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The Electoral College and voter participation rates: Reply

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In our paper on the impact of the Electoral College on voter participation rates (Cebula and Murphy, 1980), we argue on theoretical grounds that, in states where there is a dominant political party, the Electoral College system acts to reduce the voter participation rate; these arguments are strongly supported by the empirical evidence.

Professor Blair argues that our analysis '(... ignores the other side of the coin – the greatly magnified probability of influencing the national outcome accorded a voter in a very competitive state when the electoral vote is close.' In point of fact, however, we do to some extent address this issue in our theoretical discussion (see para. 2, p. 186), although not in our empirical analysis. In particular, we argue that, in states with relatively competitive political parties, the small differences in the political power structure will tend to result in a higher voter participation rate.

On the other hand, Professor Blair is justified in his criticism of our *conclusions*. We concluded that the Electoral College should be abolished because it reduces voter participation; however, in reality, such a net effect may not be observed in the *aggregate*.

Specifically, although clearly reducing voter participation rates in many states, the Electoral College may also raise the voter participation rate in other states. In terms of sheer statistics, the final *net* outcome *in the aggregate* is theoretically unknown. It is *a priori* conceivable that the aggregate voter participation rate may be lowered, unchanged, or even elevated due to the Electoral College system. As illustrated in our paper, however, the fact that 41 states are dominated by one party or the other implies that, in the aggregate, voter participation is most likely to decline.

Our basic conclusion should nevertheless be remolded. It should now emphasize that the Electoral College system unequivocally *distorts* the geographic pattern of voter participation, *artificially* raising the rate in some states and *artificially* lowering it in others. This permits an attack on the Electoral College on grounds that this *distortion* is not likely to yield *net* social benefits.

Given that the Electoral College induces a voter participation rate

reduction in some states and a presumed voter participation rate increase in others, and given the impropriety of inter personal utility comparisons, it is technically impossible to infer positive *net social benefits* of the Electoral College on voter participation in the aggregate; this is true even if the aggregate participation rate is increased (which certainly is only one possible outcome). In other words, although both gross costs and possible gross benefits can be identified, they cannot be compared in such a way as to generate a case that the Electoral College yields *net* benefits to society. The Electoral College system, pure and simple, *artificially* distorts behavior in a market where selected household preferences are to be expressed; although this distortion yields apparent benefits and costs, the existence of *net* benefits is not established.

In sum, since the Electoral College system artificially distorts geographic voter participation rate patterns, the case needs to be made why the system should be *retained*. Such a case may not be arguable ...

REFER ENCE

Cebula, R. J., and Murphy, D. R. (1980). The Electoral College and voter participation rates: An exploratory note. *Public Choice* 35(2): 185-190.