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An Elector's Notebook

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Editor's Invited Comment

An Elector's Notebook

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The next time that you conduct a discussion of American politics, try this device: ask your listeners how many of them voted for President in the last election. If they are a typical sample, half or more will raise their hands. And some will be surprised if you then remark that, in fact, none of them cast a Presidential ballot. What they cast, of course, was a ballot for several of the more unusual officers created by the Constitution: Presidential electors. Described in Article II, Section I of the 1787 document, and later modified in their duties by the 12th Amendment, the electors are a fascinating reminder of 18th century political thought. James Madison's *Notes*, and some later remarks in the ratifying conventions, suggest that the electors were designed to fill several needs. In part they were a nominating mechanism, prepared to offer candidates that the House of Representatives would choose among — at least after the retirement of the obvious first choice, Washington. In part they were a check upon the passions of the mob, free from the requirement to reflect the popular will, if that will proved mistaken. And in part the electors were a link to the civic republicanism of Europe, a reflection of America's respect for a commonwealth tradition with its stress upon checks, balances, and public diversity.

The College, of course, has seldom served the first of those functions. Only once has it failed to give any Presidential candidate a majority (in 1824) and only once has it failed to name a Vice-President (in 1836). It did, of course, once create a tie vote (in 1800, triggering the subsequent 12th Amendment), and it once faced a bitter battle over who were the lawful electors (in 1876). It has only once opposed the popular plurality, selecting the second highest vote-getter, (in 1888), although occasionally (as in 1972 and 1976) seeing individual electors vote for their personal preferences.

Indiana's electors are designated by the state party conventions, and are chosen to reflect the Constitutional formula: two at large, and one from each Congressional district. In practice, the choice is usually made by the state or district party chairmen as a recognition of political involvement and service.

My own district chairman added, when he named me to serve in 1984, that he wanted me — as a teacher — to experience and report the system.

Electors run at large, their names not even printed on the Indiana ballot since 1936, and the successful electoral ticket meets in the General Assembly chambers in Indianapolis in December to cast its votes. Our ticket attracted little personal media attention, although I did give half a dozen interviews during the fall. The one common question was: "Do you think the College should be abolished?" My answer was, "no", explaining that I saw in it a continuing affirmation of the 18th century spirit of balanced government which animated the Constitution. And, perhaps in that sense, the College has continued to fulfill its third function of reaffirming its republican heritage.