



Federalism and the Electoral College: Are States Still Relevant?

Uses Vote Worthy Part 1 Segment 1 [Listen here](#)

Background Reading

The Electoral College is an important part of how we in the United States elect our president. In this system, each citizen has one vote, which is cast in their state of residency. These votes are tallied at the state level to determine the state's choice. Then, a group of people serving as the Electoral College gathers together at their state's capital to cast votes, based on a state's population, for the presidential candidate that their state has selected.

This might seem like a complicated system, but the Electoral College arose from the Founding Fathers' fear of "factions," groups of voters who agreed on a common purpose and worked together to make their ideas a reality. According to James Madison in Federalist Number 10, if a faction becomes the majority, "a pure democracy...can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction." (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp) In other words, they worried that factions would become a "tyranny of the majority," and use their power to crush those who disagreed by choosing a president who would serve only the faction's desires, instead of promoting the general welfare. Consequently, in creating the method through which Americans would choose the president, the method of the Electoral College was formed. They were proud of the balance they felt this system created. Alexander Hamilton, in Federalist Number 68, notes of the Electoral College, "if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent." (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed68.asp)

Today, many Americans want to move to a system called the "popular vote," which means that the presidential candidate who receives the largest number of votes nationally would win, instead of the winner of the majority of Electoral College votes from the states. In fact, according to a 2020 Gallup poll, 61 percent of citizens surveyed said they would support

amending the Constitution to use the popular vote in presidential elections.

(<https://news.gallup.com/poll/320744/americans-support-abolishing-electoral-college.aspx>)

This podcast discusses whether or not the Electoral College has outlived its usefulness, or if it still has a purpose and role to play in American political life.

The podcasters first focus on the idea of federalism, which is a type of government in which the nation is not simply one single unit, but a collection of state governments under the banner of one national government, each of which has important roles, responsibilities, and identities. Because the United States has a federal system, Dr. Scott Lesley, professor of political science at Western Kentucky University, discusses how the Electoral College reflects this reality of our system of government and upholds the importance of each state as a geopolitical unit.

They also discuss the idea of a National Popular Vote, which would replace the Electoral College with a less federal-focused system.

Discussion Questions

- Do you feel a sense of identity as a Kentuckian or know anyone who feels connected to their home state?
- Do you think state identity is an important part of our nation?
- In what ways would our national and state identities change if we moved to a national popular vote for president?
- What are the benefits of passing a state law that “binds” Electoral College electors to vote for the winner of the popular vote in their state? Can you think of any drawbacks?
- The podcast presenters say that the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is the wrong way to go about changing to a popular vote system, because it undercuts the Constitution, without actually amending it. Why do you think they make this assertion?
- With the Electoral College system, states where the voters’ preference for president are undecided or split, receive more focus, attention, and visits from presidential candidates. Is this system fair? Can you think of a way to ensure that non-competitive states are also considered important?
- The podcast presenters comment that moving to a national popular vote system would make urban areas, where many voters live, more important than rural areas. Does this issue make the idea of a national popular vote more or less appealing to you? Why?

Key Vocabulary

direct election: an election in which people vote directly for the person, persons or political party that they want to see elected to a political position

Electoral College: Established in Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the Electoral College is the formal body which elects the President and Vice President of the United States.

faithless electors: Electoral College electors who do not vote for the candidates for whom the elector had pledged to vote and instead vote for another person

federalism: a type of government in which the nation is not simply one single unit, but a collection of state governments under the banner of one national government, each of which has important roles, responsibilities, and identities

geopolitical unit: a political jurisdiction or area based on location

popular vote: in the U.S. presidential election, the vote made directly by qualified voters as opposed to the Electoral College

ratification: formal confirmation

“winner takes all”: an Electoral College approach in which the winner of the most popular votes receives all of that state’s electors; every state with the exception of Maine and Nebraska use this system

Suggested Activity

After listening to the podcast, show the YouTube video “The Sneaky Plan to Subvert the Electoral College for the Next Election” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUX-frINBJY> and have students read the article “5 Reasons to Keep the Electoral College” at <https://electoralvotemap.com/5-reasons-to-keep-the-electoral-college/> or the article “Reasons to Keep the Electoral College” at <https://www.thoughtco.com/why-keep-the-electoral-college-3322050>

Then use the Socratic Seminar method (<https://minds-in-bloom.com/5-steps-to-successful-socratic-seminar-29/>) to engage students in a discussion about whether states and the federal system are still relevant, or if the Electoral College system is outdated and should be changed.

Evaluation Criteria for Student Work

Students may express a variety of opinions, however, some of main arguments they could discuss can be found at the Britannica [ProCon.org](https://www.britannica.com/topic/electoral-college) article “The Electoral College: Top 3 Pros and Cons, at <https://www.procon.org/headlines/the-electoral-college-top-3-pros-and-cons/> . Student responses should be grounded in evidence, with specific examples from the podcast, YouTube video, or articles being used to support their opinions.

Suggested Supplemental Source

The Annenberg Guide to the United States Constitution at www.annenbergclassroom.org/constitution/ (Article 2, Section 1)

Kentucky Academic Standards

Social Studies

HS.C.CP.1

Explain how the U.S. Constitution embodies the principles of rule of law, popular sovereignty, republicanism, federalism, separation of powers and checks and balances to promote general welfare.

HS.C.PR.2

Analyze the role of elections, bureaucracy, political parties, interest groups and media in shaping public policy.

HS.C.RR.2

Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.

Resource created by Katie Booth, N.B.C.T.