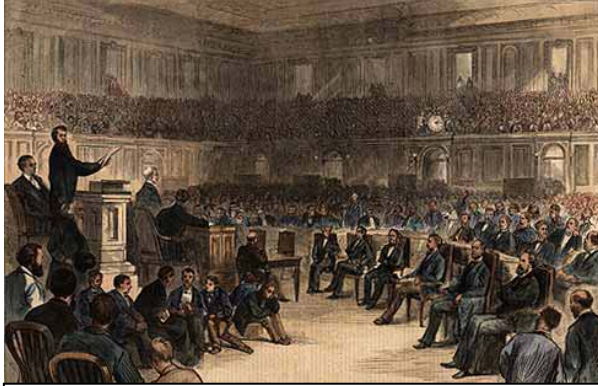


III. Activites

Reading Passage #1 - "Origins of the Electoral College"

By William C. Kimberling, Deputy Director of the Federal Elections Commission
(as appeared in the September 2004 edition of *Cobblestone* magazine)



This sketch by Theodore R. Davis, titled "Counting the Electoral Vote: David Dudley Field Objects to the Vote of Florida," appeared in the February 17, 1877, edition of *Harper's Weekly*. It shows the official counting by Congress of the electoral vote in 1876, a tradition that continues today.

Why did the *Founding Fathers* (also called the "Framers of the Constitution" because they were members of the convention that drafted the U.S. Constitution in 1787) create the Electoral College? In order to answer this question, it is important to go back in time and look at the problems they were trying to solve more than two centuries ago.

The United States was a very nation in the post-Revolutionary War years. There were only thirteen states, which varied in size. All the states were jealous and suspicious of one another's rights and powers, and distrustful of any central government telling them what to do.

The population of this mostly rural country was only four million in the 1780s. Citizens were spread out, up and down about one thousand miles along the Atlantic coast. Nationwide campaigns were impractical, as people barely were connected in

terms of transportation and communication.

At that time, most Americans believed that political parties were evil and not to be trusted. The popular saying of the day, "The office should seek the man, the man should not seek the office," also showed their displeasure with gentlemen openly campaigning.

When they convened to draft the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the Founding Fathers grappled with how to choose a president without using national campaigns and without the backing of political parties. They also did not want to upset their carefully designed balances between a future president and Congress, between the states and the federal government, and between the large and small states. The Framers at the Constitutional Convention considered several possible methods of selecting a president.

One idea, which eventually was rejected, was to have Congress choose the president. Some Founding Fathers felt that doing so would create division and hard feelings in Congress. Others believed that such a procedure would invite inappropriate political bargaining, corruption, and possibly even interference from foreign powers. Still others felt that this arrangement would upset the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches of the federal government.

A second proposal was to have the state legislatures select the president. This suggestion also was not successful, as the Fathers feared that a president would become so *beholden* (meaning "owing something to another") to the state legislatures that federal authority would be weakened. This would undermine the point of having a federation.

A third failed idea was to have the president elected by a direct popular vote. The Framers of the Constitution feared that voters, lacking adequate information about candidates from outside their own state, naturally would vote for a *favorite son* (meaning a man that is favored as a presidential candidate by people in his own state) from their own state or region (which still tends to happen today). At worst, no president would emerge with a popular majority sufficient to govern the country. At best, the choice of president always would be decided by the largest, most populous states, and the smaller states would have little influence.



Henry Clay (framed in the background under the caption, "I would rather be right than President") was a man after the Founding Fathers' hearts: he sacrificed his own political career to keep the country united in the years prior to the Civil War. Politician Mark Hanna (left), however, is portrayed here as the kind of man the Founders feared. To him, the presidency and politics represented fame, money, and power. In this political cartoon, Hanna claims, "It is better to be president than to be right!"

Finally, a Committee of Eleven at the constitutional convention proposed an indirect election of the president through a College of electors. The original idea was for the most knowledgeable and informed individuals from each state to communicate with one another and share their opinions. Then they would select a president based solely on his merit and without regard to his state of origin or political party. Each state would be given a number of presidential electors equal to its number of U.S. senators (always two regardless of the size of the state) plus its number of U.S. representatives (which is based on the number of resident per state). Thus, the smaller states would have a slightly larger voice in choosing the president than they would through a direct popular election.

The individual presidential electors themselves would be chosen by each state in whatever way the state decided. Until 1860, some states decided to let their legislatures choose their presidential electors; in those states, there were no popular elections for president at all!

The Founding Fathers based the structure of the Electoral College on the Centurial Assembly system of the ancient Roman Republic. Under that method, the adult male citizens of Rome were divided, according to their wealth, into groups of one hundred, called "centuries." Each century was entitled to cast only one vote either in favor of or against proposals submitted to them by the Roman Senate. In the American Electoral College, the states can be compared to the Centurial groups of ancient Rome, with the states relying on geography rather than wealth.

The resemblances between the Electoral College and classical institutions such as the Assembly are not accidental. Many of the Founding Fathers were schooled in ancient history and understood its influences.

The Electoral College was designed by the Framers of the Constitution to solve a number of problems America faced more than two hundred years ago. And even with all the changes the United States has encountered (better transportation and communication, along with the rise of political parties and national campaigns, for example), the Electoral College continues to serve its purpose. The balances between the legislative and executive branches, between the state and federal governments, and between the large and small states are addressed by the College. And it continues to face and solve new problems as they arise over time.

Reading Passage #2 – “Open to Debate”

By Kathiann M. Kowalski (*Cobblestone*, Sept. 2004)

*Should the United States keep the Electoral College? Consider the following arguments for and against the Electoral College. Which side do you think has the better case?

<u>Pro – Keep the Electoral College!!</u>	<u>Con – Get Rid of the Electoral College!!</u>
<p><u>-The Electoral College (EC) makes sure a president has support from, and gives support to, all of the United States:</u> The President is not elected to represent just <u>part</u> of the country. To win a majority of electoral votes, candidates need to take a broader view. They need to appeal to both urban and rural states in different parts of the country. This reduces potential regional tensions.</p> <p><u>-The EC fairly balances voting power:</u> States with large urban populations have more voters than other states. Thus, candidates often cater to those states during their campaigns. Voters in those states know how much their votes count, too. The EC makes sure that states with smaller populations still have a say in who becomes president. Ensuring smaller states at least three electoral votes helps offset the advantage larger states have.</p> <p><u>-The EC promotes federalism:</u> The EC recognizes the importance of individual states. It maintains a formal federal structure of government while preserving political power within the states.</p> <p><u>-The EC helps a new president lead more effectively:</u> Because most states employ the winner-take-all system, the winning candidate can have a bigger share of the electoral vote than the popular vote. This gives the appearance of wider support and can enhance the legitimacy of the outcome—even after a close race. That helps the country put aside grudges after a bitter campaign.</p> <p><u>-The EC promotes a strong two-party political system:</u> The American two-party system makes the U.S. government more stable than the governments of those countries where many parties compete for power.</p> <p><u>-Why fix the electoral system if it is not broken?</u> Despite a few unusual cases, the EC has worked fairly well for two centuries. Who knows if proposed reforms really would work better? In addition, amending the U.S. Constitution is a huge task and unlikely to happen anytime soon.</p> <p><u>-The EC gives weight to the needs and issues of minorities:</u> The EC increases the visibility of minority groups. Such groups sometimes can win or lose an election for a presidential candidate, especially in larger states. Without the EC, minority interests probably would be ignored.</p>	<p><u>-The Electoral College (EC) is outdated:</u> Voters do not need electors to pick their president for them. With modern technology improving communications and travel, candidates can organize nationwide campaigns. As a result, voters can just as easily learn about issues and make their own informed choices, for example, via the Internet.</p> <p><u>-Direct election of the President would be more practical:</u> Why wait weeks to declare an official presidential winner? Direct elections are simpler. Some proposals even call for “instant run-offs,” where voters would state their second choice up front on Election Day. That would answer any concern about making sure the winner has a majority of the votes.</p> <p><u>-Direct election of the President is more democratic:</u> With the EC, some votes count more than others. In states with the smallest populations, the value of each popular vote per electoral vote could be worth three times what it would be based on population alone. Shouldn’t all voters get an equal say? Besides, it’s just unfair to have a system that can allow someone to become president if that person did not win the most popular votes.</p> <p><u>-The current electoral system emphasizes approximately one dozen key states at the expense of the others:</u> Candidates focus on states with the most electoral votes and target certain <i>swing</i> states whose votes could go either way (“<i>swing</i>” means having the ability to determine an outcome by going one way or the other). What about the rest of the country?</p> <p><u>-The winner-takes-all system seems unfair:</u> Almost all states award all their electoral votes to whoever wins most of the popular vote, even if that number is less than a majority. So, the rest of the votes in those states become meaningless—this actually could be a factor in people not bothering to vote. Shouldn’t <i>everyone’s</i> vote count toward electing America’s leader?</p> <p><u>-Who needs nameless electors?</u> Electors’ only job today is to <i>rubber-stamp</i> (give a routine seal of approval without taking merit into consideration) the decisions made weeks earlier. Most state ballots do not even list electors’ names anymore. And why run the risk of encountering faithless electors who will not vote as promised?</p> <p><u>-The Constitution is a “living document”:</u> In 1804, the 12th Amendment changed the EC system to reflect the growth of political parties. A new amendment changing how Americans vote for president would reflect the realities of the United States in the 21st century.</p>