**American Government Class**

**Grades 10-12**

**WSDE Social Studies Content Standards and Benchmarks addressed:**

Standard 1: Citizenship, Government and Democracy (Grade 12)

Benchmarks: SS12.1.1; SS12.1.2; SS12.1.3; SS12.1.5

**Learning Targets: Students will**

Define the purpose Electoral College and its role in American Presidential elections.

Describe the foundation of the Electoral College in the United States Constitution, including Article II, Section 1, Clause and Constitutional Amendment No. 12

(Optional: Federalist Paper No. 68. <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa68.htm> (specifically paragraphs 2 & 3 of the document)

Construct and refute arguments for and against the Electoral College process.

**Resources:**

The original letter from Abraham Lincoln to Josephus Hewett, on display at The Brinton Museum.

Constitution of the United States: <http://www.heritage.org/constitution/#!/articles/2/essays/80/electoral-college>

C-SPAN 2012 Electoral College Map: <http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/images/2012_Electoral_College_Map_Poster_Large.JPG>

U.S. Government Electoral College web site: <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/>

An excellent online paper about the Electoral College and its history: <http://www.fec.gov/pdf/eleccoll.pdf>

**Vocabulary:**

Electoral College Elector Whig

Popular vote Winner-take-all Circuit Court

Electoral vote United States Census

**Starter Questions:**

What do you know about the Electoral College? Is it a real place?

What role does it play in presidential elections?

Why do you think the founders provided for the Electoral College?

What are Electors? What is their job?

How is the number of Electors per state determined?

How many Electors represent the state of Wyoming in the Electoral College?

*(Students may provide answers with pencil and paper, or may participate in a class discussion.)*

**Electoral College:** Written into the U.S. Constitution, the Electoral College is a compromise between the election of the President by Congressional vote and election by popular vote of citizens. The college consists of 538 Electors, with a majority of 270 is needed to elect the President. Voting power of each state is based on the number of Electors representing the state in Congress, one for each member in the House of Representatives and two for Senators. State representation in the House of Representatives may change over time in line with each State’s population. Thus the Electoral College is defined by the most recent official United States census.   
The minimum representation in the Electoral College a state can hold is three (3). Wyoming, Montana, North & South Dakota, Vermont, Delaware, Alaska, and Washington D.C. all have three electoral votes.

Visit web site: <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/about.html> for information on how the Electoral College process works.

**Brief Biographical Information:***Abraham Lincoln:* 1809-1865. As the 16th President of the United States, Lincoln’s two terms of office encompassed the Civil War. Lincoln is one of the most highly regarded, well studied, and best known of the American Presidents. He began his career as Whig but later became a Republican. Before he became President, Lincoln served eight years in the Illinois legislature, and was also a lawyer who rode the circuit courts. (A portion of the letter mentions his riding horseback to provide legal services to Tremont from Springfield, Illinois.) Traveling law professionals are not as common today but the name circuit court remains for those who preside over many lower district court decisions.

*Josephus Hewett:* 1805-1868. Practiced law in Springfield, Illinois, although by 1840 was a resident of Natchez, Mississippi. Hewett likely met Lincoln when he was reading law with Stephen T. Logan, Lincoln’s second law partner.

**Background information on Lincoln’s letter of February, 1848, to Josephus Hewett:**

Lincoln is asking his acquaintance to understand that by rejecting the Electoral College’s role in American Presidential elections, the political power of the southern states would decrease dramatically. Direct elections would eliminate the ability of the South to count the slave population in the vote. Hewett, by now a representative of Mississippi, appears not to realize how greatly his constituency would be impacted by this enforcement. At one point in the letter Lincoln asks “Have you ever reflected on these things?” It is not known why Hewett spoke out against the Electoral College.

According to Charles W. Moores, “The references to the horseback ride from Tremont to Springfield [Illinois], a distance of about eighty miles, is to the days when Lincoln and his associates at law rode from county to county following the court and trying cases for such clients as employed them after they reached town. This letter is one of Lincoln’s earliest written references to the Constitution of the United States, and shows his familiarity with that document.” *(Lincoln Addresses and Letters: Eclectic English Classics.* Charles Washington Moores, ed. New York: American Book Company, 1914, 42-43. Digitized by Harvard University, 2006.)

The content of Lincoln’s speech to Congress, mentioned in the letter, is also unknown.

**Discussion after the lesson:**

Give some thoughtful arguments for the Electoral College:

*Enhances interests of minorities, contributes to stability by managing a two-party system, requires a distribution of support across the country for a person to be elected president, and maintains the federal system of governance and [equal] representation.*  
Give some thoughtful arguments against the Electoral College:

*The possibility of electing a person to be President who received a minority of votes, trusting in electors who are not faithful to their party, the Electoral College depresses voter turnout by promoting a mentality of “my vote doesn’t really count,” and the idea that electing a President indirectly via the Electoral College does not reflect the popular will of the American people.*

**Optional Idea:** Instead of a teacher-moderated class discussion after the lesson, split the class into two groups and have either a Socratic dialogue pro and con, or stage a formal debate, in the manner of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

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