

# Teaching about the Electoral College

David Dulio and the staff of the National Student/Parent Mock Election

IT IS A FACT LITTLE KNOWN by many students that when citizens step into the voting booth on election day and select the name of the candidate they wish to be president, they are not actually voting for the individual whose name is on the ballot. Rather, they are choosing a set of “electors” assigned to the state in which the voter lives. These electors are the individuals who will participate in the formal election of the president of the United States.

The U.S. Constitution assigns each state a number of “electoral votes” that equals the number of that state’s members of the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. (See Table 1) When all electors from all 50 states are taken together, we arrive at the Electoral College—the mechanism formally used to choose the president.

The Electoral College consists of 538 electors [the number of U.S. House members (435) plus the number of U.S. Senators (100) plus the electors for the District of Columbia (3)]. A candidate must win a majority of these (270 in total) in order to become president-elect. While this system seems convoluted, the Founding Fathers who instituted it had their reasons; many of these can be found in the writings of Alexander Hamilton in Federalist Paper #68 ([thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed\\_68.html](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_68.html)).

The Constitution leaves many decisions surrounding the Electoral College to the states, including how each state’s electoral votes will be assigned (e.g., by voting in an election, by the state legislature, etc.) and how they will be divided between the candidates for office (e.g., in a winner-take-all manner, by proportional representation, etc.). While all states (and the District of Columbia) now use a statewide election to assign their electoral votes, there is some difference in how states divide the electoral votes. Most states (48 in all) use a simple winner-take-all decision rule by which the candidate with the most votes in the

election gets all of that state’s electoral votes. Two states (Maine and Nebraska) use a system that is more similar to a proportional division of electoral votes (i.e., that it is possible for more than one candidate to receive electoral votes in these states).

Either way, in all states voters head to the polls on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November and mark a ballot for their choice of electors in the presidential contest. After all of the voting locations close, each ballot is counted and the votes for each candidate in the race are tallied.

Following the finalized vote totals, the assignment of the state’s electoral votes are made. The first candidate to accumulate a majority of electoral votes (270) becomes president elect. This process decides who will be the next president of the United States. However, the candidate with the most electoral votes is not formally elected until the members of the Electoral College meet and cast votes, which will happen on December 13, 2004; the votes will be formally counted by a joint session of Congress on January 6, 2005. (For a more detailed description of the process, see the Electoral College web page at the National Archives—[www.archives.gov/federal\\_register/electoral\\_college/2004/dates.html](http://www.archives.gov/federal_register/electoral_college/2004/dates.html).)

## Electoral College Classroom Activities

**1** Discuss the reasons set forth by the Framers for instituting the Electoral College. Use Hamilton’s writings in Federalist Paper #68 ([thomas.loc.gov/](http://thomas.loc.gov/)

[home/histdox/fed\\_68.html](http://home/histdox/fed_68.html)) as a guide. Consider with your class whether you believe these reasons are still valid. Why do we still use the Electoral College? What are the alternatives? What are the pros and cons of using a different system to elect the president—the national popular vote, for instance? Why do most states use a winner-take-all method, rather than a proportional method in their assignment of electoral votes? (See for instance, the Frequently Asked Questions page at the National Archives: [www.archives.gov/federal\\_register/electoral\\_college/faq.html](http://www.archives.gov/federal_register/electoral_college/faq.html)).

**2** As noted above, a candidate must accumulate 270 electoral votes to become president. There are literally countless numbers of combinations of states that could result in a total of 270 or more electoral votes for a candidate. However, past electoral history and previous voting results tell us that there are some states that have traditionally voted for, and assigned their electoral votes to Republican candidates, and some states that have traditionally voted for, and assigned their electoral votes to Democratic candidates. For instance, Texas is a state that is typically solidly in the Republican column, while California habitually goes for Democratic candidates.

Past election results can give us great clues as to how the 2004 election will go. Examine the election results from 2000 ([www.archives.gov/federal\\_register/electoral\\_college/2000/popular\\_vote.html](http://www.archives.gov/federal_register/electoral_college/2000/popular_vote.html)). Which

Table 1

**Electoral College Votes:  
2004 Presidential Elections***(Total electoral votes: 538; majority needed to elect: 270)*

Alabama	9
Alaska	3
Arizona	10
Arkansas	6
California	55
Colorado	9
Connecticut	7
Delaware	3
District of Columbia	3
Florida	27
Georgia	15
Hawaii	4
Idaho	4
Illinois	21
Indiana	11
Iowa	7
Kansas	6
Kentucky	8
Louisiana	9
Maine	4
Maryland	10
Massachusetts	12
Michigan	17
Minnesota	10
Mississippi	6
Missouri	11
Montana	3
Nebraska	5
Nevada	5
New Hampshire	4
New Jersey	15
New Mexico	5
New York	31
North Carolina	15
North Dakota	3
Ohio	20
Oklahoma	7
Oregon	7
Pennsylvania	21
Rhode Island	4
South Carolina	8
South Dakota	3
Tennessee	11
Texas	34
Utah	5
Vermont	3
Virginia	13
Washington	11
West Virginia	5
Wisconsin	10
Wyoming	3

The National Student/Parent Mock Election ([www.nationalmockelection.org](http://www.nationalmockelection.org)) is a voter education project that has involved millions of American students, parents and educators in mock elections. This year, on October 28, in all 50 states, Washington, DC, and American schools overseas, students, educators, and parents will cast mock election votes for President, the House of Representatives, and the positions of senator and governor (President, Congress, Senate and governor where there is a race).

The Mock Election also includes a ballot on several different issues relating to national security, constitutional liberties, the economy, education and healthcare. For example, participants will vote on one of the following, whichever is the most important and second most important issue for them:

- |  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a) Homeland security / the "War on Terror" | d) Healthcare                  |
| b) The economy                             | e) Other. Please specify _____ |
| c) Education                               |                                |

The Teacher's Guide and other free curriculum, and information on how to enroll in the mock election, can be found at [www.nationalmockelection.org](http://www.nationalmockelection.org) (Inquiries can also be faxed to the number 520-742-3553). Participants can vote on the Internet, by phone, or by fax, and forward the tallies to the Election Headquarters in their state. After participants enroll, their State Coordinator will supply information on the location of their state's Mock Election Headquarters, or, alternatively, they will be able to vote directly at National Election Headquarters.

states were in the Republican column and which were in the Democratic column? Go back to the 1996 and 1992 election results and do the same thing. Do you see any patterns? Try and identify the "Republican L" that many think gives Republican candidates an upper hand in presidential elections.

Based on the trends you find in previous election results (with special attention to 2000), and on current opinion polls, what can you say about the 2004 election? Use the Electoral College Calculator ([www.archives.gov/federal\\_register/electoral\\_college/calculator.html](http://www.archives.gov/federal_register/electoral_college/calculator.html)) to assign electoral votes to different states that you think are nearly certain to be in either Bush's or Kerry's column on election night. Which states are difficult to assign to either candidate? Try to identify those states that are classified as "swing states," or those that could swing in either direction. Do not put these into the Electoral College Calculator, but keep them off to the side and use only those states that are "sure things" for both candidates.

(Table 2 provides a list compiled in the summer of 2004 of swing states and states that were firmly with or leaning to a candidate. Teachers should, however, encourage students to do the research on their own rather than simply show them

the table.)

After this first run at the calculator, examine how many electoral votes each candidate still needs to get to the magic number of 270. Of the remaining states not assigned to a candidate (i.e., the "swing states"), which states are each candidate's best bet to get to 270? Examine where the candidates are spending their time on the campaign trail. Do these states match with the list of states you just created? Why? What is it about the states to which the candidates are traveling? Would the candidates' travel plans and strategy be different if a different method of electing the president was used?

If you do not have access to a computer, use a blank outline map of the United States. Insert the number of electoral votes for each state from Table 1. Using a calculator, or just simple columns of addition, try a combination of states you believe will be responsible for the winning candidate this year.

In addition to using the web, you may also ask your librarian to help you research which states have a past history of voting for a Democratic or Republican president.

Use the map to compare your combination with the actual results as you watch them come in on Election Day, November 2.

Table 2

## Political Leanings of States\*

<b>Firmly or Likely Democratic</b>	<b>Swing States</b>	<b>Firmly or Likely Republican</b>
California Connecticut DC Delaware Hawaii Illinois Maryland Massachusetts New Jersey New York Rhode Island Vermont	Arizona Arkansas Florida Iowa Maine Michigan Minnesota Missouri Nevada New Hampshire New Mexico Ohio Oregon Pennsylvania Washington West Virginia Wisconsin	Alabama Alaska Colorado Georgia Idaho Indiana Kansas Kentucky Louisiana Mississippi Montana Nebraska North Carolina North Dakota Oklahoma South Carolina South Dakota Tennessee Texas Utah Virginia Wyoming
<b>States considered likely to go to Kerry: 11 states + D.C. = 12  168 electoral votes</b>	<b>17 states  180 electoral votes</b>	<b>States considered likely to go to Bush: 22 states  190 electoral votes</b>

\*As of the summer of 2004. These categories are considered flexible.

**3** On the day after the election—November 3—collect the election results from each state across the country. Who won and who lost? Make a tally sheet on the board and note each state's outcome and the number of electoral votes each has to assign to a candidate. Match this with your predictions from before the election that were based on previous election results. How well did you do in predicting the outcome? If you did well, what do you think was the reason? If the results were

not what you expected, why is that? Search newspaper coverage for articles explaining the results of the election.

For other campaign and voting information see the Federal Voting Assistance Program website at: [www.fvap.gov](http://www.fvap.gov) for their Get-Out-The-Vote Public Service Announcement (PSA) Campaign. Also see [cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/fyi/](http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/fyi/) for CNN Student News and [www.cspan.org/classroom/index.asp?code=Classroom](http://www.cspan.org/classroom/index.asp?code=Classroom) for C-SPAN in the Classroom.

For additional activities and campaign information go to [www.nationalmockelection.org](http://www.nationalmockelection.org).

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