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To Erase or Embrace the Electoral College

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide social studies educators with a brief historical overview of the Electoral College, while emphasizing inquiry-based learning, and introduce the Inquiry Design Model as a tool for students to critically evaluate the effectiveness of the Electoral College in presidential elections. While utilizing the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), students will have the opportunity to extensively investigate and assess primary sources, websites, and news articles as they construct their own arguments and articulate their own conclusions through project based summative assessments. At the culmination of the inquiry, during the informed action phase of the IDM, students will be able to make a real-world connection as they consider to embrace the Electoral College or advocate to erase it from the presidential election process.

Keywords: Social Studies, Inquiry Design Model, Electoral College.

Introduction

One of the most important aspects of teaching civics and government is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes of electing the president of the United States. As our nation approaches the 2024 presidential election, the Electoral College looms large in the forefront the upcoming election cycle. During the most recent presidential election, a growing public discourse surrounding the popular vote and the Electoral College's relevance in the electoral process emerged as a significant point of contention. Even though the Electoral College has been a deep-rooted American tradition since the founding of our Constitution, there have been several presidential elections in which electoral college and the popular vote had different voting outcomes. The presidential elections of 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016 had presidential nominations in which winning the popular vote did not lead to winning the Electoral College and eventually the presidency (United States House of Representatives, 2023). Therefore, public opinion has varied as the usefulness of the Electoral College and whether or not the U.S. Constitution should be changed to simply rely on the popular vote for presidential elections. Some Electoral College provisions include one person one vote, differences between large states and small states, the role of political parties, checks and balances, separation of powers, and majority rule rights (Turner, 2007). However, the Electoral College preserves several fundamental principles established during our nation's founding, such as the preservation of federalism, the conservation of balanced representation, and, in most elections, enabling the people to determine the winning presidential candidate. The aim of this article is to provide

social studies educators with a brief historical overview of the Electoral College, emphasize the importance of inquiry-based teaching, and introduce the Inquiry Design Model as a tool for students to critically evaluate the effectiveness of the Electoral College in determining the presidency of the United States.

Relevance for Teachers/ Practitioners

For classroom practitioners considering evaluating the Electoral College, one of the first places to investigate is our U.S. Constitution. Article II of the U.S. Constitution clearly states that the President and Vice President of the United States are elected by the Electoral College. The United States House of Representatives (2023):

Established in Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the Electoral College is the formal body which elects the President and Vice President of the United States. Each state has as many "electors" in the Electoral College as it has Representatives and Senators in the United States Congress, and the District of Columbia has three electors. When voters go to the polls in a Presidential election, they actually vote for the slate of electors who have vowed to cast their ballots for that ticket in the Electoral College. (p.1)

Additionally, the specific number of electors from each state is explicitly indicated by the combination total of senators and representatives. Therefore, the Constitution gives strict oversight in the state allocation and the process of the Electoral College in determining the presidency. In the U.S. Constitution (1789):

The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America. He shall hold his Office during the Term of four Years, and, together with the Vice President, chosen for the same Term, be elected, as follows Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be / an Elector. (p.2)

For presidential candidates to win the actual election, a candidate must receive a total of 270 electoral votes out of the 538 possible (National Archives, 2023).

Historically, making this decision concerning the Electoral College posed significant challenges, even in the early days of our nation's founding. During the constitutional convention, clashes between representatives from large and small states played an important role in decisions concerning the executive branch. The implementation of the Electoral College represented the first primary compromise of selecting the executive of our government (Slonim, 1986). Even during constitutional convention, many of the delegates favored direct popular election of the executive, which was referred to as the Democratic doctrine. (Slonim, 1986). “Generally, opponents object to the fact that the system violates the one-person, one-vote principle and may result in the election of a popular vote loser or produce congressional deadlock in close elections” (Harvard Law Review Association, 2001, p. 2526). Jones (2020) stated:

Imagine a presidential election, the first in history, where every vote truly counted as an expression of popular will. Presidential candidates could and would no longer fly over red and blue states. They would be forced to fully engage with rural, suburban and urban voters in ways that could potentially diminish polarization. (p.1)

Still, under the current Electoral College, larger states in population such as California (54), Texas (40), Florida (30), New York (28) receive the largest number of electoral votes (Leip, 1999). Therefore, presidential candidates must be strategic in assessing their own campaigning plans with an emphasis on larger states with a significant number of electoral votes. In addition, presidential campaigns might also strongly consider swing states, that are not typically Democrat or Republican, and yet have a large number of electors. These states could include Wisconsin (10), Ohio (17), Pennsylvania (19), North Carolina (16), Georgia (16), and Colorado (10). “Indeed, the very origins of the Electoral College lay in attempts by the framers of the Constitution to overcome the nation's deep geographical divisions by forcing candidates to construct geographically diverse bases of support. Candidates must win states, not simply votes, and winners must seek consensus by building broad coalitions of local interests that stretch across state boundaries” (Warf, 2009, p.187). Based on past electoral history, some states have traditionally voted for Republican candidates, and some states have traditionally voted for Democratic candidates (Dulio, 2004). Therefore, students that have a deep understanding of the mathematics and process of the Electoral College will become better informed citizens before they have a chance to vote (Markworth & Willox, 2012).

Problematic Issues with the Electoral College and the Popular Vote

Perhaps the main and continuous argument against the Electoral College is that it systematically distorts the results of the popular vote and therefore removes the democratic principles of the electorate (Ross & Josephson, 1996). By retaining the Electoral College, the voice of the majority of voters are silenced by not allowing the victor of the popular vote to hold the office of the presidency. Another argument is that the Electoral College forces presidential candidates to concentrating on a few battle ground states as opposed to campaigning throughout the nation (Warf, 2009). Instead of focusing on the need to the states, presidential candidates will be concentrating with winning a handful of elections in states that only represent the majority of the electoral votes. “Allowing the Electoral College to select a candidate who is failed to win the greatest number of votes is an exception to the standard for elected officials” (Bolinger, 2007, p.180).

Yet, the founders of our nation desired a Republic, with representation from all states including the smaller states with a fewer population. “The Electoral College plan earned support because it was uniquely fitted to the eighteenth century ideological requirements for republican government, its institutional arrangements, and accepted means of conducting public business” (Turner, 2007, p.412). In addition, supporters claim that having the Electoral College in place forces presidential candidates to engage in a state by state campaign; thus, not being able to neglect smaller states and also focus on local issues (Best, 1975). By eliminating the Electoral

College, presidential candidates would no longer need support throughout the country. Instead, the primary campaign focus would be on populous areas of the nation and ignoring smaller states, which would give less power and voice to marginalized states during the election process (McCollester, 2007). “ It made a place for the states as well as the people in electing the president by giving them a say at different points in a federal process and preventing big-city populations from dominating the election of a president” (Guelzo & Hulme, 2016, p.1). Adkinson and Elliot (1997) contend that ending the Electoral College would enhance television campaigning, perhaps split political parties, and encourage electoral fraud.

Context for Teaching and Learning Inquiry Based Instruction

To have students actively investigate the Electoral College, we propose using an inquiry-based form of instruction, specifically the IDM. Since 2013, the National Council for the Social Studies developed the C3 framework, which encourages social studies instruction focused on the implementation of inquiry-based disciplinary concepts including: student led investigations, analysis, explanations, and developing arguments (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Through academic investigation and answering questions, students receive benefits such as cognitive and motivational capabilities, increased engagement, and greater development of students’ critical thinking skills (Ness, 2016). Neurologically, students engage in inquiry-based instruction have an increased brain activity associated with pleasure, reward, and creation of memory (Singh, 2014). Wilhelm (2007) argues that this type of student centered and teacher guided classroom helps students develop their curiosities, drive learning, and answer questions to help address real world issues. Inquiry based instruction allows for asking questions, carrying out investigations, analyzing and interpreting data, and developing conclusions and explanations to promote a deep understanding (Wilcox, Kruse, & Clough, 2015). In this type of historical inquiry, students not only deepen their own understanding of the content, but they are also able to conduct their own investigations (Voet & De Wever, 2017). In doing so, students are able to collect and analyze evidence, even if it is contradictory evidence, in constructing their arguments about the past (Wilson & Wineburg, 1993). Therefore, inquiry based instruction gives rise to historical reasoning, a process in which students use evidence, logically analyze information, and use this evidence in a form of argument to support specific conclusions (Monte-Sano, 2010). The purpose of any inquiry is for students to ask meaningful questions, draw and develop their own conclusions from various sources, and communicate their conclusions which will lead to an increase in social studies content knowledge (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

To explore the Electoral College using a model centered on inquiry-based learning, we recommend the IDM. The IDM was created by educators at C3 teachers.org and currently aligns with the principles of the C3 framework established by National Council for the Social Studies. Our IDM on the Electoral College presents a compelling question, an introductory activity to start the inquiry, multiple supporting questions along with future resources, and daily formative tasks. The inquiry culminates with two types of summative assessments as well as a taking informed action activity to allow students to become active participatory citizens while engaging

with the topic of electoral college. The intent of this IDM is to provide teachers with a practical tool that they can readily incorporate into their classrooms, either in its entirety or by selectively integrating specific components to craft their own inquiry-based lessons on the Electoral College.

Implementation and Impact

The Inquiry Design Model provides a unique inquiry-based teaching framework to accomplish the context of the C3 (C3 Teachers.org, 2023). “Inquiry, which is the central concept that grounds the C3 Framework and the IDM approach leads to powerful learning opportunities for social studies students” (Cuenca, 2021, p. 301). The IDM does provide students the opportunity to evaluate sources, develop claims, communicate critically, and to take informed action. At the heart of the IDM is the compelling question. This compelling question is typically an overarching question, usually developed by the social studies teacher, that is answered after multiple days of instruction at the end of a learning segment. The compelling question not only provides a framework for the IDM, but it's a question that students will answer through the exploration and examination of documents and sources; thus, leading to the development of their own arguments. For this specific IDM on the Electoral College, our question is “Should the United States continue to use the Electoral College to decide the Presidency?” (**Appendix**)

At the start of the IDM is a section referred to as staging the question. This presents students with a brief introduction to the ideas and concepts that are part of the compelling question. We decided on a brief visual introduction of the Electoral College with a video from TEDEd that gives a concise overview for students. Next, students move to answer the supporting questions of the IDM. The supporting questions involve students in researching multiple sources, including primary sources, and completing performance based tasks. These supporting questions included subjects related to the Constitution, the popular vote, and the census, and explored how these factors collectively influenced the Electoral College. “Supporting questions focus on descriptions, definitions, and processes about which there is general agreement within the social studies disciplines, which will assist students to construct explanations that advance the inquiry” (C3 Teachers.org, 2014, p.1).

Additionally, students had to use the featured resources of the IDM (the US Constitution, websites, and news articles) to complete the formative tasks. These formative tasks included students writing a paragraph, developing a cause-and-effect diagram, and creating a digital poster. These tasks help students to develop their own social studies content knowledge as well as skills to produce clear, coherent, evidence-based arguments (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018). At the end of the learning segment, once all the supporting questions have been answered and the performance tasks have been completed, students are asked to complete a final summative performing task.

The summative performing task is an activity in which students construct an evidence based argument, while using previous sources, that addresses to the compelling question of the inquiry (C3 Teachers.org, 2014). For this IDM, students can create an interactive website that

details issues concerning the Electoral College, or develop an interactive timeline on the last six presidential elections and the impact of the Electoral College on the particular elections.

Lastly, concluding the IDM is the taking informed action section. This portion of the IDM allows students to make more relevant connections to the social studies curriculum. Students are asked to apply their knowledge into a larger and more relevant context, assess the impact and issues addressed, and finally, act in ways that demonstrate real world agency. Taking informed action grants students the opportunity to demonstrate the purpose of social studies education by informed citizens participating in civic engagement. This civic engagement can be conducted through local communities, state, or national governments. For example, in our IDM model provided below on the Electoral College, students will write their congressional representatives in support of or against the continuation of the Electoral College on presidential elections. Taking informed action is designed so that students make a rich civic connection from the social studies curriculum in the classroom to dynamic civic engagement outside of school (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2017).

Recommendations

The national debate concerning the effectiveness of the Electoral College or its abolishment regarding the presidential electoral process will continue in the realm of public discourse. The Electoral College's support from smaller states that desire a wide geographical republic versus the democratic doctrine of larger states that covet direct popular election remains a political struggle. The purpose of this article is to offer social studies educators a concise historical overview of the Electoral College, while implementing an inquiry based learning approach, the Inquiry Design Model. Hopefully, social studies teachers will potentially incorporate elements of this inquiry-based learning method while students practice active engagement in participatory citizenship. "Applying the skills of inquiry to contemporary issues both serves as an opportunity to practice inquiry as a habit of citizenship and also helps frame the utility of social studies education for civic life" (Cuenca, 2021, p. 307). Furthermore, social studies teachers might be able to utilize the news articles, websites, and primary sources as supplementary resources to facilitate an exploration of the Electoral College. By social studies teachers facilitating student led historical inquiry, students can be empowered to engage in academic exploration, thereby fostering their development as active and informed citizens. (Dewey, 1902).

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Appendix

The Electoral College IDM

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™		
Compelling Question	Should the United States continue to use the Electoral College to decide the Presidency?	
Standards and Practices	<p><u>NCSS National Standards:</u> V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions VI. Power, Authority, and Governance</p> <p><u>College and Career Readiness Standards – History/Social Studies 11-12</u> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</p>	
Staging the Question	What is the Electoral College? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9H3gvnN468	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
What is the constitutional definition of the Electoral College?	How does the popular vote effect the results of the Electoral College?	How does the census effect the Electoral College?

Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Write a paragraph describing the constitutional process of presidential elections; specifically addressing the Electoral College.	Develop a cause-and-effect diagram detailing how the popular vote impacts the Electoral College.	Create a digital poster of the importance of the census and its' impact on the Electoral College. Students will submit and have the opportunity present their poster to the class. Pikochart Canva
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
U.S. Constitution https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript	<u>U.S. Constitution</u> https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript <u>Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections</u> https://uselectionatlas.org/ <u>Articles</u> https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/15/opinions/abolish-the-electoral-college-joseph/index.htm https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/15/in-defense-of-the-electoral-college/	<u>U.S. Constitution</u> https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript <u>Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections</u> https://uselectionatlas.org/
Summative Performance Task	Argument	Students will develop an interactive website, detailing the history, purpose, and issues concerning the electoral college. This activity will create a deeper understanding of transferability by students constructing their websites, becoming content experts, and presenting those concepts to their peers.
	Extension	Students will construct a Presidential Election Interactive Timeline on the last six presidential elections; thus, providing information on the process and impact of the electoral college. Timeline using Sutori
Taking Informed Action	Write a letter to a congressional representative either in support of or against the continuation of the Electoral College in presidential elections.	