Choosing a President

How the Electoral College works, changed, and is debated

9-12.GOV.37 "Explain the Electoral College system, and how it has evolved over time, and compare arguments for and against it."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two steps in the Electoral College process, circle two examples of how it changed, and label one argument for the system 1 and one argument against it 2.

From Ballots to Electoral Votes

1. When voters cast ballots for president, they are usually choosing a slate of electors pledged to a candidate. Each state gets electors equal to its members of Congress, and Washington, D.C., gets three. There are 538 electoral votes, so 270 is the usual winning majority. Almost all states award all their electoral votes to the statewide popular-vote winner. Maine and Nebraska can split theirs by congressional district. Electors vote after the public election, and Congress counts their votes. If no presidential candidate wins an electoral majority, the House of Representatives chooses the president from the top three electoral-vote recipients, with each state delegation casting one vote.

2. That process did not begin as today's familiar November vote. The Constitution let each state decide how to appoint electors, and some early state legislatures chose them without a statewide popular vote. At first, electors cast two votes for president, with no separate vote for vice president. A tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr in 1800 exposed a weakness, and the Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, required separate votes for the two offices. Over time, states adopted popular elections for electors. The Twenty-third Amendment, ratified in 1961, gave Washington, D.C., electoral votes, though it has no voting members of Congress.

3. Imagine a candidate winning millions more votes nationwide but losing by narrow margins in several states. That candidate could lose the presidency because electoral votes, not the national popular-vote total, decide the result. Supporters argue that state-based results encourage candidates to seek support across different parts of the country and preserve a role for states in choosing the president. Critics answer that candidates often concentrate on competitive states while ignoring states with predictable outcomes. They also object that the statewide winner-take-all rule can leave many voters unrepresented in their state's electoral-vote total. These arguments weigh federalism and geographic representation against equal influence for individual voters.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do votes cast by the public usually lead to a president being chosen? Explain what happens if no candidate wins an electoral majority.

2. What problem did the 1800 election reveal, and how did the Twelfth Amendment change the electors' votes?

3. Describe two ways participation in choosing electors changed from the early years of the system.

4. How do supporters and critics differ about the effect of state-based results on where candidates campaign?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A proposed constitutional amendment would elect the president by a single national popular vote. In five or six sentences, recommend whether to support it. Explain one step of the current system, describe one historical change, compare an argument for and an argument against the Electoral College, and give a reason for your recommendation.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.GOV.37

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two steps in the Electoral College process, circle two examples of how it changed, and label one argument for the system 1 and one argument against it 2. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do votes cast by the public usually lead to a president being chosen? Explain what happens if no candidate wins an electoral majority.	**Voters usually choose pledged electors. Most states award all their electors to the statewide winner, and Congress counts the electors' votes. If no candidate wins an electoral majority, the House chooses from the top three electoral-vote recipients, with one vote per state delegation.**
2	What problem did the 1800 election reveal, and how did the Twelfth Amendment change the electors' votes?	**The election produced a tie between Jefferson and Burr. The Twelfth Amendment required electors to vote separately for president and vice president.**
3	Describe two ways participation in choosing electors changed from the early years of the system.	**States adopted popular elections for electors instead of having some state legislatures choose them. The Twenty-third Amendment gave Washington, D.C., electoral votes.**
4	How do supporters and critics differ about the effect of state-based results on where candidates campaign?	**Supporters say candidates seek support across different parts of the country. Critics say candidates focus on competitive states and neglect states with predictable results.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would support an amendment that elects the president by national popular vote. Today, most states give all their electoral votes to the candidate who wins that state's popular vote. Some early state legislatures chose electors directly, but states later adopted popular elections for them. Supporters of the Electoral College say it preserves a role for states and encourages candidates to seek support across regions. Critics argue that campaigns instead focus on competitive states and that the national popular-vote winner can lose. I think a national vote would better reflect each voter's choice, even if it reduced the states' role.

For the open-response task, accept either recommendation if the student accurately explains the current system and a historical change, compares both sides, and supports a judgment. Students may use historical changes other than those in the sample.