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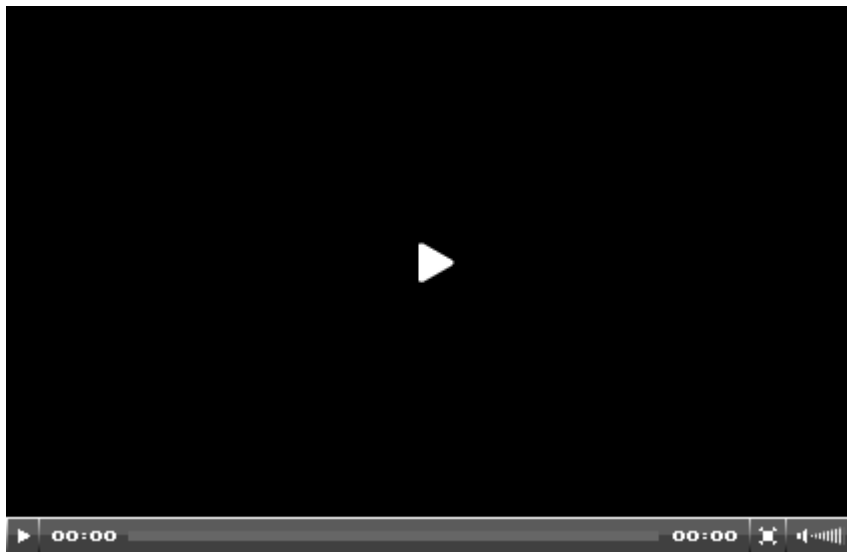
Debating N.P.V.

Posted by *Hendrik Hertzberg*

As promised in my live chat yesterday, more about N.P.V.!

The Cato Institute, the Vatican (or maybe the Saddleback Church) of corporate libertarianism, recently hosted a debate between John R. Koza, the Pope (or maybe the Martin Luther) of the National Popular Vote plan, and Tara Ross, the Virgin Mary (or maybe the Flying Nun) of the electoral-college status quo.

If you have the stomach for this sort of theological disputation, there are worse ways to spend eighty minutes than to watch and listen:



The most striking aspect of this debate is how extraordinarily feeble Ms. Ross's arguments sound. Watching the discussion unfold, I was tempted to suspect that the fix was in—that the Cato Institute had rigged the fight in Dr. Koza's favor. But that can't be right, because Cato *opposes* the National Popular Vote plan. It even sent the director of its "Center for Representative Government" to testify against it before a state legislature.

One is forced to conclude that the arguments sound feeble because they are feeble.

Two examples. Ms. Ross argues that N.P.V. would undermine the two-party system. She says that there would be "five, six, ten Presidential candidates in elections. There's no reason for there not to be." As a result, she says, we would end up with a President elected with fifteen per cent ("or it might be twenty per cent, or whatever") of the popular vote.

In reality, there is a very good “reason for there not to be.” The domination of two large, coalition-like parties is a function of the fact that there can be only one winner of a Presidential election. If it were remotely true that popular-vote elections cause parties to proliferate, then you would expect to find examples of this phenomenon. Since all fifty states elect their governors this way, there ought to be at least a couple that have, or have ever had, this problem. If the problem is a function of size—the larger the electorate, the more likely parties are to proliferate—you would expect to find such proliferation in, say, at least one of the four largest states, each of which is more populous than the entire country was in 1840. You find no such thing. It doesn’t happen in California (pop. thirty-seven million), it doesn’t happen in Wyoming (pop. half a million), and it wouldn’t happen in the United States of America (pop. three hundred million).

So that argument is merely untrue. A second argument—that N.P.V. would empower regional candidates—goes further: it is the exact opposite of the truth. Do I really need to explain why awarding a hundred per cent of a state’s electors to the plurality winner *in that state* favors candidates whose appeal is regional as opposed to national? “The George Wallaces of the world, which right now have basically no impact on national elections, would have a much larger voice,” she argues. No impact? In 1968, Wallace, whose appeal was regional, got 13.5 per cent of the popular vote and 46 electoral votes. In 1992, Ross Perot, whose appeal was national, got 18.9 per cent of the popular vote and zero electoral votes.

I could go on. And, no doubt, I will.

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