

# Sun Journal

## **Maine bill would allocate Maine electoral votes according to national vote**

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There's a push underway to have Maine join a movement aimed at undercutting the ability of the Electoral College to put someone in the White House who comes up short in the popular vote.

Legislators are eyeing a measure that would have Maine join with other states to guarantee that its electoral votes would be allocated to the person who wins the national vote rather than having them reflect only what happens at the Pine Tree State's polling places.

"This bill really helps to try to embody the principle of one person, one vote," said state Sen. Shenna Bellows, D-Manchester.

The proposal says that Maine will join the multi-state compact to go along with the popular vote winners as soon as states possessing a majority of the 538 electoral votes have agreed to go along with it. So far, 11 mostly Democratic-leaning states with 165 electoral votes have signed on.

Sen. Garrett Mason, R-Lisbon Falls, said he's concerned the change would cause presidential candidates to focus their attention only on big population centers such as Miami, Dallas and New York City.

The way it is now, he said, small states such as Maine can make a difference. He pointed out that last year "Maine really did matter."

"For God's sake, Donald Trump showed up in Lisbon, Maine," Mason said. "When little old Lisbon, Maine matters, that means the Electoral College matters."

But supporters of the national popular vote push said the existing system basically writes off most of the country to focus solely on swing states that either candidate might win. It also leaves voters in states with lopsided party affiliations out in the cold, they said, with their votes basically irrelevant because the majority always wins.

Shifting to a national focus, said state Rep. Craig Hickman, D-Winthrop, would flip the existing arrangement on its head and provide a boost to voter turnout everywhere since each vote would matter.

Even the man who benefitted most from the current system, Trump, favors putting the candidate with the most votes in the White House.

"I would rather see it, where you went with simple votes. You know, you get 100 million votes, and somebody else gets 90 million votes, and you win," Trump told "60 Minutes" in November. "There's a reason for doing this: because it brings all the states into play."

Trump won the electoral tally but lost the popular vote by 2.9 million votes to his unsuccessful Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. However, as Trump has pointed out, he wasn't trying to maximize his vote. His campaign focused on winning the necessary electoral votes, one reason he paid so much attention to Maine's 2nd District, where he picked up an elector.

Two of the last four presidents — George W. Bush and Trump, both Republicans — took office after losing the popular vote.

Still, Sen. David Miramant, D-Camden, said it's not a partisan issue because there have been five times in American history when the president lost the popular vote, two of them Democrats, two of them Republicans and one a Federalist.

Veteran journalist Douglas Rooks told a legislative panel that "each time this has happened, it has put democracy into the shadows and heightened mistrust about whether our system is truly representative."

The proposal secured the support of the state Senate in 2008, but never got any further. This year, though, backers hope to push Maine into the ranks of states that have adopted it, which include California, Illinois and three more in New England.

Rep. Sheldon Hanington, R-Lincoln, said he's concerned that lumping all the votes together will diminish the representation of smaller states and districts. "This is going to open up a whole can of worms," he said.

But Ann Luther of Trenton, treasurer of the League of Women Voters of Maine, said the civic group she represents has backed the abolition of the Electoral College since 1970 in part because it believes the existing system gives too much clout to small states.

"We don't see any reason why voters in Wyoming should count three times more than voters in California or New York," she said, a reflection of the distortion caused by every state getting at least three electoral votes no matter how small its population.

The relative weight in electoral terms of voters in small states is much higher than it is for voters in large states. [A study by the libertarian Cato Institute](#) determined that many small states would lose electoral importance, especially those that might be considered a battleground state.

The two states most apt to lose ground because they are both small and competitive in national elections are Maine and New Hampshire, with larger Midwestern states the biggest beneficiaries.

It isn't clear that the authors of the Constitution intended to give smaller states more clout in picking a president. They'd already ensured every state would have an equal say in the U.S. Senate, after all.

The Electoral College was a loosely considered addition meant less to distribute electoral power as to make sure voters in a big country with poor communications would pick somebody as president who deserved the office. It also bolstered the clout of states with many slaves, as Bates professor Christopher Petrella has argued.

"Since the Founders completed their work, this nation has become immensely more democratic in the way we are represented, and the way we vote," Rooks said. "Blacks have the right to vote. So do women. And 18-year-olds. There are no religious tests for office, no literacy tests or poll taxes. And there is no suggestion that we should disenfranchise any of these citizens now."

"Yet our presidential elections remain undemocratic. There is no polite way to say this," Rooks said.

Bellows said that national popular vote effort is based on the idea that nobody's vote should carry more weight than anyone else's. Anything else, she said, is contrary to the nation's ideals.

Mary Winchell of Camden said many Americans are "increasingly losing faith in the legitimacy, basically, in our national elections" because the top vote-getters don't always win.

The proposal under consideration by the Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs is "a practical solution" to the problem, she said.

Mason said he likes the system that Maine in Nebraska have, awarding the winner of each congressional district an elector and handing the two other electors to the candidate who gets the most votes within the state.

He said it ensures candidates will pay attention to places that aren't major media markets.

Fromuth said, though, that he is confident campaigns "will chase votes" in many locales if there's a close election. They won't just focus on big cities, he said.

Moreover, he said, they'll do things candidates never do now because a changed system would give such people as Democrats in Oklahoma and Republicans in New York a reason to head to the polls.

"Today, none of those people count," Fromuth said.

Proponents said every voter should matter if, as Rooks put, there's going to be "continued confidence in this country as the world's greatest democracy."