

CommonGround

POLITICAL NEWS & ANALYSIS

Electoral College under attack with new vigor

By **CHUCK RAASCH**, Gannett National Writer

January 25, 2012 4:28PM

WASHINGTON - Newt Gingrich did more than himself a favor by winning the South Carolina primary.

By extending the GOP nomination fight, he ended any chance that just about a million Americans - a fraction of the nation's population of 310 million - could have picked the Republican presidential nominee.

That scenario was possible if former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney had run the table through South Carolina and Florida, which holds its primary Tuesday. Challengers would have quit or seen donations dry up, turning primaries and caucuses from February to June into play-out-the-clock exercises.

Based on votes and John McCain's winning tally in Florida in the 2008 election, Romney could have accomplished all that with fewer votes than it takes to win some governorships.

Until Gingrich stopped him. And now, voters in states other than Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida will have their say.

This is important amid political polarization and renewed attacks on the Electoral College. Although there are reasons to keep a system of state-based electors to choose the president, unless you live in one of 16 "swing states" where a vast majority of presidential candidates' advertising and campaign visits will be concentrated, your vote this year will be craved less than those cast by swing-state voters.

Case in point: A day after his State of the Union message Tuesday, President Barack Obama embarked on a three-day tour of five of the 16 "battleground" states.

Against this backdrop, a group called National Popular Vote is taking a fresh run at making sure the candidate that gets the most votes becomes president.

Population shifts have made this debate over the fairness of the Electoral College more urgent in 2012. The 16 swing states represent less than 35 percent of the population and 185 of 538 electoral votes. Collectively, this sweet 16 lost two electoral votes after the 2010 Census. The battleground shrinks even as the population grows. It is also moving south and west.

Arizona and Nevada each gained a vote, and Florida, two. But Pennsylvania, Missouri, Michigan and Iowa each lost one, and Ohio two. Colorado, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Virginia and Wisconsin had no change.

In truth, that group of 16 could be much smaller by October, prompting campaigns to pull out of some states, as happened with McCain in Michigan in 2008. If there was any place the economic woes that wracked that election should have been discussed it was Michigan.

Again, 2012 bystander states will almost certainly include true-blue behemoths California and New York, and reliably red Texas. Come October, the poor folks of Ohio again will be tripping over candidates and turning off TVs, while their cousins in Alabama or Oregon watch from the cheap seats.

The argument for change is not a slam dunk, though. It took the founders a long time to come up with the Electoral College for many reasons.

Intent on restricting the power of Congress, founders didn't want it picking the president. There was suspicion of an all-powerful federal government controlling elections. They were wary that a direct vote would produce a hodgepodge of local celebrities dividing up the vote. Remember, this was long before mass media nationalized leaders and political parties were formed to weed them out.

National Popular Vote says those were different times. The effort is chaired by Tom Golisano, a businessman, philanthropist and three-time New York gubernatorial candidate. The group's plan would not require a constitutional amendment.

It wants states to pledge their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote irrespective of who wins their state. Nine jurisdictions, representing 132 electoral votes, have enacted legislation to do this: Vermont, Maryland, Washington, Illinois, New Jersey, Massachusetts, California, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. Presidents are technically chosen by electors from each state, apportioned by population, ranging from three in the smallest states to 55 in California. There are 538 electors, total. The National Popular Vote initiative's goal is to attract enough states to reach a majority of 270.

"Four times in our history the candidate with the least (total) votes won," Golisano said. ". . . It creates this phenomenon of battleground vs. flyover states."

Two-thirds of voters, he argues, "wake up on Wednesday morning (after the election) saying, 'Who won, and did my vote count?' "

Had the national popular vote compact been in place, the proponents say, we could have avoided the 2000 Florida recount that resulted in George W. Bush becoming president despite losing the popular vote. The popular vote winner also did not win the presidency in 1824, 1876 and 1888.

It is not a slam-dunk argument, though. Proponents of the status quo say the Electoral College's original intent of dispersing power is still constitutionally valid and politically desirable. The popular vote initiative "is another step toward eliminating the states as an important part of American politics," said John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Defenders of the status quo also say a popular vote election would produce a different set of swing areas, heavily tilted toward big cities. A Democrat, they say, would be tempted to campaign only in Democratic pockets, and vice versa, to maximize votes where they're popular, and downplay the tougher-to-get votes in split-allegiance areas reflective of the country's greater divisions.

And imagine this: A close national vote could trigger a nightmarish nationwide recount. Think Florida, 2000, multiplied by 50.