

Should We Keep the Electoral College?

Compelling Question: To what extent is the Electoral College fair and equitable?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1, R6, R9 Writing: W1, W8 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

LESSON OVERVIEW

The Electoral College, the process by which Presidential races are ultimately decided, is the subject of ongoing debate and controversy. The Electoral College always decides the outcome of the Presidential election, but five times in our history and two times in the last five elections, the Electoral College selected a president who did not win the majority of the votes across the nation. The Electoral College is controversial because many people question its origins and because of how it affects modern day elections. Many believe it is unfair, inequitable.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the Electoral College, consider different viewpoints about the Electoral College and write a persuasive letter that expresses their opinion about the Electoral College.

[Note to Teacher: There are parts of this lesson plan in which prior knowledge about a range of topics would be helpful. Therefore, please read the lesson in advance and determine if prior knowledge is important for the class and adjust accordingly.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand what the Electoral College is and reflect on its origins.
- Students will consider two points of view on the Electoral College.
- Students will explore their own opinion about the Electoral College by writing a persuasive letter.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Background Information on Electoral College](#)
- “Does your vote count? The Electoral College explained” YouTube video (2012, 5 min., TED-Ed, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9H3gvnN468>)
- “In Defense of the Electoral College” (Slate, November 12, 2012, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2012/11/defending-the-electoral-college.html>, one copy for half the class)
- “Why the Electoral College is the absolute worst, explained” (Vox, December 19, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/7/12315574/electoral-college-explained-presidential-elections-2016>, one copy for half the class)

Lessons

- [Elections and the Youth Vote](#)
- [How Do Polls Inform, Influence and Impact Elections?](#)
- [Representing the People: Diversity and Elections](#)
- [Voting Rights Then and Now](#)

Other Resources

- [9 Ways to Teach about the Election: A Social Justice Approach](#)
- [Debate Watch Teaching Guide](#)
- [Teaching about Elections](#)
- [Voting Rights and the 2020 Election](#)
- [Let's Talk about Voting!](#)

Key Words

accordance
anachronism
appointments
appropriations
democracy
dictatorial
disenfranchised
dominance
electors
elites
fearmonger
idiosyncratic
incentive
inducement
inherently
jury-rig
landslide
malapportionment

- [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing: Electoral College

1. Begin the lesson by asking students the following questions:
 - How does the U.S. President get elected?
 - What have you heard about “swing states,” “blue states,” or “red states”? Why do you think that’s important?
 - Have you heard of the Electoral College?
 - What do you know about it and how it works?
2. Elicit and explain the following:

The Electoral College is a system that is used in the U.S. Presidential election. In the Electoral College, each state gets a certain number of electors based on its total number of representatives in Congress. Each of these electors casts one electoral vote following the general election.
3. Ask students: *What else do you know about the Electoral College and how it works?*
4. Divide students into groups of three. Give small groups ten minutes to come up with as many facts, background, or historical information as they can about the Electoral College. If you allow phones or devices in your classroom, you may choose to allow students to use them to find facts.
5. One group at a time, have each group share aloud one fact, instructing them not to repeat one that was already shared. Move from group to group and repeat until all the information collected has been shared.
6. Share some/all the [background information on Electoral College](#) based on what students already shared in their small groups.
7. After sharing this information, watch the YouTube video, “[Does your vote count? The Electoral College explained.](#)”
8. After the video viewing, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
 - What information was expected? What surprises you?
 - What are your thoughts about the Electoral College?
 - What questions do you still have about the Electoral College?
 - Is the Electoral College fair or not? Please explain.

Key Words (cont.)

malign
margin
plurality
popular vote
populous
rebuttal
representatives
run-off election
segregationist
swing state
transregional
vestigial
vetting

Here I Stand Activity

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. They will then indicate their opinion about each statement by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between these two positions, indicate AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.

Note: If you are doing this activity online or in a space that is unable to accommodate students moving around, conduct a poll instead, with students raising hands or using a digital poll like [Google forms](#), [Mentimeter](#) or a poll included in your learning platform.

3. Read each statement below, requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum and have them walk (or vote) silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. After students have chosen their spots, have them spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are situated there. Use this process for each of the statements.
 - I look forward to being able to vote in a political election.
 - Voting is an important part of voicing one’s opinion and contributing to a democratic society.
 - Every vote has equal value.
 - The Electoral College was a good idea in the founding days.
 - The Electoral College is unfair and undemocratic.
 - We should continue using the Electoral College but modify it.
 - The Electoral College should be abolished.
4. After the activity, lead a whole group discussion using the following questions:
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand? Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you ever feel you needed to explain where you chose to stand? If so, why did you feel this way?
 - Did you ever decide to change your position when you saw you did not agree with a majority of the group, or after hearing others’ points of view?
 - Was there anything said that complicated your previous thinking?
 - Have you shifted your opinion during or after the activity? Please explain.



Reading Activity: Pro and Con Essays

1. Explain to students that now they will learn more about the arguments for and against the Electoral College. Distribute a copy of Article 1 to half of the students and Article 2 to the other half of the students as outlined below. Give students 15 minutes to read their article silently. Have them underline or highlight words, phrases and quotes they want to learn more about or that resonate.

Article 1: “[In Defense of the Electoral College](#)” (Note: Explain that this article was written in 2012, right after the re-election of Barack Obama and years before Donald Trump won the Electoral College and lost the popular vote in 2016.)

Article 2: “[Why the Electoral College is the absolute worst, explained](#)” (If this is too long for students to read, have them stop after reading #5)
2. After reading, explain that half the students read an article that supports the Electoral College and the other half read an article that opposes the Electoral College. Organize students into pairs so that each pair includes a student that read each of the two articles.
3. Instruct students to each share in their pairs: (1) a brief summary of their article, (2) the perspective of the author, and (3) one or two arguments the author used to make their case. Tell students they do not need to disclose whether they agreed or not with the article, but they can if they choose to.

Note: You can also divide students into groups of four, with two students who read each article.

4. Reconvene the class and engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What arguments did you read or hear about that support Electoral College?
 - What arguments did you read or hear about that oppose the Electoral College?
 - What issues of fairness, equity, and democracy were addressed in the articles?
 - Were you persuaded by any of the arguments? Please explain.
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - Has your opinion changed from before you read or heard about the articles?



Writing Activity: Persuasive Letter

1. Display the statements from the “Here I Stand Activity,” except for the first one, on the board/smart board.
2. Have students choose one of the statements with which they agree. If none of the statements resonate, they can write their own original statement that does; it must reflect an opinion about the Electoral College. Explain that they are going to write a persuasive letter about their position and can decide to whom they would like to direct the letter before or after writing. Some suggestions include: Members of Congress, local elected official, friend or peer, family member, or someone else.
3. Have students use the [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) to plan out their persuasive letter. If time permits, allow 10–15 minutes for them to complete the organizer. Explain that they can use what they learned so far and do additional research (using resources below or other materials they find) in order to write a full persuasive letter. During this class period, give them at least a few minutes to complete the first box which asks, “State your opinion/position about the Electoral College.”
4. Using a combination of class and homework time, have students complete their persuasive letter and allow them to send the letter if they choose to.

Closing

Have each student read aloud what they wrote in the first box of their Persuasive Letter Organizer, “State your opinion/position about the Electoral College.”

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“5 Presidents Who Lost the Popular Vote but Won the Election”](#) (History, July 23, 2020)
- [“A majority of Americans continue to favor replacing Electoral College with a nationwide popular vote”](#) (Pew Research Center, March 13, 2020)
- [Electoral College](#) (History)
- [“Electoral College benefits whiter states, study shows”](#) (The Conversation, July 20, 2020)
- [“How Has the Electoral College Survived for This Long?”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 3, 2020)
- [“The Electoral College, explained”](#) (CNN Politics, March 1, 2020)
- [“The Electoral College’s Racist Origins”](#) (*The Atlantic*, November 17, 2019)
- [The Race to 270](#) (Scholastic)
- [“Three common arguments for preserving the Electoral College – and why they’re wrong”](#) (The Conversation, November 14, 2016)
- [“Why Was the Electoral College Created?”](#) (History, July 10, 2020)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Background Information on Electoral College

- When the U.S. was established, the important topic of how to elect a President was controversial and debated for months. Some suggested that Congress choose the President while others argued that it should be a democratic vote by the people. The compromise the Framers came up with was the Electoral College, which has been in effect ever since. The Electoral College is in the Constitution, Article II, Section I, Clause II.
- In the Electoral College system, each state gets a certain number of electors based on its total number of representatives in Congress (which is based on the number of people in the state). Each elector casts one electoral vote following the general election. There is a total of 538 electoral votes; the candidate must win the majority of the electoral votes to win. Therefore, the candidate who gets more than half (270 votes) wins the Presidential election.
- In every state except Nebraska and Maine, the candidate who wins the most votes in a state wins **all** the electors from that state, no matter the margin of victory. The winner-take-all electoral system explains why one candidate can get more votes nationwide, while a different candidate wins in the Electoral College. Therefore, Presidential campaigns try to put together a map of state victories that will total more than 270 electoral votes, rather than try to win the most actual direct votes nationwide.
- It is important to note that individual states make decisions about their own state's election and voting policies. For example, states decide whether their electors are "all-or-nothing." States also enact important policies that expand or restrict voting, like early voting, same-day registration voting and voter ID laws. This means that the state you live in plays a major role in determining your ability to vote and how much your vote matters.
- Many argue that the "reason" given for the establishment of the Electoral College is more complex than described above (the balance/compromise between Congress choosing the President or it being a democratic vote by the people). Akhil Reed Amar, a constitutional scholar at Yale, as well as others, argue that the Electoral College was a concession to the slave states at the time of the founding. He says:

"In my view, it's slavery. In a direct election system, the South would have lost every time because a huge percentage of its population was slaves, and slaves couldn't vote. But an Electoral College allows states to count slaves, albeit at a discount (the three-fifths clause), and that's what gave the South the inside track in presidential elections. And thus, it's no surprise that eight of the first nine presidential races were won by a Virginian. (Virginia was the most populous state at the time and had a massive slave population that boosted its electoral vote count.)"
- Another common theory about why the Electoral College was enacted was to prevent Presidential candidates from ignoring the smaller, less populated states. Hans von Spakovsky, a former member of the Federal Election Commission says:

"It prevents candidates from winning an election by focusing only on high-population urban centers (the big cities), ignoring smaller states and the more rural areas of the country—the places that progressives and media elites consider flyover country."
- There have been five times in U.S. history where the results of the Electoral College were not aligned with the winner of the popular vote nationwide. The person who won the Electoral College won the election. Out of fifty-eight presidential elections, the winner of the Electoral College lost the popular vote but won the election. That happened in 1824 (John Quincy Adams), 1876 (Rutherford B. Hayes), 1888 (Benjamin Harrison), 2000 (George W. Bush), and 2016 (Donald Trump). In the last two out of five Presidential elections, the Presidential election was determined by the Electoral College, not the popular vote.
- In a 2020 Pew Research study, more than half of U.S. adults (58%) say the Constitution should be amended so the Presidential candidate who wins the popular vote (i.e., receives the most votes nationwide) should win the election. Forty percent prefer to keep the current system in which the candidate who receives the most Electoral College votes wins the election.

Persuasive Letter Organizer

Directions: Use this organizer to outline your persuasive letter before writing.

State your opinion/position about the Electoral College.

Provide background information about the issue.

List at least three (3) main reasons that would convince someone of your position (use examples, statistics, quotes, etc.).

Indicate what those who have a different point of view might say.

Indicate what you might say in response.