



The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President?

NEWSMatters Teacher's Guide for

The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President?

About NEWSMatters

The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President? is one in a series of NEWSMatters programs. Each 15-20 minute video in the NEWSMatters series examines an issue or topic in the news. The video is supported by a poster pertaining to the topic and a teacher's guide. The NEWSMatters program is designed to promote discussion and critical thinking in the classroom. NEWSMatters videos will rarely, if ever, provide clear-cut conclusions about an issue. Rather, each video's goal is to leave more questions in viewers' minds than answers. The supplementary materials are designed to help focus and direct these questions and to generate thought and debate about the topic. These materials are flexible. You can control the pace and length of each lesson, and you can use any, all, or none of these materials.

The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President? provides the basis for a debate about the Electoral College. Recent presidential elections caused many Americans to question the fairness of the Electoral College and the relevance of a 200-year-old way of electing a president. *The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President?* presents a number of issues in this debate. The video also looks at some reforms that have been suggested for the Electoral College. Eight of the following activities are designed to be reproduced. Your students can organize and complete seven of these exercises on their own. The other activities are designed for teacher presentation and classroom participation.

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Readiness Activity

(An activity to be done before viewing the video)

This activity will help your students become familiar with some of the important terms and themes in *The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President?* before they watch the video. Divide the class into five groups. Assign each group three of the terms listed below. One member of each group should record an agreed-upon definition or description for each term and then present these definitions to the class for discussion.

democracy
Constitution
ratify
regionalism
"minority president"

renegade elector
Electoral College
reform
run-off election
third party

winner-take-all system
two-party system
popular vote
amendment
candidate

Discussion Questions

These questions will help you and your class review important points made in the video. The questions will also give some structure to your discussions about *The Electoral College: Is This Any Way to Pick a President?* After your students view the video, ask them to comment on these questions. Some questions have specific answers and others are more open-ended. You may wish to use these questions as a springboard for further discussion.

- Do you think the Electoral College should be reformed or abolished, or do you think it should remain the way it is?

- Do you think the Electoral College discourages people from voting? Why or why not?

- What do you like about the Electoral College? What do you dislike about it? Why do you feel this way?

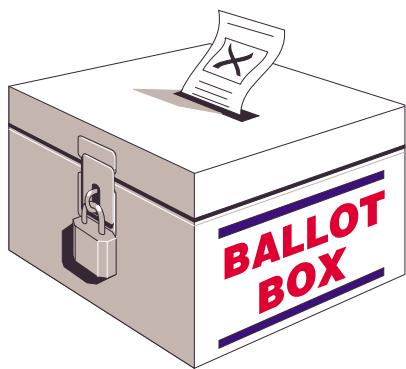
- How do you think being a “minority” president could affect how a leader governs?

- Is America’s two-party system a benefit or drawback to the country’s political system? How might elections be different if there were more strong political parties? How might the government be different if more than two parties had to work together?

- Can you explain the procedure for making an amendment to the U.S. Constitution?

- Do you think Congress will pass legislation to change the Electoral College? Why or why not?

- If Congress approves an amendment to abolish the Electoral College, do you think the states will ratify it?



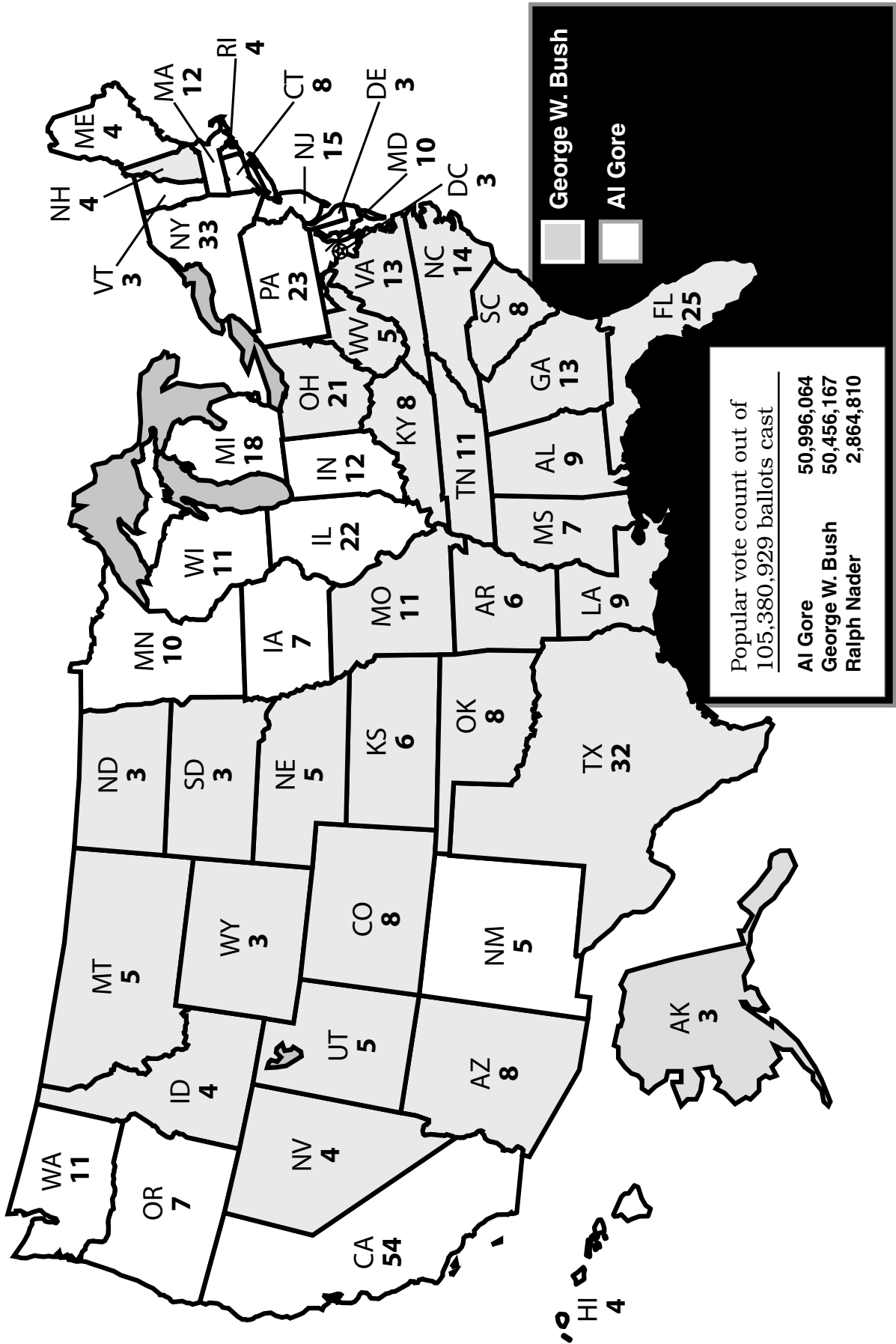
Below is a list of countries. Look for news articles and use the library and Internet to research one of these nations to learn how it holds elections.

Present a report about the nation to your class. Tell where the nation is in the world and answer the following questions: What kind of government does the nation have? Who is the nation's leader? Are elections free in this country, that is, is there more than one candidate running for an office and are voters not required by law to vote? Does the nation make it easy for its citizens to vote? What voting system does the country use (for example, does it hold run-off elections)? What percentage of the voting-age population votes? Is voter fraud a problem in this country? In your report, include any other information that helps explain the voting process in the country. Also show how the country's voting process compares or contrasts to the voting process in the U.S.

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Australia | Indonesia | Romania |
| Austria | Ireland | Rwanda |
| Belgium | Israel | South Africa |
| Bulgaria | Italy | Spain |
| Burundi | Mexico | Taiwan, Republic of China |
| Canada | Netherlands | Thailand |
| China | New Zealand | Turkey |
| Congo | Northern Ireland | United Kingdom |
| Cuba | Norway | Uzbekistan |
| Germany | Palestinian Authority | Venezuela |
| Iceland | Peru | Vietnam |

CLASS DISCUSSION: Of the countries presented in class, do you think any hold unfair elections? If so, which ones? Why do you think they are unfair? Which countries do you think have the best systems for voting? Explain your answer.

This map shows the electoral college vote distribution from the 2000 presidential election. The shaded states were won by George W. Bush; the white states were won by Al Gore. Use the map to answer the questions on page 5.



Use the map from page 4 to answer the questions you see here. Use a separate sheet of paper if needed.

1. How many states did Al Gore win? _____

How many states did George W. Bush win? _____

What percentage of the states did each candidate win?

George W. Bush _____% Al Gore _____%

What percentage of the popular vote did each candidate win?

George W. Bush _____% Al Gore _____% Ralph Nader _____%

2. What effect, if any, do you think Ralph Nader had on the election?

3. What do you notice about the pattern of states that went to each candidate?

4. Can you name some things that most of the Bush states have in common?

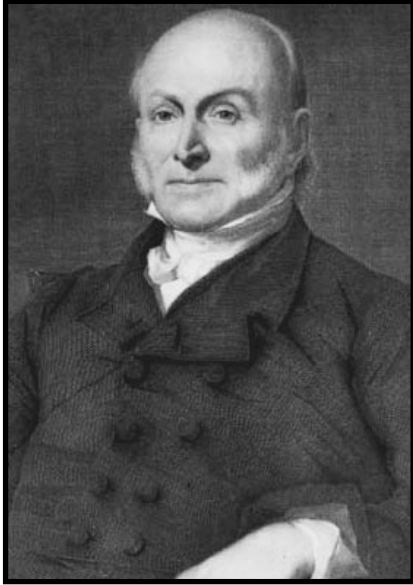
What are some things the Gore states have in common?

5. Do you think that where a person lives influences how he or she stands on issues such as taxes, the environment, defense, gun control, and so on? Why or why not?

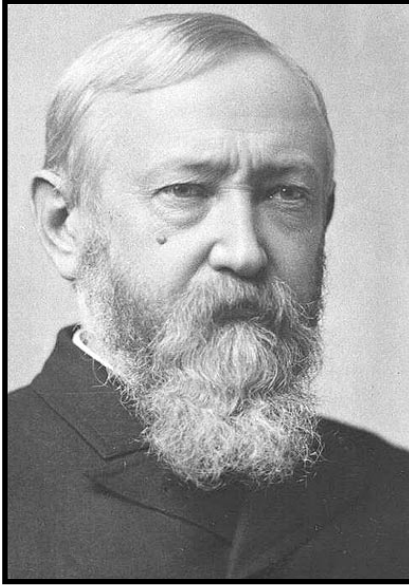
Does this map support or disprove your answer? Explain.

6. What does this map suggest to you about regionalism in this country?

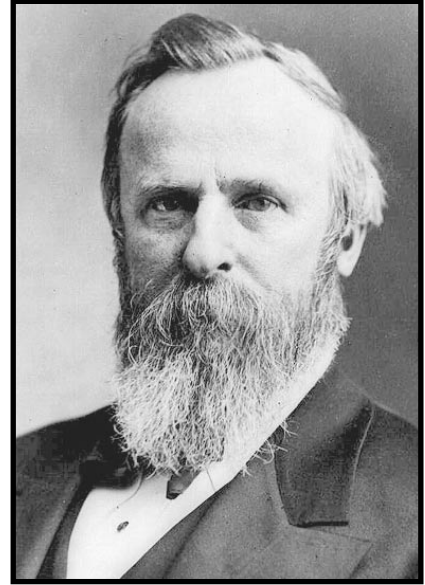
7. What effect, if any, do you think the Electoral College has in preventing regionalism in the United States?



John Quincy Adams



Benjamin Harrison



Rutherford Hayes

In 2001, George W. Bush became America’s fourth “minority president”— a candidate who didn’t win the popular vote. Here you see history’s other minority presidents: John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Harrison, and Rutherford Hayes. Using the Internet, encyclopedias, or other library sources, research the elections of these three men. In the space provided, or on a separate sheet of paper, describe the circumstances of their elections and answer the following questions: Whom did he defeat to become president? Was Congress or the Supreme Court involved in his election? Do you think the election process was fair or unfair? Why? How was his presidency affected by his status as a minority president?

CLASS DISCUSSION: How were these elections similar to George W. Bush’s election? How were these elections different from George W. Bush’s election?

Listed below are three ways Congress could change the way the Electoral College works. Break your class into three groups, assigning each group one of these possible Electoral College changes. Have each group research its possible change and develop a mock bill to present to Congress supporting the Electoral College reform. Each group should choose one person to present his or her group's bill to the rest of the class. Have the class vote for the bill they think will work the best.



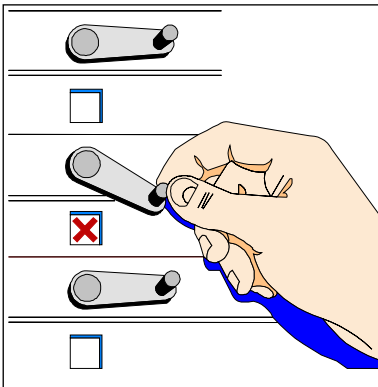
Instant-runoff voting



Popular vote election, with the possibility of a separate runoff election



Congressional district Electoral College



CLASS DISCUSSION: Why do you think the voting method you chose is the best means for voting for president? How difficult would it be for Congress to pass each, or any, of these bills?

Most third parties in the United States have had a difficult time breaking into mainstream politics. The most successful third party in U.S. history is the Republican Party, which was created in 1854 and elected its first president in 1860. The Republican Party replaced the Whig Party as one of the two main political parties in the country. Below is a list of some other notable third parties that have made a mark on U.S. history. Choose a classmate to work with and select a third party from the list below. Research your party, answer the questions, and prepare a brief report about your party to present to the class. Your report should include the information from the questions you answered.

- Progressive Party
- Green Party
- American Party or Know-Nothing Party
- Greenback Party
- States' Rights Democratic Party
- Free Soil Party
- Prohibitionist Party
- People's Party
- American Independence Party
- Socialist Workers Party
- Bull-Moose Party Dixiecrats

1. When was the party active?

2. Why was the party formed?

3. What were the main ideas of the party?

4. How successful was the party?

CLASS DISCUSSION: Why do you think it is so hard for third parties to become recognized seriously in the U.S. political system? How might getting rid of the Electoral College change that? Do you think it would be better for our political system if there were strong third parties? Why or why not?

Lawmakers have amended the U.S. Constitution several times to give more Americans the right to vote. Using the library, the Internet, or a copy of the Constitution, read about the following amendments and briefly explain how they each gave more Americans the freedom to vote.

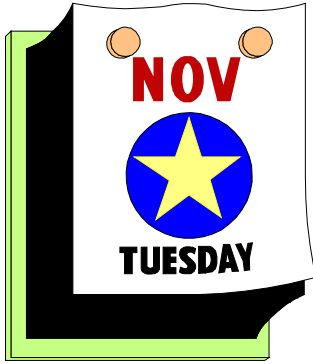
Fifteenth Amendment

Nineteenth Amendment

Twenty-third Amendment

Twenty-fourth Amendment

Twenty-sixth Amendment



Each state in the United States has the right to conduct its elections in any way it chooses, within certain limits. For instance, all states must hold their elections on Election Day. But the details of Election Day and laws on polling are left up to the states. The job of overseeing elections is up to each state's secretary of state.

Choose a U.S. state and learn about its voting laws. Be sure you choose a different state from your classmates so that you can discuss how states' laws differ. Using newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, research your chosen state's voting laws and answer the following questions.

What was the state's voter turnout for the latest presidential election?

What types of voting machines does the state use?

What are the state's rules for absentee ballots?

Is the state currently considering legislation to change any of its voting rules? If so, explain.

Record a few things you find interesting about your chosen state's voting procedures.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: What are some differences in voting procedures from state to state? Considering information about several states, what are some things that make voting easier for citizens? What are some things that make voting harder for citizens? Do you think it's a good idea for states to make their own laws for voting, or do you think it should be the same everywhere in the country?



The editorial cartoon here makes a comment on the Electoral College.

On the lines provided answer the questions.

In your own words, what do you think the artist was trying to say through this cartoon?

Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's point? Explain your answer?

In the empty box on the right, draw your own editorial cartoon about the Electoral College.

CLASS ACTIVITY: Share your cartoons with classmates. Choose a winning cartoon to print in your school's newspaper.



Newspaper Activity *classroom activity*

For one week, pay close attention to newspaper, Internet, and television news stories about the Electoral College or voting reform. Then answer the questions below.

Make a list of the headlines about voting reform that you found.

Did most of the stories focus on one specific type of voting reform or on many different types of reform?

Briefly sum up the most interesting news story about the Electoral College or voting reform that you found.

Did you notice a difference between the way your state or region covered voting reform and how national news sources covered voting reform? Why do you think this is so?

What do you know about the Electoral College and voting reform that you didn't know one year ago?
