

California Republicans seek to rig 2008 presidential vote

Our reporter
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In a transparent effort to rig the outcome of the 2008 presidential election, the California Republican Party has launched a petition drive to place a referendum on the ballot in June 2008 that would split the state's huge bloc of electoral votes rather than awarding them based on the traditional winner-take-all formula.

Since Democratic candidates have carried California in the last four presidential elections, and are heavily favored to do so again in 2008, the goal of the ballot drive is to shift 20 or more of the state's 55 electoral votes to the losing Republican, making it more likely that in a close national vote a Republican who loses the popular vote could still win the Electoral College, as Bush did in 2000 after the Supreme Court awarded him Florida's electoral votes.

The ballot proposition was drafted by a Republican-backed group taking the name "Californians for Equal Representation," set up by Thomas Hiltachk, a lawyer who was involved in the 2003 recall petition that ousted Democrat Gray Davis and installed Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Sacramento statehouse. Hiltachk filed the language of the referendum with state attorney general Jerry Brown in late July and supporters have begun gathering the 454,000 signatures required to win a place on the June 3, 2008 ballot.

The plan would award one electoral vote to the winner of each congressional district and two additional votes to the statewide winner. Since 19 of the state's 53 congressmen are Republicans, a Republican presidential candidate in 2008 could win the electoral votes of most of those districts and a few held by conservative Democrats if the referendum is approved by voters next year.

If the proposed system had been in effect in 2004, President Bush would have gained 22 electoral votes in California and guaranteed his reelection even if he had

lost the closely contested state of Ohio, which provided his actual margin of victory in the Electoral College.

The ballot drive is a political dirty trick, not only in its content, but in its timing. The petition would force a vote in June 2008, the traditional presidential primary date in California, which was abandoned earlier this year when the legislature voted to move up the presidential vote to February 5. The result is that only local offices and statewide referenda will be on the ballot in June, making a low turnout very likely.

The ballot proposition is also deceptively marketed as an effort to ensure "election fairness." When given only this description, respondents to a recent poll in California supported the measure 43 percent to 31 percent. After an explanation that the effect would be to greatly increase the electoral votes available to the Republican presidential candidate, support dropped considerably.

In a further effort to "game" the result of the June 3 ballot, right-wing groups have launched other petition drives to place anti-abortion and anti-gay-marriage proposals on the ballot to drive up turnout among Christian fundamentalists.

According to the US Constitution, state governments may determine how their electoral votes are awarded. They may—although no state has done so in more than a century—even award the electoral votes by decision of the state legislature, without a popular vote. That is what the Republican-controlled Florida state legislature threatened to do in 2000 before the US Supreme Court stepped in to halt a recount that would have given the state to Democrat Al Gore.

Currently two small states, Nebraska and Maine, award their electoral votes district-by-district in the manner proposed in California. Because of the political homogeneity of the states, their electoral votes have

never actually been split, since the same candidate has prevailed in each district and statewide. Maine has only two congressional districts and Nebraska three.

The electoral college system is inherently undemocratic, not so much in its winner-take-all feature, as in the fact that small states have inordinate weight. Every state has electoral votes equal to its combined total of congressmen and senators. Since each state has two senators regardless of population, there are far more electoral votes per capita in Wyoming or Vermont than in California or Illinois.

The Republican campaign in California has nothing to do with making the electoral vote system more democratic. It is rather an effort to manipulate the outcome of the 2008 presidential election under conditions where the Republican Party is plunging in opinion polls.



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