**How Do Americans Choose Their President?**

The United States does not elect its president directly through a national popular vote. Instead, the Constitution created the Electoral College, a system that gives each state a certain number of electoral votes based on its representation in Congress (House + Senate). When citizens cast their ballots for president, they are actually voting for a slate of electors who will cast the official votes for president and vice president.

Most states use a “winner-take-all” system, where the candidate who gets the most votes in the state receives all of that state’s electoral votes. The first candidate to reach 270 out of 538 total electoral votes wins the presidency. This system means that smaller states still have a voice in presidential elections, but it also creates strong incentives for candidates to focus on swing states, those with close or unpredictable outcomes.

The Electoral College is a source of ongoing debate. Supporters say it balances the influence of big and small states and preserves the federal structure. Critics argue it can override the popular vote and give disproportionate power to a few battleground states.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| **Electoral College** | The system established by the Constitution for electing the president, using electors chosen by each state. |
| **Elector** | A person selected to formally vote for the president and vice president in the Electoral College. |
| **Winner-Take-All** | A system where the candidate with the most votes in a state wins all of that state’s electoral votes. |
| **Battleground State** | A state where no candidate has overwhelming support, making it heavily targeted in campaigns. |
| **Swing State** | Another term for a battleground state; it can “swing” either way in an election. |
| **Popular Vote** | The total number of votes cast by citizens across the entire country. |
| **270 to Win** | The minimum number of electoral votes needed to win the presidency. |

**Active Learning Exercise: “Elect the President!” Simulation**

**Orienting Question:**  
How does the Electoral College shape who becomes president?

**Objective:**  
Students will simulate a presidential election using the Electoral College and analyze its effects.

**Instructions:**

**Part 1: Popular vs. Electoral Vote (10–15 minutes)**

* Divide students into 5–6 “states” of varying population sizes.
* Assign each state a number of electoral votes.
* Hold a mock popular vote using ballots, then count electoral votes using winner-take-all rules.
* Compare the national popular vote to the Electoral College outcome.

**Part 2: Campaign Strategy Map (15–20 minutes)**

* Provide a U.S. map with electoral vote counts.
* Students roleplay as campaign managers and decide where to spend limited campaign resources.
* They must explain their focus on key battleground states.

**Debrief Discussion (10 minutes):**

* Did the popular vote winner also win the presidency?
* How did the Electoral College influence campaign strategy?
* Is this system fair or flawed?

**Review Questions**

1. How does the Electoral College determine the winner of a presidential election?
2. What is the role of electors in the system?
3. Why do presidential candidates focus on swing states?
4. What are arguments for and against the Electoral College?
5. Can a candidate become president without winning the national popular vote? Explain how.