

Colorado initiative could alter way electoral votes are divided

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DENVER - Colorado voters have delivered the state for the Republican presidential candidate in every election in the last half century, except when Bill Clinton won by a whisker in 1992 and Lyndon B. Johnson swamped Barry Goldwater in 1964.

But if a ballot initiative called Amendment 36 is approved by the voters here on Election Day, the facade of unanimity will shatter, and in one stroke a new small state's worth of definitively Democratic Electoral College votes will be created in the heart of what has been the solidly Republican West.

Amendment 36 would make Colorado the first state to distribute its electoral votes on the basis of its popular vote. The change would take effect immediately with this year's election, which means that President Bush and Sen. John Kerry would share Colorado's nine electoral votes, but neither would get all.

Political experts say the implications for the election are deeply uncertain. A Rocky Mountain News/News 4 poll released Friday showed Bush and Kerry in a statistical dead heat here.

Bush received just under 51 percent here in 2000, which, under the proposal, would be good for five of the nine votes.

Could set a precedent

If Amendment 36 passes, it will essentially create a mini-state within a state. For example, if a majority of voters go for Bush, and the race is as close as polls suggest it is, Kerry would very likely collect four electoral votes, mostly among Democrats in the Denver-Boulder area. That equals the total electoral allotment for New Hampshire. If Kerry wins, Bush would most likely get four votes from the heavily Republican Denver suburbs and rural areas.

"If Colorado does in fact do this, it could set a dramatic and amazing precedent," said James G. Gimpel, a professor of government at the University of Maryland.

Republicans have led the effort to defeat the measure. But political analysts say that could shift toward Election Day if Kerry appears more likely to win here.

Turmoil of 2000 recalled

Supporters, who got the measure onto the ballot after collecting 134,000 signatures say that voters are ready to try something new and that simply mentioning the turmoil of the 2000 presidential election was enough to induce many people to sign.

Bush won Florida's 25 electoral votes, tipping the balance for his victory in 2000, even though he lost the popular vote nationally to Vice President Al Gore.

Although two states, Nebraska and Maine, allow each congressional district's voters to determine that district's electoral vote, neither state has ever split its votes as a result. Colorado's system would guarantee a split every time.

The backdrop for the issue is the ever-increasing polarization of the nation, a fact that many political experts say is exaggerated by the Electoral College, with its winner-take-all mechanism. The candidates this year are not competing at all in a majority of states - some large, like California; others small, like Idaho - because they think they cannot win there or they cannot lose there.

Colorado's proposal would make those calculations - who benefits, who competes, who gets wooed - intensely local.

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