

Socratic Seminar

Grading the Electoral College

Making Votes Count: Abolish the Electoral College

New York Times August 29, 2004

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12/17/2008

A lesson for:

High school History, Civics, or Political Science

Overview

For our next lesson we will be having a class discussion. This discussion lesson will be using the format of a Socratic Seminar. Every student will read the article provided and complete your ticket. Completion of the ticket admits students into the discussion on the article. Students who do not complete the ticket will not be allowed to participate in the discussion. We will be reading an article on the Electoral College from The New York Times. I want you to read the article and think about the reasons to abolish, change, or keep the Electoral College.

Rationale

Part of understanding government is understanding how elections work. The Electoral College plays a major role in the election of the President. Controversy surrounds the Electoral College and how it functions. I would like the students to better understand how the Electoral College works and also understand the reform proposals that have been made.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Seek deeper understanding of the text.
2. Have a good conversation about issues, values and ideas in the text.
3. Actively listen and build on or react to others ideas

Students will:

B.12.2 Analyze primary and secondary sources related to a historical question to evaluate their relevance, make comparisons, integrate new information with prior knowledge, and come to a reasoned conclusion.

B.12.6 Select and analyze various documents that have influenced the legal, political, and constitutional heritage of the United States.

B.12.9 Select significant changes caused by technology, industrialization, urbanization, and population growth, and analyze the effects of these changes in the United States and the world.

C.12.1 Identify the sources, evaluate the justification, and analyze the implications of certain rights and responsibilities of citizens.

C.12.4 Explain the multiple purposes of democratic government; analyze historical and contemporary examples of the tensions between those purposes; and illustrate how governmental powers can be acquired, used, abused, or legitimized.

C.12.8 Locate, organize, analyze, and use information from various sources to understand an issue of public concern, take a position, and communicate the position.

Context

This Socratic Seminar is appropriate for a High School History, Civics, or Political Science class. This lesson is meant to be used during or after instruction on political structure or presidential elections. The Seminar outlined here relates to several topics and can be used for several different subjects. Furthermore the lesson should be used in conjunction with a unit on elections.

Time

The amount of time for this lesson will vary depending upon the students. The article and ticket should be handed out to students a day in advance of the discussion so they have time to read the article and complete their ticket. The Socratic Seminar will be explained to the students when the article and ticket are handed out. The discussion will take between 25-35 minutes, but depending on student interest and participation I reserve the right to use additional time. After discussion, a debriefing will take place that will last approximately 20 minutes.

Materials Needed

All materials will be found in the folder marked: **Socratic Seminar: Electoral College.**

- Copies of the article for the class (have extras available for discussion day)
- Copies of the ticket for the students
- Card Stock for students to make name placards
- Thick Black marker (2-3) for students to write names on placards
- The teachers discussion guide that includes refocusing questions
- Pen or Pencil
- Paper to write down notes from student responses

Procedures

1. Introduction

Prior to the Socratic Seminar the students should have covered material on presidential elections. If they have not covered this material please stop now, the students will not have the necessary background knowledge to complete this assignment. The day before the Socratic Seminar students will be given a copy of Making Votes Count: Abolish the Electoral College. I have included copies of the article in the lesson's folder should more copies be needed the original article can be found at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9407E0D81E3EF93AA1575BC0A9629C8B63>. Instruct the students to carefully read the article and think about questions that might be raised. Tell students to read the article multiple times searching for deeper meaning and to look "between the lines" for information that is implied by the article but not necessarily written. Instruct students to make notations in the text, highlighting and locating information they will want to discuss. Students will also need to complete a ticket for the Seminar. If they do not have a completed ticket on the day of

discussion they will not be allowed to participate in the discussion. Please emphasize this point to the students, it is important they read the article and complete the ticket or they will not be able to participate. The ticket is a three column chart where students write down reasons to keep, reform, or abolish the Electoral College. Tell the students when handing out the assignment that they must have at least two reasons in each column; they can have more if they wish but two is the minimum. Finally hand out card stock and markers so students can make name tags for the Seminar and tell students to bring their name tags with them for the discussion.

2. Discussion

On the day of the Socratic Seminar all of the desks (or chairs) should be arranged in a circle in the classroom. This should be done prior to class if at all possible (this will reduce prep time and allow for discussion to proceed in a timely manner). This is done so that students can see everyone in the class easily and can have their eyes on whoever is speaking. Write the objectives, rules, and one focusing question to begin discussion on the board before students enter the classroom. As students enter the classroom instruct them to place their name cards on their desk and have their ticket out and a notebook to take notes in. When checking the tickets while it is important that they have been completed, do not take too much time reading everything they have written on their ticket. Simply make sure it is filled out and on point. Students who have not completed the ticket are not to sit in the circle and should be given an alternate role. (See Question sheet for list of possible roles.) The teacher joins the circle and has a name card like the students. Read the objectives to the students and explain their relevance and how the students will use them in the Seminar. Tell the students *“The goal of this Socratic Seminar is to gain a deeper understanding of the values, issues, and ideas in the text, and to actively listen, evaluate, and build on each other’s comments.”* (Course Reader p.409)

Explain the rules of the Socratic Seminar to the students prior to class. Briefly cover them again before beginning the seminar. The rules are as follows:

1. Don’t raise your hand to speak.
2. Only one person speaks at a time.
3. Refer to the text using paragraph numbering.
4. Try to build on or challenge ideas of others.
5. Have your name placard visible to the other students.

Students should take turns speaking. If two start at the same time, they should work out who should go first. Do not call on students. If students are not engaging in the discussion use a new refocusing question to try and trigger discussion.

Allow students a few minutes (2-4) to review their ticket and the text to refresh their memories on the topic and then ask the first discussion question. **Why should we or shouldn’t we abolish the Electoral College?** Give students time to think about their response to the question and then ask the question aloud a second time to begin the discussion. Don’t forget to remind the students of the rules and feel free to use refocusing questions found on the question sheet attached to this lesson. Only refocus the discussion if things are repeating themselves over and over or students are bogging down. Remember,

there is no single correct answer to any of the questions asked. The goal of this exercise is to increase student understanding through class discussion. When there are only a few minutes left try to wrap up the current topic being discussed. After the topic is wrapped up ask if anyone has not spoken (you should already know who these people are). Ask if they would like to add anything to the discussion giving them a chance to think and talk. Finally ask if anyone has any final thoughts on the text they would like to share that was not previously discussed.

A few pointers:

- Watch the time to allow for a debrief at the end of the Seminar.
- Pause close to the end and ask if anyone who has not spoken would like to add to the discussion.
- Before ending the discussion ask if anyone has any final thoughts.

After the time for the discussion has expired, students will engage in a Debrief.

3. Debrief

Explain the debrief process to the students. The class will assess whether or not the objectives of the Seminar have been met. Students will also answer a few questions on a debrief worksheet. When all of the students have completed the worksheet ask the following questions of each student:

1. What is something you have learned or understood better from the seminar?
2. What was done well?
3. What was done poorly and how can we improve that?

Allow students to pass on the questions if they do not want to answer; give them some time to think and then move on. Once every student has been asked at least one of the questions above open the floor to comments not covered. This is a discussion of the Seminar and not the text.

4. Assessment

During the Socratic Seminar students will be assessed informally on their participation and enthusiasm for the Seminar. Students will not be graded on their participation, but the instructor should keep track of participation and remember comments made by students during the Seminar.

Students will also write a short paper (minimum 1 page maximum 2 pages) on whether or not we should abolish the Electoral College. Their paper can synthesize anything from the text to the discussion and should include evidence to back their position. Inform the students that notes taken during the discussion may prove very helpful to the students when writing their paper.

5. Socratic Seminar Evaluation

Teachers should strive to always improve and become more effective. That being the case I have included an evaluation for the facilitator. It should be completed as soon as possible after the Socratic Seminar to be most effective.

Discussion Questions

- Why should we or shouldn't we abolish the Electoral College?
- Do you think that every vote counts?
- Should someone who receives fewer votes win?
- Does the Electoral College disenfranchise voters?
- How does the author propose we elect the President?
- How would the author respond to the question, "Wouldn't a direct election favor the heavily urban areas over the rural areas?"
- Do the small states have too much weight in electing the President?
Should small states have such a strong influence?

Refocusing Questions

- How does what X said relate to what Y said?
- Where did you find that in the text?
- How do you know that?
- What do you think about that?

Tasks for students who have not completed a ticket

- Record who speaks and how many times
- What major ideas/topics were discussed
- How often did the facilitator (teacher) interject
- How often people referred to the text
- How often do people refer to outside information
- How many times do students refer to each other by name

Socratic Seminar Analysis

Seminar Name _____

Date _____

How often did you participate and were your comments on point?

If you did not participate in the discussion, why?

Did you gain a better understanding of the Electoral College from the seminar?

Did you follow the rules of the seminar and if not why?

How would you rate the seminar? (Please define your rating)

Additional comments.

Facilitator's Evaluation

Date _____

How often did you have to interject and why?

How well did students understand the questions?

Did students refer to the text accurately and often?

How would you rate class participation?

What changes would you make for the next time you teach this lesson?

How did the students react to the lesson?

How did the students rate the lesson?

Grading the Electoral College

Paper Rubric

Name: _____

To complete the Socratic Seminar you are required to write a paper answering the focusing question of the seminar. **Why should we or shouldn't we abolish the Electoral College?** Your paper should be 1-2 pages and will be scored on the following rubric. Please refer to your notes, the discussion, and the text when writing your paper.

Category	4	3	2	1
Text References	Referred to the text multiple times to back position or thesis. Uses at least two direct quotes from the text.	Referred to the text multiple times to back position or thesis. Used one direct quote from the text.	Referred to the text one time to back position or thesis.	Did not refer to the text to support position or thesis.
Ideas Discussed in Seminar	Used multiple ideas from the seminar in support of position or thesis.	Mentioned at least one idea from the seminar in support of position or thesis.	Mentioned one idea from the seminar.	Did not mention any ideas discussed during the seminar.
Mechanics	No grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Almost no grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	A few grammatical spelling or punctuation errors.	Many grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.
Organization	Information is very organized with well-constructed paragraphs and subheadings.	Information is organized with well-constructed paragraphs.	Information is organized, but paragraphs are not well-constructed.	The information appears to be disorganized.
Quality of Information	Information clearly relates to the main topic. It includes several supporting details and/or examples.	Information clearly relates to the main topic. It provides 1-2 supporting details and/or examples.	Information clearly relates to the main topic. No details and/or examples are given.	Information has little or nothing to do with the main topic.

(Rubric borrowed from Malcolm X: "Ballots or Bullets" course reader p. 419)

Total Points: _____/20

Grade: _____

Comments:

Lesson Plan Evaluation/Reflection

This Socratic Seminar is designed to be used in a History, Civics, or Political Science class. It's appropriate and relevant because the issue of the Electoral College and its flaws go back to the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. For a history lesson this could be used after any one of the elections where the system has come into question (the three most glaring examples are 1876 Hayes, 1888 Harrison, and 2000 Bush). In a civics class this lesson could be used to analyze the role of the people in relation to the Electoral College and how they are represented in an election. For a political science lesson this seminar can be used to help students gain a deeper understanding of the questions raised by our country's use of the Electoral College in electing the President. This lesson is designed for students of virtually any grade in high school. It is understood that students in the higher grades should have more relevant information due to additional class work they have completed, but I don't think that 9th and 10th graders should be excluded. Students of the lower grade level can still engage in this lesson and learn through effective discussion. This lesson also allows for different viewpoints from students of various backgrounds.

PASS Standards

Standard 1. Higher Order Thinking-4

A Socratic Seminar's main purpose is to engage students in discussion where different points of view are expressed on a particular topic. This discussion should be based on the issues, values, and ideas that are raised in the text. This seminar requires students to search for deeper meaning and understand why some people feel we should abolish the Electoral College. The students are the focus of this lesson with the teacher acting as a facilitator to help students have a thoughtful constructive discussion. I believe this lesson scored a 4 on this standard because students are engaging in discussion where they will often need to read between the lines and draw inferences based on the provided text.

Standard 2. Deep Knowledge-4

Students are required to have prior knowledge of the topic of the Socratic Seminar and will then draw upon the main point of the text to gain a deep understanding of the issues, values, and ideas of the text. Students will also focus on a single topic with the goal of understanding the problems associated with the Electoral College. I give this lesson a score of 4 because students are going to strive for a deeper understanding of the text and topic, but they will not necessarily solve any particular problem.

Standard 3. Substantive Conversation-5

The purpose of Socratic Seminar is for students to interact through conversation. I feel this lesson does an excellent job of addressing this standard. Students will be challenged to read between the lines of the text and discuss more than just the facts that appear on the page. Students will also be required to share ideas and discussion with minimal direction from the facilitator. The overlying theme of what to

do with the Electoral College will be discussed from as many angles and perspectives as possible allowing students to build on each others comments and come to a higher understanding. I score this lesson a 5 in this area. Students are given multiple opportunities to participate in the discussion and they are encouraged although not required to discuss right down to the end of the lesson.

Standard 4. Connections to the World Beyond the Classroom-3

The issue of the Electoral College and what to do about it is not new. The issues raised by the use of the College go all the way back to 1800. Every few years the use of the College comes into question and now there is an organization dedicated to abolishing its use all together. This has happened numerous times throughout our countries history most recently in the year 2000. Students will realize that this issue is not new nor is it something that does not effect elections. Presidential candidates focus on “battleground states” to win an election rather than engaging in a national campaign. Students will work to understand how the President is elected to office and how on occasion a President has served even though he did not win a majority of the popular vote. Students should have an understanding of how their government works and how we elect people to office. Many of the seniors will have had an opportunity to vote so this lesson is even more directly related to them. I rate this lesson a 3 on the pass standards. Students will study an issue that is related to their lives in that the President is the leader of the country, but only the students 18 years old will have had the opportunity to vote and will relate this lesson to the ballot box.

Standard 5. Ethical Valuing-3

The position that this lesson encourages students to take is: should we or shouldn't we abolish the Electoral College. Students will discuss the issue and form an opinion based on the materials in the text and the discussion in class. I score this lesson a 3 because only one issue is addressed and there are only three possible positions a student could take on the issue (abolish, reform, or keep unchanged).

Standard 6. Integration-4

This lesson incorporates several disciplines most notably History and Political Science. History-Students will work to understand that the Electoral College put into place upon the country's inception has come into question numerous times throughout the nation's history. Political Science-Students will also gain a deeper understanding on how the President is elected through the use of the Electoral College. Students will become more informed about the workings of government and understand that no system is without its flaws. I rate this lesson a 4 on this standard because it addresses two types of integration and enhances their social and civic understanding.

Possible Changes

One of the changes I think I could use is the text could be updated regularly. The issue of the Electoral College is one that comes into play every four years essentially. I have found articles dating back to 1960 all of which say similar things. I think I could also include a second text to give the students more material with which to work. There is no shortage of editorials on either side of this issue and I think

that using new text that is up to date or even flipping the text to an opposing point of view may have value. I would also like to always seek new questions to ask the students and look for new tasks for the students who have not completed their ticket.

Transcendent Teaching and Learning Issues

I have discovered just how much material has been written on the issue of the Electoral College. There is no shortage of articles, editorials, and papers written about the topic. It was a challenge to find one that I felt fit best into the goals for the class. I wanted the text to reflect a position while not attacking the opposition and also providing concrete reasons for the position. I underestimated the amount of detail I would need to go into to make this lesson something that a substitute teacher could teach. It was a lot more work involved than I had originally anticipated putting my thoughts into words so someone else could understand how to facilitate this lesson. I think that this will be a good lesson that will fit into my curriculum easily. I think that students will grab onto the material with even greater interest in a Presidential election year as the material will have a current events type of relevance. I think that this lesson will also allow students to contribute discussion who do not normally do so because of the format and style of the lesson.

MAKING VOTES COUNT; Abolish the Electoral College
Published: August 29, 2004

When Republican delegates nominate their presidential candidate this week, they will be doing it in a city where residents who support George Bush have, for all practical purposes, already been disenfranchised. Barring a tsunami of a sweep, heavily Democratic New York will send its electoral votes to John Kerry and both parties have already written New York off as a surefire blue state. The Electoral College makes Republicans in New York, and Democrats in Utah, superfluous. It also makes members of the majority party in those states feel less than crucial. It's hard to tell New York City children that every vote is equally important -- it's winner take all here, and whether Senator Kerry beats the president by one New York vote or one million, he will still walk away with all 31 of the state's electoral votes.

The Electoral College got a brief spate of attention in 2000, when George Bush became president even though he lost the popular vote to Al Gore by more than 500,000 votes. Many people realized then for the first time that we have a system in which the president is chosen not by the voters themselves, but by 538 electors. It's a ridiculous setup, which thwarts the will of the majority, distorts presidential campaigning and has the potential to produce a true constitutional crisis. There should be a bipartisan movement for direct election of the president.

The main problem with the Electoral College is that it builds into every election the possibility, which has been a reality three times since the Civil War, that the president will be a candidate who lost the popular vote. This shocks people in other nations who have been taught to look upon the United States as the world's oldest democracy. The Electoral College also heavily favors small states. The fact that every one gets three automatic electors -- one for each senator and a House member -- means states that by population might be entitled to only one or two electoral votes wind up with three, four or five.

The majority does not rule and every vote is not equal -- those are reasons enough for scrapping the system. But there are other consequences as well. This election has been making clear how the Electoral College distorts presidential campaigns. A few swing states take on oversized importance, leading the candidates to focus their attention, money and promises on a small slice of the electorate. We are hearing far more this year about the issue of storing hazardous waste at Yucca Mountain, an important one for Nevada's 2.2 million residents, than about securing ports against terrorism, a vital concern for 19.2 million New Yorkers. The political concerns of Cuban-Americans, who are concentrated in the swing state of Florida, are of enormous interest to the candidates. The interests of people from Puerto Rico scarcely come up at all, since they are mainly settled in areas already conceded as Kerry territory. The emphasis on swing states removes the incentive for a large part of the population to follow the campaign, or even to vote.

Those are the problems we have already experienced. The arcane rules governing the Electoral College have the potential to create havoc if things go wrong. Electors are not required to vote for the candidates they are pledged to, and if the vote is close in the Electoral College, a losing candidate might well be able to persuade a small number of electors to switch sides. Because there are an even number of electors -- one for every senator and House member of the states, and three for the District of Columbia -- the Electoral College vote can end in a tie. There are several plausible situations in which a 269-269 tie could occur this year. In the case of a tie, the election goes to the House of Representatives, where each state delegation gets one vote -- one for Wyoming's 500,000 residents and one for California's 35.5 million.

The Electoral College's supporters argue that it plays an important role in balancing relations among the states, and protecting the interests of small states. A few years ago, this page was moved by these concerns to support the Electoral College. But we were wrong. The small states are already significantly overrepresented in the Senate, which more than looks out for their interests. And there is no interest higher than making every vote count.