

Twice in 16 years, and for the fifth time since 1828, the winner of the popular vote for president has lost the election because their opponent received more electoral college votes. Amid the howls of ongoing protests against Donald Trump's election are calls to make the national popular vote decide the winner.

First, let's do some math, just for fun. Trump won the electoral college vote 306-232 (still unofficially), a 57-43 percent margin. But Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 789,724 votes (and still counting as of Nov. 15), a margin of .7 percent, according to CNN. Trump took 31 states to Clinton's 20 (including Washington, D.C.)

Of the 12 most populous states, with the most electoral college votes, Clinton won five states to Trump's seven, but she garnered over 4 million more votes in California and New York alone. Her popular vote victory in this "group of 12" was by a 53-47 percent margin, yet translated to electoral votes the tally is almost exactly reversed – Trump took 53.7 percent of those electoral votes to Clinton's 46.2 percent.

Clinton's popular vote victory is meaningless but serves as a consolation prize, said Richard Taskin, a North Adams lawyer and longtime political observer. As far as dispensing with the electoral college, "What would it accomplish?" Taskin posed. "It would reinforce our polarized politics, at the expense of small states."

The electoral college system was devised to prevent large urban populations from "stealing" the election, and to provide a voice for rural areas with far less people, thereby providing balance and stability nationwide. And this worked for Trump. He nearly swept the electoral votes in the South, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain states. However, if Clinton won the states she was "supposed" to win – Michigan, Pennsylvania and North Carolina – that would have given her 283 votes to Trump's 255.

But therein lies one problem, according to Samantha Pettey, a political science professor at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

"(One argument against) the electoral college process is that it creates a red/blue myth, that these states are solidly Democratic or Republican, when in actuality there is vast variation within the states," she said. For example, Texas, which Trump won by a 54.7-45.2 margin, is not as red as assumed. Another example is blue New Jersey, which Clinton won 56.8-43.2. While those margins may be considered a "landslide" in election terms, the tally reflects over 1.5 million votes for Trump in New Jersey, and in Texas, 3.8 million voted for Clinton. So are these votes "wasted?"

Pro-popular vote folks feel millions of votes don't matter, and the electoral college process discourages voter participation. Even Trump, who claimed the election was "rigged" up until he won, said on "60 Minutes" Sunday that he supports a national popular vote winner.

Supporters of the electoral college say it makes candidates pay attention to less populated and rural states. Really? Where did we see Clinton and Trump the last few months? In the usual places – decidedly swing states like Ohio and Florida, and new

swing states like Michigan and North Carolina (all states Clinton lost). New Hampshire and Pennsylvania were also graced by the candidates and their surrogates.

The National Popular Vote Inc. (nationalpopularvote.com), a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to instituting a popular vote system, is pushing for states to ratify the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which would require state electors to vote for the nationwide popular vote winner. According to NPV, states representing 165 electoral votes (Massachusetts is one) have passed this measure, but it will take a number of states representing the majority of electoral votes – 270 – to enact this law.

States which choose not to adopt the compact would retain the current winner-take-all system. Some “battleground” states are less likely to adopt the compact, said Pat Rosensteel, a senior consultant to NPV, but if a majority of states did, many more voters would become relevant.

“How much you win or lose a state becomes important, and it would encourage vigorous participation by voters,” Rosensteel said. “This would “right-size” some of the political influence certain states have.”

The compact would not require a federal constitutional amendment, according to Rosensteel, because the constitution already allows states to choose its voting methodology, and the electoral college process is still retained.

“I’m increasingly confident that we’ve experienced the last travesty of an election system (in 2016)” Rosentheil said.

Whether the compact is instituted in 2020, or if it ever is, remains to be seen. Both Taskin and Pettey think it is unlikely to happen.

So is there a compromise? What about Maine and Nebraska? These states award their electoral votes by Congressional district, and two of the votes are determined by the state’s popular vote. In Maine, Clinton beat Trump by a 2.7 percent margin, but Trump took one vote because he won one of Maine’s two Congressional districts. All five of Nebraska’s went to Trump, where he won by 26.3 percent.

In a state like Ohio, which Trump won at about a 54.5-45.5 margin, theoretically they could have split the electoral votes 10-8 or some ratio that reflected the tallies in the congressional districts. Or not. That would make the math even more fun, right?

A district-style vote wouldn’t help much, as battleground states would turn into battleground districts, and those areas would continue to be a proxy for political influence, according to Rosentheil.

Like it or not, we may be stuck with the electoral college process for quite some time.

“I don’t think the electoral college is perfect, but it is better than using a straight popular vote,” Pettey said.

In the meantime, let's remember that some candidates – like football coaches and poker players – do what they need to do to win. If you're stuck in a heads-up poker game and you have a lousy hand, the only way to win is to bluff. Like it or not, Trump's strategy worked.

Remember that this is still an election – not just a game of math.