

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Legislators ready to adopt popular vote

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PROVIDENCE — For better or worse, for more influence or maybe less, Rhode Island is just two votes away from joining a group of states that hope one day to elect presidents by popular vote.

The National Popular Vote bill, as it's known, whizzed through the Senate and narrowly passed in the House Thursday, making it all but certain that Rhode Island

will sign on to a controversial agreement that some see as a path to fairness and others view as an end-run around the Constitution.

To supporters, the thinking goes something like this: Presidential elections typically focus

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To make votes count

on a handful of battleground states, which draw the candidates and the attention while most states — those leaning for one candidate or the other — are ignored. In the process, voters in most states are made to feel as if their votes don't count.

In a way they don't count, say national popular vote supporters, because ultimately it's not the votes from the voters that elect the president, but those from the Electoral College in which all the states participate.

Their solution is to change the way states assign their Electoral College votes. By signing onto the National Popular Vote compact, a state agrees to assign its electoral votes to the candidate who wins the national popular vote, regardless of which candidate wins the statewide

vote.

The agreement takes effect once the states that have signed on represent a majority of the Electoral College votes — a total of 270 — which would give them enough to elect a president.

Rep. Edith H. Ajello, D-Providence, speaking on the House floor, said the bill would create a system where “every vote counts equally,” regardless of whether its cast in Rhode Island or California or anywhere else.

“Rhode Island voters and Americans across the country are clear, they want a popular vote for president,” she said.

“Let's pass this bill, let's set ourselves on the right side of history, as one of the states leading the charge for this important change.”

But there was much debate before the 41-to-31 vote — unusually close in a General Assembly where the House speaker and Senate president

typically hold sway over fellow party members. And opponents — Democrats and Republicans — offered more than a half-dozen arguments against passage, saying the compact would cause nightmare recount scenarios that engulf the entire country, reduce the influence of small states because their electoral votes carry more relative

weight than their populations and ignore the will of voters should the state favor a candidate who loses the national vote. They also said the compact would shift attention to large states and cause division should a

candidate win with support from just a small number of states.

“The framers of our Constitution, when they sat down, they said let's figure out a way to have a person be the president the United States, and they came up with the Electoral College,” said Rep. John

J. DeSimone, D-Providence. “The reason why they did that is because they wanted a person to represent all the various states, or at least the majority of the states. The popular vote doesn't do that. The popular vote will have fractions, it'll cause regionalization, it'll have large states getting together to try and win the presidency. But with the Electoral College they can't do that.”

The matching Senate bill, sponsored by Sen. Erin P. Lynch, D-Warwick, passed 30 to 4.

One of the bills must pass in both chambers before it can be sent to Governor Chafee for his signature. Chafee is on record as supporting the idea, which has passed in eight states and the District of Columbia, which represent 132 of the 270 electoral votes needed for the interstate agreement to take effect.

WITH REPORTS FROM STAFF
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