

Chris Pearson: Battleground status aside, it's time for Wisconsin to get behind a national popular vote - here's why

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Our system of electing the President of the United States is broken, and Wisconsin has the opportunity to help fix it by becoming the 17th jurisdiction to join the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact and reform the way America elects our presidents.

There is nothing partisan or complicated about it. States that combine for at least 270 electoral votes – enough to elect a president – simply agree to award those votes in a package to the candidate who wins the most popular votes across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The Compact, which is fully constitutional, doesn't do away with the Electoral College. It simply ensures that the Electoral College will always reflect the will of a majority of American voters. That doesn't always happen. Twice in this century, and five times in our nation's history, candidates have lost the popular vote while still winning the White House with 270 or more electoral votes.

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Today, we don't so much elect the President of the United States as we do the President of the Battleground States. In order to secure an electoral majority, campaigns pour the lion's share of their money and attention across a small handful

of purple states viewed as toss-ups, while voters in reliably red and reliably blue states are left watching from the sidelines.

Lately, Wisconsin has been on that elite battleground list – its ten electoral votes going to Donald Trump in 2016 by just 22,748 votes, or less than one percent. Not surprisingly, Badger State opponents of a national popular vote argue that Wisconsin's got a good thing going, with lots of candidate appearances, national media, and money spent on TV ads. Why, they ask, should we upset that lucrative apple cart with a new system that would compel candidates to campaign across all 50 states, and draw attention – not to mention cash – away from Wisconsin?

Here are four good reasons:

Wisconsin TV needn't worry. There's plenty of campaign advertising cash available to spread across all 50 states.

According to the campaign finance watchdog OpenSecrets.org, the Trump and Clinton campaigns spent a combined, and astounding, \$2.4 billion in 2016, two thirds of it going to six battleground states. This concentration of attention and money leaves 70 percent of the country aside.

Battleground status is no sure thing.

Michigan 2008 is a good example of how battleground status can be as fleeting as a middle school crush. As former state GOP chairman (and now national popular vote supporter) Saul Anuzis often points out, every Michigan poll showed Senators Barack Obama and John McCain were running neck and neck early on. The candidates visited frequently and cash flowed into the state. But as soon as those same polls showed Obama as a sure winner, both campaigns pulled up stakes and headed for Ohio. Michigan's membership in the battleground club disappeared in a flash. The same could happen in Wisconsin.

The current "winner-take-all" system of allocating electoral votes effectively disenfranchises anyone who doesn't vote for Wisconsin's popular vote winner.

In Wisconsin, Hillary Clinton received 1,382,536 votes in 2016, compared to 1,405,284 votes for Donald Trump. But under the winner-take-all system, Trump received all ten of Wisconsin's electoral votes. So the nearly 1.4 million Wisconsinites who voted for Clinton might just as well have stayed home. Their

votes had exactly zero effect on the national outcome. Under a national popular vote, every single individual vote counts, because the candidate who gets the most individual votes across all 50 states and the District of Columbia is always awarded 270 electoral votes and the presidency.

A National Popular Vote would ensure against voter fraud swinging a presidential election to the wrong candidate.

Under a National Popular Vote, it would be virtually impossible to tamper with the hundreds of thousands, or more likely the millions of votes that would be required to fraudulently elect a president.

Not so under the current system. Today, a handful of fraudulent votes could easily swing a razor-close presidential election one way or another. Changing a few hundred votes in Florida in 2000 would have swung the state's 25 electoral votes, and the election, from Bush to Gore. Changing a few thousand votes in just a state or two in 2004 could have given the presidency to John Kerry, even though George W. Bush scored a national popular vote victory of more than three million.

Here's the bottom line. It's time to ensure that every voter – in Wisconsin and across the nation – is politically relevant in every presidential election. Campaign reform though a national popular vote is a uniquely American idea whose time has come.

— Sen. Chris Pearson is a member of the Vermont State Legislature and a member of the Vermont Progressive Party. On April 22, 2011, Vermont became the 11th state to pass the National Popular Vote bill into law.