

# Road to the White House

Students will understand the unique process of electing the president of the United States.

(30-45 minutes)

## Discussion

Someone who wants to be president must first win their party's nomination. There are currently two major parties, Republican and Democratic. Each state party holds a primary or caucus to select their choice for nominee.

The parties' presidential nomination process starts with the Iowa Caucus. A caucus is a small neighborhood meeting of the Democratic or Republican parties. At a caucus, party members talk about candidates and decide who they feel would be the best presidential nominee for their party. Caucus results are sent to state party headquarters where the results are tallied.

A presidential primary serves the same purpose. New Hampshire's constitution states that it's always the first state to hold a presidential primary. In a presidential primary, party members statewide vote for their favorite candidate. The winning candidate gains that state's votes for nomination at the party's national convention.

At the national conventions, each party selects a nominee. The convention itself is a roll call. Each state is called and the number of votes they have is announced (based on state population). The state's party delegates stand and declare their choice for presidential nominee. The candidates with the most votes wins the party's nomination and goes on to the General Election.

In the General Election, minor party nominees join the Republican and Democrat nominees on the ballot. Minor party nominees typically support certain causes or are simply a popular individual.

After the General Election, the winner is declared based on who earned the most electoral votes. Each state is given the same number of votes in the Electoral College as it has U.S. representatives and senators. After the 2010 Census, Washington gained a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, making our total electoral votes 12. Electors are chosen by each state party before the election; if their nominee wins the state's popular vote, those electors will vote in the Electoral College.



## Primary Sources

U.S. Constitution:

- [Article 2, Section 1](#)
- Amendments [12](#), [14](#), [20](#), [22](#), [23](#) & [25](#)

Federalist Paper No. 68:  
The Mode of Electing the President (p. 4)

### **political party**

*a group of people who share common political views, working to elect members to government*

### **major party**

*a political party that had federal or statewide candidates who received at least 5% of the vote in the previous presidential election*

### **minor party**

*a political party not qualified to be a major party; also known as a "third party"*

### **nominee**

*a candidate chosen by a political party*

**presidential primary**  
*an election to select the state party's choice for presidential nominee; that state's delegates will vote for the Primary winner at their party's national convention*

**caucus**  
*a meeting of party members to select their state's choice for a presidential nominee and delegates to their national convention*

**Super Tuesday**  
*the day that many states hold presidential primaries and caucuses, the results of which generally predict the major parties' presidential nominees*

**national convention**  
*a meeting of party delegates from each state to select the party's presidential nominee*

**Electoral College**  
*presidents are not elected directly by voters; instead, they are elected by "electors" who are chosen by popular vote in each state; states get a number of electoral votes equal to their seats in Congress (Washington has 12 electoral votes)*

**inauguration**  
*the ceremony in which a winning candidate takes office*

## Elementary Lesson

1. Ask students to write in their own words each step of the presidential election system on the blank "Road to the White House" worksheet (p. 5).

## Electing the President (Middle & High School)

1. Read Federalist Paper No. 68 (p. 4) and applicable sections of the U.S. Constitution, then discuss the process. Ask students to write in their own words each step of the presidential election system on the blank "Road to the White House" worksheet (p. 5).
2. Divide students into groups of three or four. Have each group draw a song title out of a hat. Suggested song titles:  
  
Yankee Doodle  
You're a Grand 'Ole Flag  
My Country 'Tis of Thee  
This Land is Your Land  
Battle Hymn of the Republic  
Take Me Out to the Ball Game
3. Instruct each group to replace the words of the song with their own lyrics about the presidential election process. Students must include each step of the process, but may describe it in their own words.
4. Give the groups 20 minutes to work on their lyrics, then ask groups to perform their songs for the class.

## Electoral College (Middle & High School)

1. Read Federalist Paper No. 68 (p. 4) and applicable sections of the U.S. Constitution, then discuss the process proposed there compared to the presidential election system we have today. Are the advantages Hamilton touted, such as the Electoral College, still the best solution today? Why or why not?
2. Ask students to complete the "Electoral College Calculator" map (p. 6) and list how many electoral votes each state is allotted.
3. If it's a presidential election year, have students fill in each state red or blue to indicate which nominee they think will win those electoral votes. What's the final tally? Who will win? (Teachers could offer a prize to students with the closest guess.)

## Homework

Many people have debated the effectiveness of the Electoral College. Ask students to discuss the Electoral College with an adult, and write down their thoughts following the conversation.

What are the benefits of the Electoral College?

How is the Electoral College outdated or ineffective?

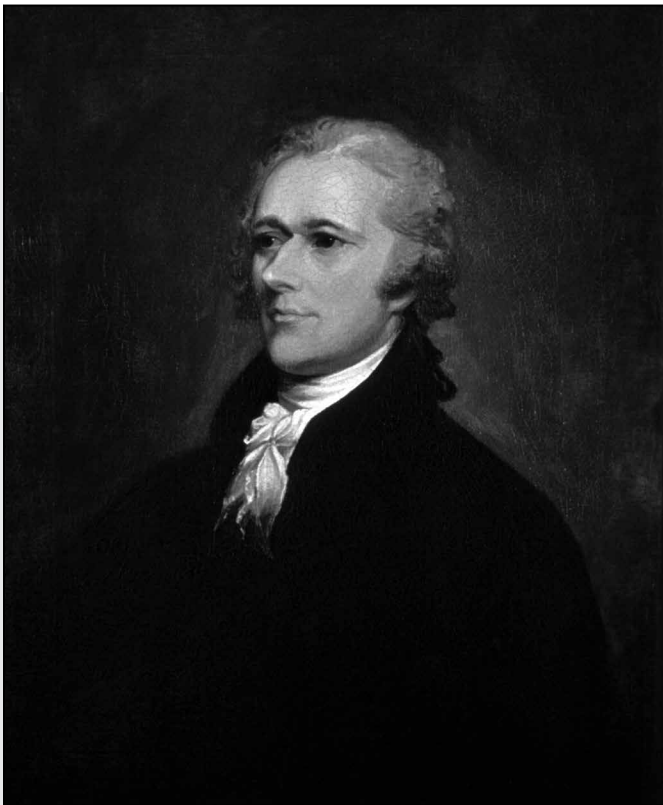
What is a different way we could select the president?

## Assessment Questions

**Elementary:** The vote for the presidential election is one of the biggest decisions an adult can make. You are being asked if voting should be required. Interview someone who disagrees with your position and find out why.

**Middle & High School** (students may choose):

1. The Constitution forbids naturalized citizens from running for president or vice president. Based on Alexander Hamilton's quote below, should the Constitution be amended to give naturalized citizens the right to run for president?
2. Now that you've had a discussion about the Electoral College, can you think of an alternative for selecting the President of the United States?



**“Constitutions should consist only of general provisions; the reason is that they must necessarily be permanent, and that they cannot calculate for the possible change of things.”**

Alexander Hamilton

# Federalist Paper No. 68 — The Mode of Electing the President

New York — March 14, 1788

To the People of the State of New York,

The mode of appointment of the Chief Magistrate of the United States is almost the only part of the system, of any consequence, which has escaped without severe censure, or which has received the slightest mark of approbation from its opponents... I venture somewhat further that if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent.

It was desirable that the sense of the people should operate in the choice of the [President]. This end will be answered by committing the right, not to any preestablished body, but to men chosen by the people for the special purpose...

It was also [particularly] desirable to afford as little opportunity as possible to tumult and disorder. This evil was not least to be dreaded in the election of a magistrate, who was to have so important a [role] in the administration of the government as the President of the United States. But the precautions which have been so happily concerted in the system under consideration, promise an effectual security against this mischief. The choice of several [men], to form an intermediate body of electors, will be much less apt to convulse the community with any extraordinary or violent movements, than the choice of one who was himself to be the final object of the public wishes. And as the electors, chosen in each State, are to assemble and vote in the State in which they are chosen, this detached and divided situation will expose them much less to heats and ferments than if they were all to be convened at one time, in one place.

Nothing was more to be desired than [to prevent] cabal, intrigue, and corruption. These most deadly adversaries of republican government might naturally have been expected [from] foreign powers [wanting] to gain an improper ascendant in our councils. How could they better gratify this, than by raising a creature of their own to the chief magistracy of the Union? But the [Constitution] guarded against all danger of this sort, with the most provident and judicious attention. [The Constitution] has not made the appointment of the President to depend on any preexisting bodies of men, who might be tampered with beforehand to prostitute their votes; but has referred it the people of America, to be exerted in the choice of persons for the temporary and sole purpose of making the appointment. And [the Constitution] excluded from eligibility all those who from situation might be suspected of too great devotion to the President in office. No senator, representative, or other person holding a place of trust or profit under the United States, can be of the numbers of the electors. Thus the [electors] will enter upon the task free from any sinister bias. Their transient existence, and their detached situation, afford a satisfactory prospect of their continuing so, to the conclusion of it. The business of corruption, when it is to embrace so considerable a number of men, requires time as well as means. Nor would it be easy, dispersed as they would be over thirteen States, to mislead them from their duty.

No less important was that the Executive should be independent for his continuance in office on all but the people themselves. He might otherwise be tempted to sacrifice his duty to his complaisance for those whose favor was necessary to the duration of his [term]...

**“The people of each State shall choose a number of persons as electors, equal to the number of senators and representatives of such State in the national government, who shall assemble within the State and vote for some fit person as President... the person who may happen to have a majority of votes will be the President.”**

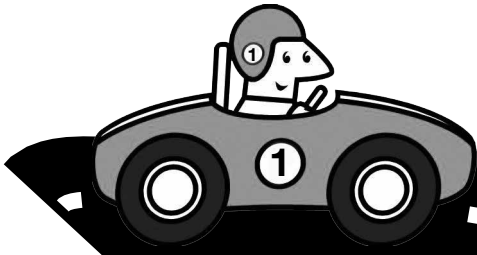
All these advantages will happily combine in the plan devised by the [Constitution]; which is, that the people of each State shall choose a number of persons as electors, equal to the number of senators and representatives of such State in the national government, who shall assemble within the State, and vote for some fit person as President. Their votes, thus given, are to be transmitted to the seat of the national government, and the person who may happen to have a majority of the whole number of votes will be the President...

The process of election affords a moral certainty that the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications. Talents for low intrigue, and the little arts of popularity, may alone suffice to elevate a man to the first honors in a single State; but it will require other talents, and a different kind of merit, to establish him in the esteem and confidence of the whole Union, or of so considerable a portion of it as would be necessary to make him a successful candidate for the distinguished office of President of the United States. It will not be too strong to say, that there will be a constant probability of seeing the station filled by characters pre-eminent for ability and virtue... We may safely pronounce, that the true test of a good government is its aptitude and tendency to produce a good administration.

PUBLIUS  
(Alexander Hamilton)

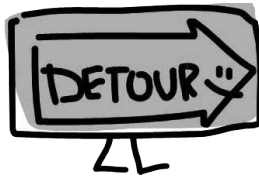
# Road to the White House

Describe each stage of the presidential election process.



**State Primaries/Caucuses**

**Convention**



**General Election**

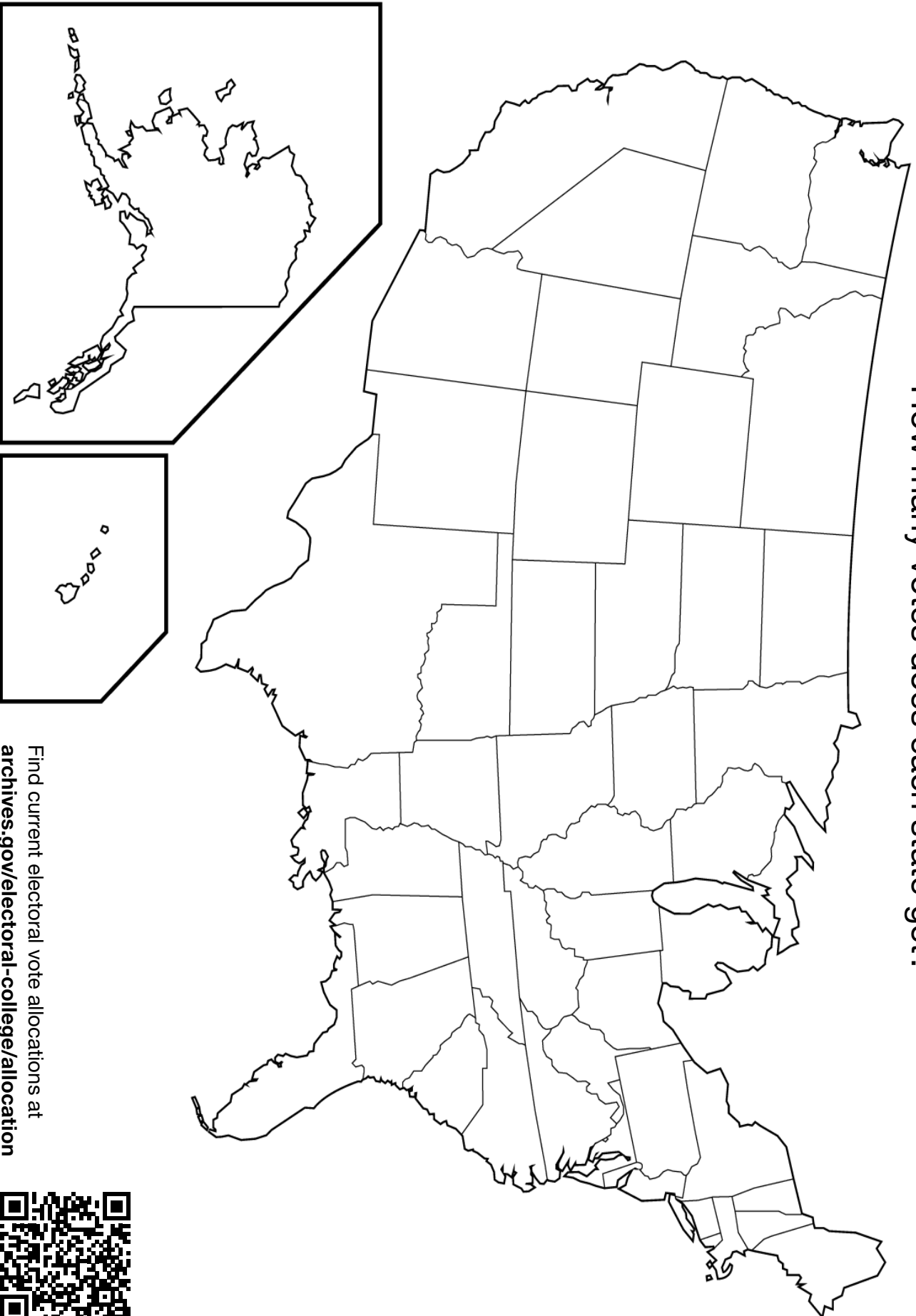
**Electoral College**

**Inauguration**



# Electoral College Calculator

How many votes does each state get?



Find current electoral vote allocations at  
[archives.gov/electoral-college/allocation](https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/allocation)

