

# *Electing a President: The Process*

## Teacher's Guide



**Grade Level:** 6–8

**Curriculum Focus:** Social Sciences

**Lesson Duration:** Two class periods

### **Program Description**

*Electing a President: The Process*—Every four years voters in the United States take part in an event established in the U.S. Constitution: electing the nation's president. This program is a thorough, up-to-date look at presidential elections, their history, and how they are changing with new media. The program explains that although the framers of the Constitution did not encourage political parties, partisanship arose soon after the nation was founded. The first big party split was over how much power to give state and federal governments. Before the Civil War it was thought to be undignified for candidates to campaign in person. Abraham Lincoln's 1860 opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, conducted the first "whistle-stop campaign." Long speech-making railroad journeys were a feature of presidential elections until after World War II. The program describes how Franklin Delano Roosevelt made use of radio to win in 1932, how television helped decide the political fates of Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1952 and 1960, and how the Internet influenced the 2000 campaigns. The controversial 2000 election is covered in detail. The program also discusses issues such as race, religion, wealth, and gender in presidential candidates and the growing image-making power of electronic media.

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### **Discussion Questions**

- How have presidential elections changed during the history of the United States?
  - How does a person become a candidate for president of the U.S.?
  - What is the role of the electoral college in electing a president?
  - Why are television and the Internet important parts of today's presidential elections?
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### **Lesson Plan**

#### *Student Objectives*

- Describe how presidential election campaigns have changed during U.S. history.
- Describe the roles of voters and the electoral college in choosing a president.
- Write a short essay explaining why you approve or disapprove of the present system of electing presidents.

## **Materials**

- *Electing a President: The Process* video
- Computer with Internet access
- Print and Web resources (including textbook entries, encyclopedia articles, biographies, and campaign literature) about presidential elections

## **Procedures**

1. Explain that the program is fairly long and contains many details. Encourage students to view the program more than once or to stop and replay the program in order to take adequate notes.
2. After students have viewed the program, ask them to recall details of what they saw and heard. This review can take the form of a class discussion or a quick, unannounced quiz. One effective review strategy is to have students define key terms and illustrate their definitions with examples from the program. (Use the Vocabulary section of this lesson plan.) Another good strategy is to list categories on the chalkboard, asking students to supply details that fit under each category. The following categories should help students recall details:
  - Requirements for running for president, as stated in the Constitution (The president must be at least 35 years old, must have been born in the U.S., and must have lived here for at least 14 years.)
  - Rules for presidential elections stated in the Constitution (The program mentions that the Constitution sets up the electoral college system and decrees that elections be held every four years.)
  - Legal changes in the election process that have taken place since the Constitution (The program mentions the development of political parties, as well as the expansion of the vote to almost all white men in 1828, to black men after the Civil War, and to women in 1920. The program also discusses the development of the primary election as a means of choosing party candidates.)
  - Examples from history of how technology has affected presidential elections (The program describes how whistle-stop campaigns spread with the railroads, how radio helped FDR win in 1932, how television worked both for and against Richard M. Nixon, and how the Internet helped shape the 2000 campaigns of Al Gore and George W. Bush.)
  - Characteristics that presidents thus far have had in common (All presidents have been white, male, and Christian. All presidents have been Protestant but for JFK, who was Roman Catholic.)
3. Ask students to describe what they learned about the role the electoral college has in choosing a president. Using the 2000 election as an example, ask students to explain how someone who won a majority of the popular vote might not be elected president. (Students should recognize that in most states the majority vote determines how all the electoral votes will be cast.) Have volunteers suggest ways this system might be improved.

4. Have students use print and Web resources to learn more about the presidential election process. Alert students to possible pitfalls in conducting online research. Ask them to notice which are partisan sites (supporting a single party). Students should take special care to use material from objective sources, unless they are quoting a partisan position. Objective sources include government sites, the sites of major museums, and university-sponsored databases. Students should record their sources (the Web addresses) as they take notes. The following Web sites are a good starting point:
  - Library of Congress: American Memory (select "Government, Law")  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
  - University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs: AmericanPresident.org  
<http://www.americanpresident.org/>
  - Commission on Presidential Debates  
<http://www.debates.org/>
  - Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids (Grades 6–8): Election Process  
<http://bensguide.gpo.gov/6-8/election/index.html>
  - U.S. National Archives and Records Administration: The Charters of Freedom (select "Constitution of the United States")  
<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters.html>
  - The Democratic Party  
<http://www.democrats.org/>
  - Federal Election Commission: The Electoral College  
<http://www.fec.gov/pages/ecmenu2.htm>
  - FirstGov.gov: For Citizens: Voting and Elections  
<http://www.firstgov.gov/Citizen/Topics/Voting.shtml>
  - GOP.com (Republican National Committee)  
<http://www.gop.com/default.aspx>
  - Internet Public Library (University of Michigan School of Information): POTUS (Presidents of the United States)  
<http://www.ipl.org/div/potus/>
  - Library of Congress: The Learning Page: Features and Activities (select "American Memory Timeline," "Elections," and "Inaugurations")  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/index.html>
  - PBS: American Experience (see "The Presidents" and "War and Politics")  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/index.html>

- PBS: The American President  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/amerpres/>
  - Smithsonian Education: IdeaLab: Mr. President  
[http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/students/idealabs/mr\\_president.html](http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/students/idealabs/mr_president.html)
  - Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: The American Presidency, a Glorious Burden  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/home.html>
  - Students.gov (see "Government 101")  
<http://www.students.gov/STUGOVWebApp/index.jsp>
  - U.S. National Archives and Records Administration: U.S. Electoral College: Historical Election Results  
<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/historical.html>
  - Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: Vote: The Machinery of Democracy  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/vote/>
  - The White House  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
5. Ask students to evaluate what they have learned about presidential elections and to decide if and how the process could be improved. Then have students write persuasive essays that set forth their points of view about the presidential election process. For example, students might argue that the electoral college system should be altered or abolished.
6. Have selected students take turns reading their essays to the class. You might want to appoint an editorial team to select the 10 best essays and publish them in booklet form.

### *Assessment*

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students were highly engaged in class discussions; defined most key terms; conducted online research using objective sources; wrote a well-organized persuasive essay solidly supporting a clearly expressed point of view .
- 2 points: Students participated in class discussions; defined some key terms; conducted online research using mostly objective sources; wrote an adequate persuasive essay supporting a somewhat clearly expressed point of view .
- 1 point: Students participated minimally in class discussions; defined few key terms; conducted online research using few objective sources; wrote an inadequate persuasive essay with an unclear point of view.

## Vocabulary

### **administration**

*Definition:* A group constituting officials appointed by a president in a federal government

*Context:* A president running for a second term runs on the record of his first administration.

### **amendment**

*Definition:* An addition to the U.S. Constitution or a bill in Congress

*Context:* Several amendments to the Constitution expanded the voting rights of U.S. citizens.

### **candidate**

*Definition:* A person who is running for office

*Context:* Before there were primary elections, ordinary party members had little to do with choosing a party's presidential candidate.

### **consensus**

*Definition:* A general agreement in opinion

*Context:* The framers of the U.S. Constitution thought that most issues would be settled by consensus, not by partisan voting.

### **Constitution**

*Definition:* The document that determines the powers and duties of the federal government

*Context:* The U.S. Constitution states that presidential elections are to take place every four years.

### **delegate**

*Definition:* A representative to a convention or congress

*Context:* In most presidential elections today the candidates for the major parties are known before the delegates arrive at their party conventions.

### **direct election**

*Definition:* An election in which the winner is chosen by a simple majority of all the voters

*Context:* Because the president is not chosen by direct election but by electoral votes, it is possible to win the majority of votes and still lose the election.

### **electoral college**

*Definition:* A body of people specially chosen to elect a leader

*Context:* When you vote for a president, you are giving your state's electors orders on how to cast their votes.

### **executive**

*Definition:* Having to do with a president or another leader



*Context:* The president is the head of the executive branch of the U.S. government.

**federal**

*Definition:* Having to do with a central government authority

*Context:* The first political parties formed around the issue of how much power should be given to the federal government.

**media**

*Definition:* Means of public communication, especially newspapers and electronic communication, such as radio, television, and the Internet

*Context:* Each new advance in electronic media changes the process of how voters perceive and choose presidential candidates.

**partisanship**

*Definition:* Support of a single party rather than the good of the whole country

*Context:* Many framers of the Constitution were against political parties because of the danger of partisanship.

**powers**

*Definition:* Legal or official authorities, capacities, or rights

*Context:* The Supreme Court used its power to overrule state courts and ended the recounting of votes in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

**primary**

*Definition:* A preliminary election in which qualified voters choose among a given political party's potential candidates

*Context:* George W. Bush secured his party's nomination for president by doing well in the Republican primaries.

**whistle-stop campaign**

*Definition:* A political campaign conducted from a train that stops at each station for a rally

*Context:* The era of whistle-stop campaigns was also the era of railroads, when trains dominated American transportation.

*Academic Standards*

**Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)**

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Civics—What Are the Basic Values and Principals of American Democracy?: Understands the central ideas of American constitutional government and how this form of government has shaped the character of American society
- Civics—How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embodify the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?: Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power
- Civics—What Are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy

### **National Council for the Social Studies**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
  - Power, Authority, and Governance
  - Civic Ideals and Practices
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### **Support Materials**

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the DiscoverySchool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>
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### *Credit*

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