

Lesson Plan: Debating the Electoral College

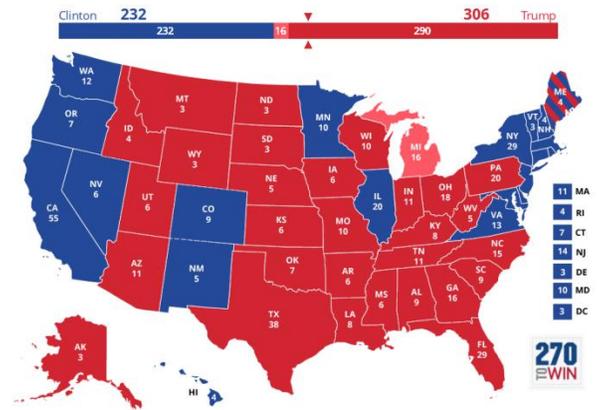
By Rachel Roberson

Featured resources

[The Lowdown: Time to Graduate from the Electoral College?](#)

[Video: This Proposal Calls for Popular Vote to Determine a Winner](#) (PBS NewsHour, 7:04)

[Video: How the Electoral College Works](#) (CGP Gray, 4:42)



Opening quick write prompt:

What do you already know about the Electoral College and how it works? Why has the Electoral College been in the news following the 2016 election?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will analyze role of the Electoral College in U.S. elections both historically and in the aftermath of the 2016 Election.
- Students will debate whether the Electoral College system should be reformed, and discuss ideas for potential changes.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What are the origins of the Electoral College and what is its place in American politics? Does the Electoral College limit or further democracy?

For only the fifth time in American history, a presidential candidate won the election without winning the majority of the popular vote. In this lesson, students explore the origins of the Electoral College and evaluate the calls to change what many describe as outdated and undemocratic.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

| Word | Simple definition |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Beneficiary (n.) | A person who benefits from something, like a decision or an insurance policy |
| Deliberation (n.) | A long, careful discussion or consideration |
| Pan (v.) | To severely criticize |
| Rationale (n.) | A set of reasons that form the basis of a decision or belief |
| Swing state/Battleground state (n.) | A state where Republicans and Democrats have similar levels of support among voters, and which often play an important role in determining the winner of presidential elections |

Activity

- Discuss the quick write prompt to determine how much students already know about the Electoral College and the current debate surrounding the outcome of the 2016 election. *(Note: If students already have a strong foundation in this topic, start the lesson at Part 2.)*
- **Part 1:** We know about the Electoral College and its role in this election, but who knows why we have it in the first place? Students discover the origin of the Electoral College by reading [The Lowdown post](#) and watching the video [How the Electoral College Works](#).
 - **“How the Electoral College Works” cites two explanations for the Electoral College:**
 - 1) The Electoral College gives small states more political power and prevents more populous states from dominating (the Senate was designed for the same reason).
 - 2) Travel and information-gathering was hard in the 1700s. The Electoral College met in one place, so the people voting to elect the president could get up-to-date information.
 - **The Lowdown post details two more reasons:**
 - 3) Direct democracy made the Founders uneasy because they feared uneducated citizens might be swayed to vote for an unqualified candidate. They wanted the Electoral College to be a check on the people. That’s why electors are not required to vote for the candidate their state elected, though almost all do.
 - 4) The Electoral College was designed, in part, to benefit less populous southern states, where slaves made up a significant amount of the general population and where counted as three-fifths of a person.
- Check for understanding by asking: Do you think the Electoral College still makes sense today? Why or why not? Students use evidence from the sources above to support their responses.

- **Part 2:** As a class or in small groups, have students view the video [This Proposal Calls for Popular Vote to Determine the Winner](#) and use the guided questions to prepare for the discussion below. (*Note: Let students know this story was aired before the election was decided.*)
 - What is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact?
 - What is an argument in favor of the Compact?
 - What is an argument against the Compact?

Discussion questions

- In what ways does the Electoral College support democracy? In what ways is it undemocratic?
- What are two ways the Electoral College system makes people feel like their votes don't count?
- Do you think the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is a good idea? Why or why not?
- What are other ideas you can think of for reforming the Electoral College system?

Circle chats, small-group discussions and think-pair-share provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension activities

Writing prompt: Are you in favor of keeping or getting rid of the Electoral College? Support your argument with evidence. Be sure to respond to at least one opposing argument in your answer.

Make your argument visual: Choose the strongest argument for keeping OR abolishing the Electoral College and make your case visually with an infographic. Educators: Learn more about making infographics with [this online course from KQED Teach](#).

Common Core standards

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| CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1 | 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. |
| CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7 | Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. |
| CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1 | Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. |