Objectives:
- Describe the features of the presidential campaign.
- Explain how the electoral college works.
- Identify the problems with the electoral college system.
- Outline the advantages and disadvantages of proposed reforms of the electoral college.

Guiding Question
Does the election process serve the goals of American democracy today? Use a table like the one below to keep track of the main ideas about the election process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral College</th>
<th>Defects</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winner-take-all system</td>
<td>Winner of the popular vote not guaranteed presidency</td>
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In America, a presidential election is held every four years. Wars and other crises have never prevented an election. This remarkable fact is not true in any other country in the world.

In this section, you will read about running a presidential campaign and how the electoral college works.

What is a presidential campaign?
The presidential campaign is an all-out effort to win the election. The candidate must convince the voters that he or she will be the best President. Voters learn about the candidate on television, the radio, the Internet and in newspapers and magazines. Candidates travel to many states and attend rallies and parties in an attempt to become well known.

At the start of the campaign, about one third of voters have not yet decided which candidate they will support. These swing voters attract much attention as each candidate tries to swing them to their side. Presidential candidates are also interested in the states that are too close to call. These states are called the battleground states. Any major candidate could win these states.

Presidential debates are now very important factors in deciding a campaign. In 1960, Vice President Richard Nixon and Democrat John F. Kennedy held the first televised debate. Kennedy performed well and went on to win the election. Since then, debates have taken place in every campaign.

Checkpoint What is a battleground state?
When people vote in the presidential election, they are really voting for presidential electors. According to the Constitution, the electoral college elects the President. Each state has as many electors as it has members of Congress. The Framers expected the electors to choose whichever candidate they believed most qualified. Today, however, that does not happen. Instead, the electors are expected to vote for their party’s candidates for President and Vice President.

Electors are chosen by popular vote in each state. They are chosen on a winner-take-all basis. The presidential candidate who receives the largest number of popular votes wins all of that state’s electoral votes. Voters usually know which candidate has won a majority of electoral votes by midnight of election day. But it is not until the electors from each state meet the Monday after the second Wednesday in December that the formal election of the President and Vice President actually takes place. On that date, the electors cast their votes and the signed and sealed ballots are sent to the President of the Senate in Washington, D.C. In early January, the sealed votes are opened and counted before a joint session of Congress. The President and Vice President are then declared elected.

If no candidate wins a majority of electoral votes (270 out of 538), the election is decided in the House of Representatives. Each state has one vote and it takes a majority of 26 to elect. If the House fails to choose a President by January 20, the 20th Amendment says that the Vice President shall act as President until a decision is made.

What are the flaws in the electoral college?

There are three major flaws, or defects, in the electoral college system. First, there is always the danger that the winner of the popular vote will not win the presidency. This has happened four times, most recently in 2000. The winner-take-all factor means that any votes won by the loser of the popular vote are not reflected in the electoral vote. For example, in 2008, Barack Obama won only 51 percent of the popular vote in Ohio. Still, he won all of Ohio’s 20 electoral votes, even though 2.5 million Ohioans voted for John McCain. See Figure 13.6 on page 334.

The second flaw is that the Constitution does not require the electors to vote for the candidate who wins the popular vote. Electors do not usually refuse to vote for their party’s presidential nominee. It has happened only eleven times. In none of these contests did this action change the outcome of the election.
Third, if neither candidate wins a majority in the electoral college, the election would have to be decided in the House of Representatives. This is a problem because each state would then have one vote. States with smaller populations would count as much as larger states. Plus, if a state could not decide on a candidate, it would lose its vote. Finally, if a strong third party candidate were involved in an election, it is possible that the House could not make a decision by Inauguration Day.

**Checkpoint** What are the three flaws with the electoral college?

**What reforms have been proposed?**

Through the years, several plans have been suggested to reform, or fix, the electoral college. Under the first, the **district plan**, two electors would be chosen from each state. They would be required to vote in line with their state's popular vote. Other electors for each state would come from that state's congressional districts. These electors would cast their votes to match the popular vote in their districts.

Under the **proportional plan**, each candidate would get a share of the electoral vote. This share would equal his or her share of the popular vote. Neither of these two plans would require a change to the Constitution. But neither plan would ensure that the winner of the popular vote would become President.

The **direct popular election** would do away with the electoral college. Each vote in the nation would count equally. The winner would always be the majority choice.

Many Americans favor this plan but obstacles stand in its way. For one, the small states do not like this change because they would lose their advantage in the electoral college. Other people feel it would weaken the federal system by taking away the states' role in the choice of President. Still other critics feel that candidates would be stretched too thin as they tried to campaign in every state. Voter fraud could also be a factor in a direct popular election.

**Checkpoint** What is the proportional plan?
The proposed **national popular vote plan** is a fairly new plan that would not call for a change in the Constitution. This plan calls for the states to amend their election laws. The new state laws would provide that all of a state's electoral votes are to be awarded to the winner of the national popular vote. This change has been passed in four states to date: Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, and New Jersey. The plan has gotten national attention and has been considered by at least 20 states. This new plan answers all the major objections about the electoral college without a need to amend the Constitution.

**What are the benefits of the electoral college?**

Some people do defend the electoral college system. They say critics often exaggerate the dangers of the system. Only two elections have been sent to the House and none in the last 180 years. Another point defenders of the system make is that the winner of the popular vote has lost the election only four times in 56 presidential elections. Defenders of the electoral college list these three strengths: the electoral college is a known process, it identifies the President quickly and certainly, and it helps promote the nation's two-party system.

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**Fig. 13.7**

**The 2008 Presidential Election**

**McCain vs Obama**

**Interpreting Maps** Although John McCain won 46 percent of the popular vote in the 2008 election, he received only 32 percent of the electoral vote. **How do these results illustrate the significance of the winner-take-all factor in state contests?**

![Map of the 2008 Presidential Election](image)
**Political Campaigns and Propaganda**

During a political campaign, candidates use the media to convince citizens to vote for them. They present their beliefs and ideas as the best answer to the country's problems. They also attack other candidates' views.

A "get on the bandwagon" approach tries to convince you that everyone else will vote for the candidate, so you should too. Name-calling happens when a candidate attacks another candidate with names, such as *unpatriotic* or *fiscally irresponsible*. This promotes fear of what would happen if the other candidate gets elected. Card stacking is when a candidate presents only the facts that support his or her point of view.

The *plain folks approach* is used by candidates who are trying to convince voters that they are just ordinary people. Candidates dress in working clothes and are seen visiting farms, talking with people, and holding babies.

Misleading messages such as these appeal to people's emotions rather than their reason. It is best, instead, to focus on facts such as experience and stands on the major issues when casting a ballot.

**SECTION 5 ASSESSMENT**

1. **Guiding Question** Use your table to answer this question: Does the election process serve the goals of American democracy today?

   **Key Terms and Comprehension**
   On a sheet of paper, write the answer to each question. Use complete sentences.

   2. What is a swing voter?

   3. What is a battleground state?

   4. What is one flaw in the electoral college?

   5. What is one defense of the electoral college?

   **Critical Thinking**

   6. **Summarize** What four options are suggested as alternatives to the electoral college?

   7. **Demonstrate Reasoned Judgment** Which of the four options to reform or replace the electoral college do you feel is most democratic? Explain.