

How to Talk to Kids About...

...ELECTING THE PRESIDENT AND THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

A Quick Reference Guide for Conversations and Activities with Kids

Who Can Be President

- * Did you know that *anyone* who is born a citizen of the United States can grow up and become president?
- * Yep, it's true. In this country, there are only 3 requirements for president. The president must:
 - be a natural born citizen,
 - be at least 35 years old, and
 - have lived in the United States for 14 or more years.
- * And, of course, the president must win a presidential election!
- * All elections have rules. The rules for electing the president are found in the U.S. Constitution.

Electing the President . . .

- * Every citizen who is 18 years old or older may vote in the U.S. presidential election.
- * On Election Day, voters go to a community building— often a school, a recreation center, or a church— to cast their ballots in person. Alternatively, voters may vote by “absentee ballot”, meaning that they may mail in their ballots prior to Election Day.
- * In the year leading up to the presidential election, voters participate in primaries or caucuses to select the nominees for president of the major political parties.

- * The United States has a “secret ballot.” This means that voters cast their ballots in private and do not put their names on their ballots. Unless a voter chooses to tell people which candidate he or she selected, the choice is secret. This allows each voter to choose the person he or she thinks best for America without fear of punishment, condemnation, or embarrassment.
- * In the United States, presidential elections are held every four years.
- * “Political parties” are groups of people who share similar ideas about how our country should be governed. For most of our history, there have been two major political parties. Today, the two major parties are the Democrats and the Republicans.
- * Once the parties have nominated their candidates for president, the race really begins!
- * The nominees for president and vice president try to persuade citizens to vote for them in November by, among other things, participating in debates, delivering speeches, running advertisements, and hosting events.

Election Day . . .

- * The U.S. presidential election is held on the first Tuesday of November in each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia.

- * On Election Day, it might seem as if voters are participating in one big nationwide election. But that isn't really what they are doing.
- * Instead, voters are participating in separate state-by-state elections for president that take place on the same day.
- * For example, when a resident of New York casts his or her ballot, they are voting in the New York state presidential election. ***The candidate who receives the most votes in the state of New York is New York's choice for president.***

The Electoral College . . .

- * Under our Constitution, each state votes for president in what has come to be called the “Electoral College.”
- * Despite its name, the Electoral College isn't a college or a school of any sort. It isn't even a location at all! Rather, the Electoral College is the name of the *process* by which we determine the winner of the U.S. presidential election.
- * After counting all the ballots cast in the state, state officials appoint “electors” who have promised to vote for the winner of the state popular vote. (Two states, Maine and Nebraska, assign electors by congressional district.)

- * Not all states have the same number of electors (or votes) in the Electoral College. The number of electors depends on how many people live in the state.
- * Every state has at least three electors (or votes). But bigger states have more electors because they have more people. Wyoming, for example, is sparsely populated, so it has the minimum of 3 electors. New York has more people, so it has 29 electors.
- * The total number of electors nationwide is 538. (This number reflects the total number of Senators and Representatives that all of the states have in Congress, plus 3 electors for the District of Columbia, which is not a state.)
- * ***The candidate who receives a majority of electoral votes (270 or more) is the winner of the U.S. presidential election!***

Why Do We Do It This Way?

- * The Electoral College system requires the president to win a number of different states across the country, not just a handful of states or states from one region of the country. ***This ensures that the president will look out for the whole country***, not just certain sections of it. **This makes us truly a nation of *United States*.**
- * Without the Electoral College, a candidate could even become president if 47 of the 50 states chose someone else. That doesn't seem fair, does it?

- * The Electoral College ensures that presidents win support from different types of voters—a diverse group of Americans. This is particularly important in a nation as large and diverse as ours.

Does the Most Popular Candidate Win?

- * Usually, but not always. The U.S. presidential election is *not* supposed to be a popularity contest. It's a contest to see who can get support from across the country.
- * Every once in a while, the candidate with the most votes overall doesn't win enough state elections to win the presidency. But this happens rarely.
- * Think of the U.S. presidential election like the baseball World Series: The champion is the team that wins the most games, not the team that scores the most runs.
- * In baseball, as in presidential politics, the team with the most runs overall usually wins the World Series. But not always. In the 1960 World Series between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the New York Yankees, the Yanks scored more runs overall than the Pirates, but the Pirates won 4 out of 7 games and were, therefore, the 1960 World Series champions. (The Pirates won four close games, with scores of 6-4, 3-2, 5-2, and 10-9, while the Yankees, won three blowout games, with scores of 16-3, 10-0, and 12-0.)

- * Four times in our nation's history, the presidential candidate who received the most votes nationwide did not win the Electoral College. Why? Because he or she did not win in enough states.

Fun Activities to Learn About Elections and the Electoral College

- * Ask your children to research a presidential candidate and write a short report on the candidate's platform or have them draw a campaign poster.
- * Have your children draw and color their own voter registration card, complete with a self-portrait.
- * Take your children with you to vote so they can see the process in action.
- * Have your children and their friends dress up in costumes to stage a political debate. The subject doesn't actually have to be political. Have them argue over what's better—cookies or brownies, cake or pie, the color yellow or orange, Superman or Superwoman. Have fun with it!
- * Show your kids Article II, Section I of the Constitution, which outlines the process for electing the president of the United States.

Further Reading for Kids

- * *Grace For President* by Kelly DePucchio. A charming book that explains the two party system and Electoral College in an understandable and entertaining way. (young readers)
- * *We Elect A President* by Tara Ross. A beautifully illustrated history of the Electoral College. (elementary school kids)
- * *Presidential Elections and Other Cool Facts* by Syl Sobel. A clear and detailed explanation of presidential elections and some interesting tidbits about the people who have held the office of president. (elementary/middle school readers)
- * *Presidential Elections Grades 3-5* A good workbook for homeschoolers or parents who like to supplement their children's education.

For more

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