

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

Electoral College Turns Presidential Election into State-to-State Combat

10/14/08

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/july-dec08/electoral_college_10-14.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

Student Worksheet (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. Do all votes in the presidential election count equally? Why or why not?

2. What is the Electoral College?

3. Why might Obama and McCain spend more time campaigning in Ohio than in Utah or Massachusetts?

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – **Student Worksheet**

1. When was the Electoral College formed? How many votes are there in total? Why that number?

ANSWER

The Electoral College was formed in 1787. In total, there are 538 Electoral College members: states are allotted a vote for each of their two senators, each House representative (depends on population), plus three votes for the District of Columbia.

2. How many Electoral College votes does a candidate have to receive to win the Presidency?

ANSWER

The number of electoral votes needed to gain a majority and become president is 270.

3. What are “red” and “blue” states?

ANSWER

“Red” states are states that vote firmly Republican, while “blue” states are states that vote firmly democratic.

4. What is a swing state? A battleground state?

ANSWER

Swing states are states that are neither “red” or “blue”, these states can be further divided into “leaning” or “battleground” states, which are just too close to call.

This year, some of the hottest battleground states are Nevada, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. This list of states is updated day to day as states can easily shift from leaning to battleground and back again.

5. Name at least four battleground states? Are any near you?

ANSWER

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6. What major change has been made to the Electoral College?

ANSWER

Early on, each member of the Electoral College would cast two votes for president. The runner-up would win the vice presidency. In the case of a tie, the vote was sent to the Congress.

Things quickly got complicated in the election of 1796 when the president and vice president came from separate parties and platforms, and in 1800 when it was tie but both candidates were hated by their parties.

The 12th Amendment -- passed in 1804 -- added that the Electoral College must vote for one president and one vice president.

7. Why do some people criticize the Electoral College?

ANSWER

Critics of the system still argue that the system can privilege the voters of swing states as candidates will campaign harder for their votes.

Other critics say that they system is inherently undemocratic as it is possible for a candidate to win the popular vote and still lose the election as happened in 1876, 1888, and 2000.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

- 1. Do you think the Electoral College is a fair system? How would you change and improve it?**
- 2. Why do you think people who argue for direct popular vote have had such a hard time changing the system?**
- 3. Look at the current swing states. Is your state one of them? Do you see any similarities? Why do you think those states are swing this election?**
- 4. What issues do you care about this election? Are the candidates talking about those issues? Why or why not?**

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.