



TEACHER KEY

The Electoral College

1. Why does the U.S. have the Electoral College system?

The framers of the Constitution created the system as a compromise after considering election of the president by Congress, election by the state legislatures, and election by the people (popular vote). Some historians believe that the framers were concerned about having the president elected directly by the people.

2. Who are the electors? How are they chosen in your state?

Electors are often loyal party activists and may be state officials, party leaders, or those affiliated in some way with the Presidential candidate. They are generally nominated by the parties in each state (the process varies from state to state – answers will vary) and then chosen by the voters in each state on Election Day.

3. What do the electors actually do? Can they vote any way they wish?

The electors gather in their state capitals on the Monday following the second Wednesday in December. They cast one vote for president and one for vice president. No federal law binds electors although some states do have such laws that have never been enforced. So, electors can vote any way they wish, although they have rarely gone against the popular vote.

4. How many electoral votes are there? How are they divided among the states? How many does your state have? How does your state determine how many electoral votes each candidate will get?

There are 538 electoral votes total. Each state receives the number of electors equal to the total number of Senators and Representatives in Congress it has. The District of Columbia also receives 3 electoral votes. Most states use a winner-take-all system: the candidate that wins the popular vote gets all of that state's electoral votes. (This is how the electoral and popular votes can differ.) Maine and Nebraska allocate their electoral votes proportionally.

5. How many electoral votes are needed to win? What if no candidate receives a majority? Has this ever happened?

270 votes are needed to win. If no candidate receives a majority, the House of Representatives selects the president from the top three candidates and the Senate selects the Vice President. Each state gets one vote. This happened in 1800 and 1824.

6. How often have the results of the Electoral College differed from the popular vote?

Three times – 1876, 1888, and 2000

7. What are the PROS of the Electoral College system? Who favors it? Whom does it benefit?

Benefits: the system requires a distribution of popular support (not just sufficient support) and thus contributes to national unity; enhancement/protection of minority interests since even small minorities can make a difference in a given state; encourages a two-party system and thus national stability since political coalitions must occur within parties rather than within the government; maintains a federal system (gives the states a role)

Thus, smaller / less populous states, the two major parties, and minorities should favor the Electoral College system.

8. What are the CONS of the Electoral College system? Who does not favor or might like to change it?

Cons / concerns: concentration of campaigning in contested states / ignoring uncontested states; the risk of electing a president who did not win a majority of the popular vote; the risk of electors who do not vote in accordance with the popular vote of their states; the possibility of depressing voter turnout; and the chance of an election will not accurately reflect the will of the people due to over-representation of small/rural states and the winner-take-all system

Thus, those from more populous states (but perhaps not the largest states with the largest numbers of electoral votes) and third parties might not favor the Electoral College system. A majority of Americans favored changing the system after the 2000 election.