How Do We Elect the President? Understanding the Electoral College

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- In the presidential election of 2000, Al Gore received **over 500,000 more votes** than George Bush.
- However, George Bush won because he got **five more votes in the Electoral College.**
- The **Electoral College** is a system of voting that is used only in elections for the president and vice president.
- In 2000, Al Gore received **more votes** than George Bush in total, but he **lost the election** because of the **Electoral College.**

Candidate	Popular Vote	Electoral College
Al Gore	50,999,897	266
George W. Bush	50,456,002	271

What is the Electoral College?

- The Electoral College system is explained by the 12th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.
- When voters **cast their ballots** in the presidential election, they really choose a group of people called **electors** who **promise** to vote for a specific candidate when the Electoral College meets in December.

How does it work?

- The candidate who wins the **popular vote** in any state (except for Maine and Nebraska) receives *all* of the state's Electoral College votes.
- This means that all of a state's votes go for **either the Democrats or the Republicans, but not both** (except for Maine and Nebraska).
- The number of electoral votes that each state has depends on the states' **population**.
- In the end, the winner of the election is the candidate who wins a **majority** (270) of the 538 Electoral College votes.

A Thought Puzzle: How is it possible to win the majority of the popular vote but lose the election?

	A	B	C	D	E	
VOTERS	XOO XXO XXX	XOO XXO XXX	XOO XXO XXX	OOO OOO XOO	OOO OOO XOO	X=20 O=25
ELECTORAL COLLEGE	X	X	X	O	O	

This graphic shows how the winner of the popular vote can lose the Electoral College. States A, B, and C each have a majority of "x" voters, so "x" wins 3 electoral votes even though there are fewer "x" voters.

Why do we do it this way?

- In 1776, the **founders** of our country had a difficult problem.
- There was no Internet, no television or radio, not many newspapers.
- It was hard for people in different states to communicate.
- In 1776, there were 13 states, some big and some small.
- The founders wanted each state to have power in the election.
- In 1776, the popular vote (no electoral college) would have given more power to bigger states

Is it the best system for today? What do you think?

People **in favor** of it say:
- It makes the country more unified by making sure that a president is popular throughout the entire country.
- It gives power to smaller states.

People **against** it say:
- It is possible to elect a president who doesn't win the majority of the votes.
- It makes it difficult for a candidate from a third party to win.

What do you think??

To explain the Electoral College: After going through the first page of the handout, which explains the Electoral College process, students are usually completely confused. To help explain it, I do the following activity. Before class, I prepare slips of paper with students' "votes" on them, for cats/dogs or beef/chicken. I purposely make the election very close, by one or two votes. I pass out a "vote" to each student, and then take a tally of the results of our class's "popular vote." (For the purpose of this activity, students don't get to choose whether they support cats or dogs, I choose for them. If they get to choose themselves it can be harder to make the desired point). Then, I group students into "states" and manipulate the groups in such a way that even with the same number of students and the same exact votes, the "electoral college" outcome is different from the popular vote outcome we saw just minutes before. Usually this makes the process clearer to students.