressional district method, on the other hand, would still limit the total electoral votes to 538 and thus more likely provide a clear winner. In addition, presidential campaigns would be induced to develop strategies based upon individual congressional districts, several of which are competitive in Illinois.

The other change Illinois should make is to change how we redistrict our state and congressional legislative districts. If done by an independent commission, as in California, then more competitive congressional districts would likely be created in Illinois. This would be in contrast to our present partisan redistricting, where most districts are made safe for the majority party and, ironically, safe for the minority party districts as well, because the minority party districts are packed with their own voters to keep them from making other districts competitive.

This would require an amendment to the Illinois constitution, and efforts will be made to put the issue on the ballot before the next redistricting in 2021.

The present presidential election system disenfranchises most voters, certainly psychologically. Let us bring Illinois back into play.

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Note on the recent “protest” column: I received an email from a reader who excoriated me, correctly, for failing to identify the Tea Party as a highly successful present-day protest movement that has moved the U.S. House and Senate Republican caucuses significantly to the right. Sometimes you can’t see things that are staring you right in the face.