

Does my vote count? Teaching the electoral college

BY DAVID WALBERT

Learning outcomes

Students will:

- understand the purpose, function, origin, and historical development of the electoral college.
- evaluate issues of fairness and representation in the electoral process, both individually and through group discussion.
- develop information skills by researching demographic and political information about states and congressional districts.
- demonstrate knowledge through writing and public speaking.

Teacher planning

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

1 week

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

For students:

- reading on the electoral college¹
- discussion guidelines for group work²
- state information background sheet³
- guidelines for written reports⁴

These resources are designed to be used on the Web but may also be printed.

TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES

- Web access for student research

Pre-activities

Students should have studied the basic elements of the U.S. Constitution and the process of its development. Some of that information is covered in the reading⁵ for this lesson, but not thoroughly.

Activities

Reading and discussion

1. Have students read the linked text, "Does my vote count? Understanding the electoral college⁶." (It is designed to be printed if you wish to distribute it as a handout, but if you wish them to do the "further reading," you'll need to provide them with the URLs.) If desired, ask them to do the "further reading" for each section and complete the brief assignments.
2. As a class, discuss each part of the reading to make sure that students understand it. In particular, you will probably need to spend some time on the "weight of vote" concept in the "Does my vote count?" section.

The constitutional convention

3. Break the class into three or more groups of at least four students each. Each group will represent a state; select at least one large state, one medium-sized state, and one small state, preferably from different regions of the country. (One of these should be the state in which you live.) When selecting the groups, try to vary the talents of the members. For each group, assign or let the students choose the following jobs:
 - demographer (someone with strong math skills)
 - historian (to evaluate historical precedents)
 - social activist (to consider fair representation and citizen participation)
 - legal expert (to look at constitutional issues and write the amendment)

Of course, you can select other jobs as necessary or vary the jobs depending on the size of your groups. You can also assign the same job to multiple students and have them work together or independently. The students should understand their jobs before beginning their discussion and may take the lead in particular areas of the background research.

4. Explain to the students that they have been selected to represent their states at a constitutional convention to consider amending the U.S. Constitution to alter the procedures for electing the president. Each group will present a proposal to the convention with specific recommendations and the text of an amendment. Refer them to "Debating a constitutional amendment⁷" to guide their work.

5. Each group will gather background information about its state, using the page "Evaluating your state's interests⁸" as a guide. They may do this individually or as a group, and you may ask them to turn in their findings.
6. Each group will then decide whether the current electoral process is or is not "fair" to the people of its state. Give them a full class period (or at least 45 minutes) to discuss this, and ask them to take notes on the discussion based on their jobs and the assignments they'll have in #6, below. (They should use "Debating a constitutional amendment⁹" to guide their discussion.) They should then decide which of the proposals on the handout to support or develop a different proposal of their own.
7. Members of each group will then write up brief (1-2 page) reports as described in the report guidelines¹⁰. You may wish to give the students additional time to discuss their research as a group before writing up their final reports.
8. Each group will present its findings and its proposal to the convention — i.e., the class. Each member of the group should summarize his or her report briefly (don't simply read it aloud).
9. After hearing the proposals, the class will vote to determine which proposal to support and send to the states for ratification. However, don't vote openly in class. Instead, ask each student to write a brief (1-2 page) explanation of which proposal he/she supports and why. This explanation should refer to the existing electoral process, include references to other students' proposals, and show an understanding of the original reading materials. The teacher will then tally up the votes and tell the class which proposal won.

Assessment

Each student should be evaluated on both individual and group work. I recommend evaluating the written report, oral report to the convention, and the written responses to the reading, if you assigned them. Use the following rubric as a guide:

Demonstrated knowledge of the existing electoral process	30%
Demonstrated understanding of historical precedents	20%
Clarity of argument (written report)	10%
Clarity of argument (oral report)	10%
Clarity of argument (justification for vote)	10%
Consistency and clarity of argument within the group	20%

Optional: If you like, you can give bonus points to the group(s) whose proposal won the popular vote of the class — or you can play "elector," override them, and declare a different winner!

Supplemental information

THE FEDERALIST PAPERS

The *Federalist Papers* were a series of essays arguing for the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, all of whom had participated in drafting the Constitution, wrote these essays as anonymous letters to the editors of various New York newspapers. They can be difficult reading, and not just for high school students! If you choose to use *Federalist* No. 68 in this lesson — or any other *Federalist* essays in your teaching — here are some additional resources on the Web about the *Federalist Papers*.

- The complete *Federalist Papers*¹¹ are available online from the Library of Congress.
- The National Archives' pages on the United States Constitution¹² are helpful in understanding the background of the *Federalist Papers*, as are the Articles of Confederation¹³ (provided here by the University of Oklahoma Law Center), which the Constitution replaced.
- Transcriptions of some of the most important "Anti-Federalist Papers"¹⁴ — arguments against the ratification of the Constitution — are presented by Constitution.org. The papers are searchable, so you could search for "electors" and "president" to look up arguments against the system set forth in the original Constitution.
- If you've got lots of time, try this free seminar on "How to Read *Federalist* #10"¹⁵, designed to help high school social studies teachers use the *Federalist* in their classes. It's a three-hour audio recording in two parts that requires RealAudio to listen. As I said, if you have lots of time, it might be valuable to you.

COMMENTS

I have written this lesson plan at a fairly high level, and teachers may judge for themselves whether certain readings or activities are beyond the abilities of their students. I've done this for two reasons:

1. I think it's better to provide more information and activities and let teachers opt not to use them than to provide less and fewer and leave teachers hanging if they want to do more.
2. The process of electing a President is both unexpectedly (to most students) complicated and extremely important. Many citizens, mostly Democrats, were turned off of politics after the 2000 elections, because they believed that if candidate with the most votes didn't become President, their vote didn't really count. I've written this lesson plan in response to those protests and in hopes that by better understanding the process, students can prepare to be more engaged and active citizens. (But then I also think they should have to pass the citizenship test to graduate from high school, so what do I know?)

If you want to shorten this lesson plan a bit, here are some suggestions.

- Eliminate some or all of the "further reading" sections and the related assignments.
- In particular, you may want to eliminate the *Federalist* reading, which I admit is extremely difficult. I included it more to give students a taste of Revolution-era

political literature than because it's critical reading for this lesson. If you want to use it, I've provided some guidance for students.

- Use some or all of the readings with students but skip the convention. As an alternative, you could assign a short essay on whether the electoral college is or is not a “fair” way to elect a President.

North Carolina Curriculum Alignment

SOCIAL STUDIES (2003)

Grade 10

- **Goal 1:** The learner will investigate the foundations of the American political system and explore basic values and principles of American democracy.
 - **Objective 1.06:** Compare viewpoints about government in the Federalist and the Anti-Federalist Papers.
- **Goal 2:** The learner will analyze how the government established by the United States Constitution embodies the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy.
 - **Objective 2.01:** Identify principles in the United States Constitution.
 - **Objective 2.02:** Explain how the United States Constitution defines the framework, organization and structure of the three branches of government at the national level.
 - **Objective 2.04:** Describe how the United States Constitution may be changed and analyze the impact of specific changes.
 - **Objective 2.07:** Identify modern controversies related to powers of the federal government that are similar to the debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over ratification of the United States Constitution.
- **Goal 4:** The learner will explore active roles as a citizen at the local, state, and national levels of government.
 - **Objective 4.02:** Describe the election process and the qualifications and procedures for voting.
 - **Objective 4.04:** Demonstrate active methods of promoting and inhibiting change through political action.

On the web

The United States Constitution

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html>

The National Archives also provides the complete text of the U.S. Constitution. Article 2, Section 1 (see http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html) and Amendment XII (see http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_amendments_11-27.html) are the portions relevant to this lesson.

National Archives and Records Administration: The Electoral College

<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/index.html>

The NARA provides detailed information on the electoral college, including general information, historical data, complete data and documents from the 2000 election, and an “electoral college calculator” that lets students experiment with various election scenarios. “How Electors Vote”

and the answers to Frequently Asked Questions are linked from the student reading and will be particularly useful, and the historical election results and votes by state are a good reference for the elections of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.

Does my vote count? Understanding the electoral college

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4465>

This tutorial for students explains how the electoral college works, the origins and development of the electoral college as some controversial elections, and how much any one vote actually "weighs" in an election. Readings and activities are included.

Project Vote Smart

http://www.votesmart.org/election_president_what_is_electoral_college.php

A good, informal but detailed explanation of the electoral process.

The *Federalist* No. 68

<http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/4466>

Alexander Hamilton's defense of the (original) constitutional method of electing a president. See the Supplemental Resources section of this lesson, above, for related resources.

Center for Voting and Democracy

http://www.fairvote.org/e_college/controversial.htm

This website provides a good summary of the events of seven controversial elections, including those of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000.

U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>

Basic information about each state, including population, population under 18 (and therefore voting age population), and a host of other data not needed for this lesson. Extremely useful for students doing background research on the states they represent in the constitutional convention.

Congressional Constituency Maps from FairData

<http://www.fairdata2000.com/Congressional/>

These interactive maps allow you to find demographic and political data for congressional districts nationwide. The resolution for some items is as small as a block.

Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections

<http://uselectionatlas.org/>

Includes detailed national results presidential elections from 1789 through 2000. Individual year pages include candidates, parties, popular and electoral vote totals, maps, charts, and voter turnout (1932–2000). Also available are state results for elections 1892–2000 and county-level maps and data for elections 1960–2000. The 2000 pages also include results maps by Congressional District.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including American government, Constitution, United States, civics, elections, government, presidency, social studies, and voting.

Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4465>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4467>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4468>.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4470>.
5. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/electoralcollege.html>.
6. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/electoralcollege.html>.
7. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/discussion.html>.
8. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/stateinfo.html>.
9. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/discussion.html>.
10. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/lessons/davidwalbert7232004-02/report.html>.
11. See <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fedpapers.html>.
12. See <http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution.html>.
13. See <http://www.law.ou.edu/ushistory/artconf.shtml>.
14. See <http://www.constitution.org/afp/afp.htm>.
15. See <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/seminars/2003/muller.html>.

About the author

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David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.