

A recent survey on voting for the President in the commonwealth (ii)



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

A Stanford Klapper poll released last month revealed that 79.4% of Puerto Rico's voters favor voting for the President of the U.S., while 82.9% of those who voted for the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) in the last election—presumably commonwealth voters—favor voting for the President. In my last column, I recounted the history of support for the Presidential vote by the PDP dating back to the stewardship of Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín and forward to my first term in office, which ended with the recommendation of an ad hoc committee appointed by President Nixon and myself. The matter went dormant when I lost the 1976 election and it has been brought back into the spotlight by the Stanford Klapper poll.

The poll also asked our voters how important U.S. citizenship was to them: 79.4% said it was very important, 13.2% said it was somewhat important, 3.2% said it was a little important, 2.9% said it was of no importance and 1.3% said they did not know. Among PDP voters, 76.4% said it was very important, 15.4% said it was somewhat important, 5.1% said it was a little important, 2.7% said it was of no importance and 0.4% said they did not know.

If we take their preference for the Presidential vote and the importance that they ascribe to U.S. citizenship, it is indisputable that PDP voters overwhelmingly favor permanent union with the U.S. under the commonwealth relationship. The other side of the coin is that the so-called *soberanistas* are merely a scant vocal minority befriended by weak leaders who lack the strength to position the party before public opinion according to the convictions of the vast majority of the *populares*.

Given the wide-ranging support for the Presidential vote, what should we do about it? Since it is part and parcel of statehood, the “statehooders” pursue it by pursuing statehood. Pursuing the vote under commonwealth is another matter, as I explained in my last column. We—the “commonwealthers”—fought Gov. Luis A. Ferré when he proposed it because he was not complying with the mandate of the 1967 plebiscite for the integral development of the commonwealth. There is no such mandate now. However, it would not be wise to pursue the Presidential vote in the same manner that it was pursued by Ferré or by the District of Columbia. The District of Columbia sought and obtained the Presidential vote through a constitutional amendment, which provided the vote specifically for that district.

Why should we not follow this route under commonwealth? Because the principal economic advantage of commonwealth is that under our compact with the United States, we are not subject to federal taxes. We have fiscal autonomy, which is key to the economic development of Puerto Rico. Amending the Constitution of the United States in order to provide that the commonwealth may send electors—see my last column as to the provisions of the U.S. Constitution regarding the selection of the President of the U.S.—to join the electors of the 50 states to select the President of the U.S. is a highly political decision that has to be made by two-thirds of the members of both houses of Congress and by three-fourths of the legislatures of the 50 states. I do not believe that we would be able to get these majorities if we insist on maintaining our rights under the compact of fiscal autonomy, which, again, is vital to our economic growth.

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But there is another way to the Presidential vote. Not through the legal-political structure of commonwealth as such, but rather by way of our U.S. citizenship. The Electoral College, which is composed of electors sent by the 50 states, is an antidemocratic mechanism embedded in the U.S. Constitution and ripe for abolition. Polls in the U.S. show vast majorities in favor of a constitutional amendment to do away with it. The idea is to grant the right to vote directly to



U.S. citizens wherever they may be.

This is the route that we should follow in Puerto Rico under commonwealth in order to pursue the Presidential vote. The Stanford Klapper poll shows that it would command overwhelming support from the voters of both major parties and there would be no need to amend our compact, providing for fiscal autonomy.

Repealing the Electoral College will not be an easy matter, but it has many more allies than would an amendment aimed at just the commonwealth. The main ally would be the American public, which favors such a repeal by overwhelming odds. Majorities in Congress have also supported it. But again, it must go through by a two-thirds majority in both houses and be ratified by three-fourths of the state legislatures.

The adversaries are senators and congressional representatives from the small states and the legislatures of these states. In these states (except for Nebraska and Maine), as in all states under the Electoral College, when a Presidential candidate wins a plurality of the popular vote he gets every single one of the votes allotted to the state in the Electoral College, regardless of the margin of victory. This provides significant power to the small states and to “*políticos*” in those states. They therefore oppose an amendment to do away with the Electoral College.

But this way of selecting the President skews the democratic process. Under the Electoral College, not every American's vote is equal. A vote in Florida is worth far more than a vote in Vermont; a vote in Ohio is worth far more than a vote in Wyoming. This leads Presidential campaigns to ignore states that are noncompetitive—Democratic or Republican—because there is no way the particular candidate can win the electoral votes of those states. The campaigns concentrate rather on the “swing states,” those where partisan margins are close enough to make a campaign effort worthwhile. If the Presidential candidates were elected through the popular vote, each vote cast would have the same weight and the candidates would have to position themselves more truly to the nation as a whole.

The arguments for a repeal of the Electoral College are stronger than those against it. Given the support for such an amendment in the American public, it is to be expected that at some point it will pass. This is the realistic way for the Presidential vote to come to Puerto Rico. ■

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