

Memo of the Month



NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20546



REPLY TO
ATTN OF

MAR 7 1977

MEMORANDUM

TO: F/Assistant Administrator ^{3/6}
for Public Affairs


FROM: L/Associate Administrator
for External Affairs

SUBJECT: Space Shuttle

It has come to my attention that in some documents the Space Shuttle has been referred to as an "aircraft."

State laws prohibit land overflight of aircraft at supersonic speeds. Since the Shuttle will carry commercial cargo at some time, some persons at GAO believe that we cannot overflight land on entry. This would, of course, mean the Shuttle could not come down on the KSC Shuttle Strip.

Consequently, would you please make sure that our Public Affairs Offices involved refer to it as the "Shuttle" or "spacecraft" and never as "aircraft."


Herbert J. Rowe

What's Good About the Electoral College

by Paul M. Perkins

It's open season again on the Electoral College. Reformist politicians and editorial writers are dreaming up disastrous election outcomes that never happened and crying for its elimination. But before we rush toward abolishing the College, we should take a closer look at its reliability and at some of its overlooked benefits.

After the two elections of George Washington in 1789 and 1792, the College has never operated as originally intended (the electors were supposed to make their presidential choice independent of the voters); still, it has survived 48 elections and has produced 48 peaceful successions of government, a record that few modern nations can claim. There are good reasons why it has worked so well and why, if its function is kept in existence, it will continue to work.

The Electoral College works because it expresses the will of the people in a way that tends to widen the margin of the winner and thus defuse the disruptive potential of the transition of power.

This widening of the margin of victory happens because of the feature of the College that is most widely criticized: the winner in each state gets all the electoral votes of that state, no matter how small his majority there. Thus in all 38 elections since

1824 the winner has had a higher percentage of the electoral vote than of the popular vote. In 15 of those elections, he has turned a popular plurality of less than 50 per cent into a clear electoral majority. This weighted edge of the College has also turned razor-thin popular majorities into decisive electoral majorities. For 152 years, the Electoral College has kept the presidential election out of the House—fortunately, because a grossly unfair one-state-one-vote system is the rule there.

The presidential elections in the twentieth century clearly show the stabilizing effect of the College. Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and 1916, Harry Truman in 1948, John Kennedy in 1960, and Richard Nixon in 1968 were all elected with a plurality but less than a majority of the popular vote, but all got a decisive majority in the College. In 1960 Kennedy had 49.9 per cent of the popular vote to Nixon's 49.7 per cent; this was translated into 56.4 per cent of electoral vote for Kennedy. In 1968 Nixon's uncertain 43.4 per cent of the popular vote became a solid 55.9 per cent of the electoral vote.

If, by comparison, the electoral vote for each state had been cast in exact proportion to its popular vote, as reformers sometimes suggest, 40 per cent of the elections since 1824 would have been without a majority and gone to the House for resolution.

Paul M. Perkins is a senior judge on the Ohio common-pleas court.