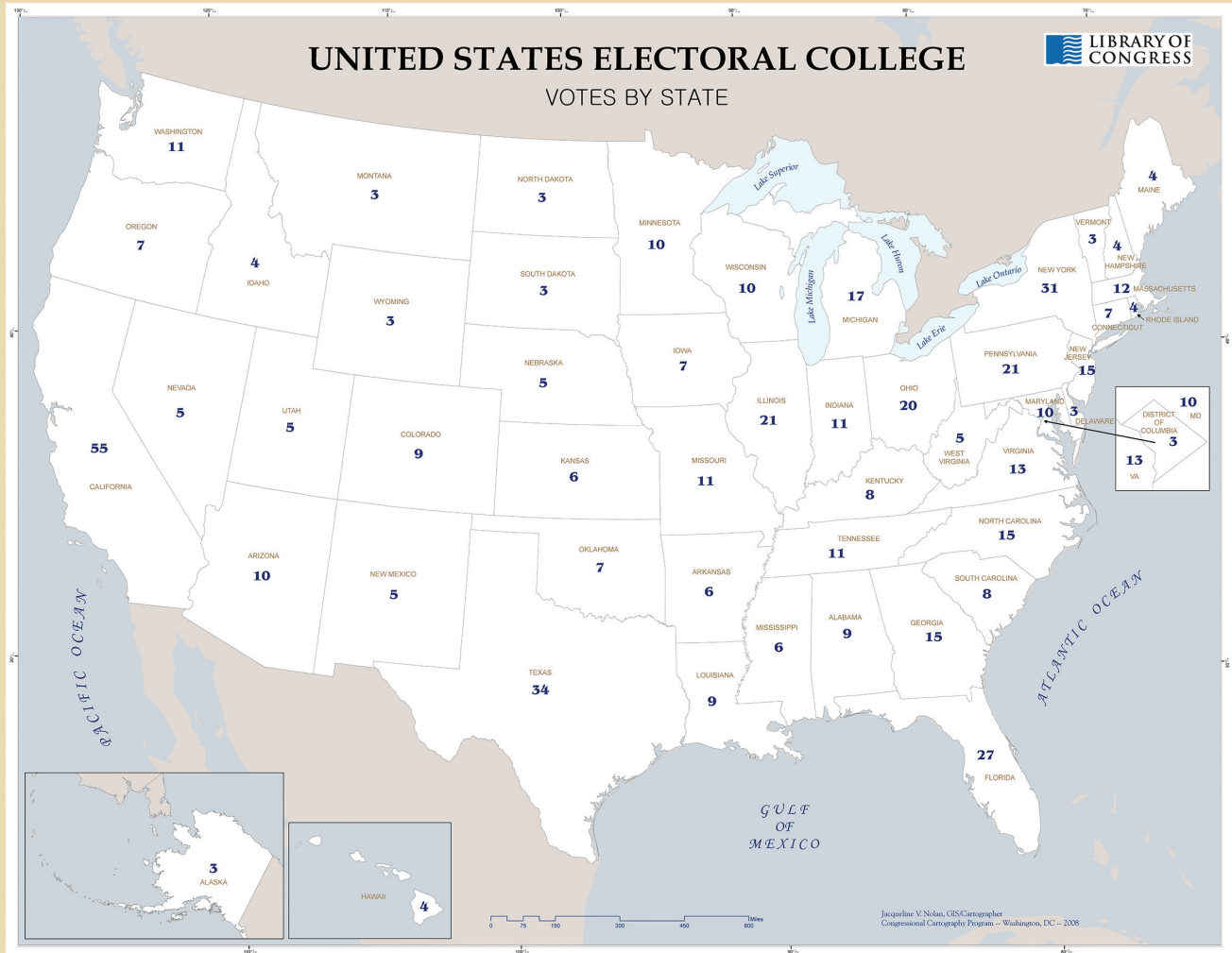


How We Elect a President: The Electoral College



THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

TL TEACHING LITERACY
TH THROUGH HISTORY



How We Elect a President: The Electoral College

BY TIM BAILEY

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary and secondary sources.

After completing this lesson, students will understand how the Electoral College system was established and how it functions in determining who will be the President and Vice President of the United States. The students will demonstrate their understanding by responding in writing to questions that are designed to make them use textual evidence to support their answers.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read and demonstrate their understanding of complex documents
- Answer critical thinking questions referencing information from the documents

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 1

GRADE LEVEL(S): 4–6

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the most important and least understood processes in American government is how we elect a president. The Electoral College system was created by the founders of our country and is articulated in Article II of the United States Constitution. Many American citizens do not understand the purpose or workings of the Electoral College and its function in selecting the president and vice president of the United States. In addition, there are ongoing arguments about whether we should do away with the Electoral College and elect the president and vice president based on the popular vote.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- In what ways is the election of a US president democratic? In what ways is the election of a US president undemocratic?
- To what extent are US presidents elected by the people?
- In what ways should presidential elections be made more democratic?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.2: Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4: Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to [grade-level] topic or subject area.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

MATERIALS

- Article II, Section 1 of the US Constitution, *America's Founding Documents*, National Archives, archives.gov/founding-docs
- The Twelfth Amendment to the US Constitution, *America's Founding Documents*, National Archives, archives.gov/founding-docs
- “How We Choose the President: What Is the Electoral College?” by Tim Bailey, compiled from the National Archives’ US Electoral College website, <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college>
- Critical Thinking Questions: Understanding the Electoral College
- Overhead projector or other display method

PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups.

1. Discuss the information in the Historical Background about presidential elections and the Electoral College.
2. Distribute copies of Article II of the US Constitution and the Twelfth Amendment and display them on an overhead or Elmo. Explain that these documents are the foundation for how we elect a president. “Share read” both primary sources with the class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read along, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English Language Learners (ELL).
3. Distribute “How We Choose the President: What Is the Electoral College” and share read it with the students.
4. Hand out “Critical Thinking Questions: Understanding the Electoral College.” Model the first question with the whole class. It is very important that student answers are backed up with evidence directly from the text. The students may continue on to the other questions individually or in their groups.
5. Discuss the students’ answers to ensure that they understand presidential elections and the Electoral College.



Article II, Section 1 of the US Constitution

The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America. He shall hold his Office during the Term of four Years, and, together with the Vice President, chosen for the same Term, be elected, as follows:

Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be appointed an Elector.

The Congress may determine the Time of choosing the Electors, and the Day on which they shall give their Votes; which Day shall be the same throughout the United States.

No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any Person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States.

The President shall, at stated Times, receive for his Services, a Compensation, which shall neither be increased nor diminished during the Period for which he shall have been elected, and he shall not receive within that Period any other Emolument from the United States, or any of them.

Before he enter on the Execution of his Office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation:—"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Source: *America's Founding Documents*, National Archives, [archives.gov/founding-docs](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs)



The Twelfth Amendment to the US Constitution, 1804

The Electors shall meet in their respective states and vote by ballot for President and Vice-President, one of whom, at least, shall not be an inhabitant of the same state with themselves; they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as President, and in distinct ballots the person voted for as Vice-President, and they shall make distinct lists of all persons voted for as President, and of all persons voted for as Vice-President, and of the number of votes for each, which lists they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate;—the President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted;—The person having the greatest number of votes for President, shall be the President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed; and if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by states, the representation from each state having one vote; a quorum for this purpose shall consist of a member or members from two-thirds of the states, and a majority of all the states shall be necessary to a choice. [And if the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the Vice-President shall act as President, as in case of the death or other constitutional disability of the President.]* The person having the greatest number of votes as Vice-President, shall be the Vice-President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed, and if no person have a majority, then from the two highest numbers on the list, the Senate shall choose the Vice-President; a quorum for the purpose shall consist of two-thirds of the whole number of Senators, and a majority of the whole number shall be necessary to a choice. But no person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States.

* Superseded by Section 3 of the Twentieth Amendment.

Source: *America's Founding Documents*, National Archives, [archives.gov/founding-docs](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs)



How We Choose the President: What Is the Electoral College?

BY TIM BAILEY

When you vote for the President of the United States of America, you are in fact voting for somebody else to cast your vote. That person is called an “elector,” and even though you voted for the next president on the first Tuesday in November, 538 electors from across America will make the vote that counts on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December. If all of this seems confusing, maybe this will help to make it more understandable:

This process of choosing an elector to vote for the president instead of you getting to choose the next president personally is part of a system called “The Electoral College.” The Electoral College was established in Article II of the United States Constitution. The article explains that every state will get one vote for president for every representative that they send to the United States Congress. For example, Hawaii sends two senators and two congressmen to represent the people of Hawaii in Congress. Therefore, because they have four representatives, they get to choose four electors to vote for president. These electors pledge to vote the way that the people in their state voted. For example, if most of the people in Hawaii voted for the Independent Party candidate, then all of the electors have promised to vote for the Independent Party candidate when they vote for the president in December. Nearly every state has this “winner-take-all” system. If a presidential candidate wins by even one vote in California, they get all 55 of California’s electoral votes. It now takes 270 of the possible 538 electoral votes to win the election.

This system may seem strange since the most familiar elections are “popular” elections. A popular election is an election in which the candidate who gets the most people to vote for him or her wins the election. However, because of the Electoral College system, this is not always the case in presidential elections. In fact, five times in our country’s history the president who won the election had fewer popular votes than the person who lost the election. In 2016, for example, President Donald J. Trump had nearly 3,000,000 fewer popular votes than his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Yet Mr. Trump was declared the new president because he had 304 of the 538 electoral votes. Then why was the Electoral College established in the first place, if someone can win an election without getting the most popular votes?

There are several reasons the founders of our country created the Electoral College. First, it gave states the power to help choose the president. This is a power that they would have lost in a popular election for president. With the Electoral College, small population states could affect the outcome of an election. For example, in 2016 more than 15,000,000 people of voting age lived in New York and that state got 29 electoral votes for president. Compare that to ten of the states with the smallest populations; they have only 6,000,000 voters combined. Yet they got 32 electoral votes for president. So although these states together have less than half the voters that New York has, they get three more electoral votes than New York. Small states saw the Electoral College as a way to have a say about who would be president without being dominated by the big states.

Second, transportation and technology at the time the US Constitution was written made it nearly impossible to hold a popular election for president. It would have taken months to gather all of the votes from across the country, count them, and send the results to Washington DC, because the fastest form of communication was a letter carried by a rider on a horse. Of course, with the technology we have today, this is no longer a problem.

In fact, many people want to end the Electoral College system. They think that a popular vote for president would encourage more people to vote. However, others think that the Electoral College has done a very good job of electing our nation's leaders and should be kept as it is now and has been in the past.

Source: Compiled from the National Archives' US Electoral College website, <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college>

**Critical Thinking Questions:
Understanding the Electoral College**

What is the major difference between a “popular” election and the Electoral College system for electing the president?

Answer:

Evidence from Text:

Why is the Electoral College called a “winner-take-all” system?

Answer:

Evidence from Text:

Why was the Electoral College system created?

Answer:

Evidence from Text:

How can someone get more votes to be the President of the United States and yet lose the election?

Answer:

Evidence from Text: