**The United States Presidential Elections**

**Learn Government and History through the Elections**

**By John De Gree**

**The Classical Historian™**

**1. How Americans Choose Their President**

The American Founding Fathers wrote in the Constitution that the President and Vice President are elected through the Electoral College. The Electoral College is an institution, or process. States are given a certain number of “electors,” people who vote for a President and Vice President. The number of electors allotted to each state is equal to the number of representatives each state has in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The electors were initially directed by their state legislators how to vote and each elector had two votes. The candidate with more than 50% of the total electoral vote becomes the President, and the candidate with the second most votes becomes the Vice President. The Founding Fathers wanted proven leaders to decide who should be president, because they thought professional politicians would best understand who should lead the country. They did not want the people to directly vote for the President and Vice President. Founding Fathers also needed the lesser-populated states to adopt the Constitution, and these “smaller” states would not if the President were to be chosen purely democratically.

**Choosing a U.S. President in History**
In the first two Presidential elections (1789 and 1782), George Washington won the unanimous vote of all electors. Once Washington left office, political parties became more important and initially this caused problems for the Electoral College. In the election of 1796, electors chose a President and Vice President from opposing parties. Federalist Party candidate John Adams became President, but Republican Party candidate Thomas Jefferson became the Vice President. This would be like Donald Trump becoming President and Joseph Biden becoming Vice-President in 2020.

In the 1800 elections, the electors wanted Jefferson as President and his running mate Aaron Burr to become Vice President. However, electors cast the same number of ballots for Jefferson and for Burr. Because the electors didn’t write which one they wanted for President, there was a tie vote and the decision went to the House of Representatives. They chose Jefferson. In 1804, the states passed the Twelfth Amendment which forced electors to cast two separate ballots – one for President and one for Vice President. Electors today still vote in this same manner.

**Choosing Electors**
Before 1824, state legislators decided who they wanted to be President and Vice President and they chose and directed the electors how to vote. American politicians, especially Andrew Jackson, thought that all American citizens should choose the electors. Because of Jackson and others, over time state leaders allowed the people to direct the electors who to vote for as President and Vice President. Today, each state holds a popular election and allows its citizens to choose how the electors should vote. Most electors are not bound by state law to vote exactly how their state citizens voted. Still, there has not been an election decided against the will of the people. Electors vote how their state citizens want them to.

**A History of Presidential Primaries and Caucuses**
Presidential Primaries and caucuses are elections in each state that choose the representative for each political party. There is nothing in the Constitution about this process, and it has developed over time, with some differences, in each state. Because of this historical development, sometimes the primary season appears confusing. Beginning with the 1796 election, Presidential candidates were chosen by politicians from each party’s state political party. In 1831, the Anti-Masonic Party held the first national party convention to choose their Presidential candidate. From this time through the early 1900s, candidates for President and Vice President were chosen at national party conventions, where powerful party leaders decided who the candidates would be.

In the early 1900s, Americans wanted to take the power away from political party leaders and give to citizens the power to choose presidential candidates. Beginning with Florida, Wisconsin, and Oregon, states held primary elections or caucuses to choose delegates to the party conventions. These delegates would then choose the candidate. In most cases, party delegates are bound to vote for the person who won in their state, but in some states, they are not. Soon, all states went to the popularly elected primaries to choose the candidates for each party.

There are two types of elections where state citizens choose their candidate for political party: a primary and a caucus. In a primary, citizens vote in a traditional election with a secret ballot. In a caucus, people gather for a meeting, express their views, and vote either secretly or in the open.

**Questions**

1. In which document is it written how the U.S. President and Vice President are chosen?

2. What is the U.S. institution that decides who will be President and Vice President?

3. What does the U.S. Constitution say about primaries and political parties?

4. Before the 1900s, who was most responsible for choosing the candidates of each major political party?

5.Who do you think is going to become the Presidential candidate for the Democrats and Republicans? Why do you think this?

**2. The Electoral College and the Election of Donald Trump**

On November 8, 2016, Americans voted Donald Trump as their 45th President. President-Elect Trump captured 306 electoral votes to Secretary Clinton’s 232. Clinton won the popular vote by over 3,000,000 votes, however, Trump won 30 states and Clinton won 20. Because of Trump’s performance in a majority of states, he captured the Presidency. Clinton was more popular in highly-populated urban areas, but Trump carried 60% of the states.

**The U.S. Constitution and the Electoral College**
The American Framers of the Constitution wrote that the President and Vice President are elected through the Electoral College. The Electoral College is an institution, or process. States are given a certain number of “electors,” people who vote for a President and Vice President. The number of electors given to each state depends on how many representatives each state has in Congress. The electors are directed by their state legislators how to vote.

Before 1824, state legislators decided how electors would vote. However, American politicians in the 1820s and 1830s, especially Andrew Jackson, thought that all American citizens should choose the electors. Because of Jackson and others, in many states, the people became the main voice in choosing electors, not the politicians. However, Americans still vote by state through the Electoral College.

**Why did the Framers Create the Electoral College? Why Didn’t the Framers Establish Direct Democracy to Choose a President?**
There are at least two reasons why the Framers created the Electoral College.

1. They wanted proven leaders to decide who should be president, because they thought professional politicians would best understand who should lead the country.

2. They wanted all 13 states to join the United States of America, because the new country could probably not have survived if one or two states did not join. After the Framers wrote the Constitution, it had to be approved by the states to become the law of the land. Many less-populated states would not have approved the Constitution if the President would be elected by popular vote. These less-populated states were afraid the larger-populated states would dictate policies of the country if the President were chosen by popular vote.

Allowing for a representative body, elected by the citizens, to choose a president, was a completely novel and radical idea. The Framers were taking an incredible risk in establishing a republic, and most world leaders thought the United States of America would fail. Never before, in the history of man, had there been a republic established as the United States of America. The Framers wanted the President to be chosen by professional, proven leaders, who had been chosen by the citizens of each state. So, American citizens have always played at least an indirect role in electing the President. Many Founding Fathers thought, “Who could make better decisions about leaders than leaders themselves?” When the leaders were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, etc., it is easy to understand this logic.

The Framers established the Electoral College also to ensure the states that were lightly populated, or rural, would not be bullied by the more populous states. The less-populated states of Vermont or Rhode Island would not have joined the Union if the President were to be democratically chosen. In a democratically chosen election, the interests of the people of Virginia would have dominated the young country, much like the citizens of California and New York would today. The Electoral College ensures a President that is approved over a large and diverse geographical area, not just over one particular kind of people.

**How Could America’s Electoral College Change?**
There are at least two ways how Americans could change the electoral process.

1. One way is for each state to change how their electors are granted.

2. The other way is for a Constitutional amendment.

​For a state to change, it could decide to reward the politician with the percentage of electors that would coincide with the percentage of votes received. For example, in California in 2016, Hillary Clinton won 61.5%, Donald Trump won 33.2%, Gary Johnson won 3.2%, Jill Stein won 1.7%, and others won .4% of the vote. California, like most states, currently rewards the winner with all of its electoral votes, which is 55. If the California legislature wanted to, it could reward the electoral votes as a percentage of votes cast. However, the California legislators are happy with this way of rewarding electors, so California will probably not change how it rewards the winner of the vote in its state. In 2016, California’s legislators were Democrats. If they had decided to split their electoral votes, then Trump would have captured 1/3 of California’s electoral votes. No Democrat wanted that.

The second way to change the electoral process is through a Constitutional Amendment, which is detailed in Article V of the Constitution. However, to do this, a large number of states would have to agree to the change, and it is highly unlikely that state legislators, or citizens of 2/3 of each state, would ever agree to this, as it would diminish a state’s power in the Electoral College.

**The Electoral College: An Institution of Stability**
The United States of America is the world’s oldest Constitutional Republic, and the Electoral College is one of the reasons for its longevity. Only once in America’s history has a Presidential election been a catalyst for war, which was the Civil War, 1861-1865. It can be strongly argued that it wasn’t the election of Lincoln that caused the war, but the issue of slavery. The Electoral College ensures that lesser-populated states are important and not dominated by heavier-populated states. It allows for states to have freedom in deciding how electors are chosen. And it ensures that the United States of America does not become divided by geography or by urban or rural differences.

**Interesting Questions You Can Ask Your Students:**
1. Who won the popular vote and the electoral vote in the 2016 Presidential election?
2. What is the Electoral College?
3. Why did the Framers create the Electoral College?
4. How could Americans change the Electoral College?
5. What is good about the Electoral College?

6. What is undemocratic about the Electoral College?
6. What is your opinion of the Electoral College?

3. **The History of the Elephant and the Donkey**

In 2020, Americans will choose Presidential candidates and in November, we will eventually vote for the U.S. President. Wherever the Democrat or Republican Parties are shown as images, their symbols are presented as a donkey and an elephant.  These images are both easy to see and comical. The history behind these party animals is little-known, though not a secret.

In the 1828 election, advocates for President John Q. Adams called Andrew Jackson the pejorative term for donkey, jackass. Adams wanted Americans to think of Jackson as a foolish, stupid and stubborn person, a blockhead, and an idiot who drank too much whiskey. Instead, Andrew Jackson took this insult and turned it into a compliment to mean strong-headed and perhaps able to hold his liquor. He used the image of a donkey on his campaign posters and took the mantle of a strong-willed candidate. For decades after, the donkey was, at times, associated with the Democrat Party.

In 1874, cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a donkey in a lion’s costume scaring away all the animals. Only the elephant was shown as being not afraid. Nast wrote “The Republican Vote” on the elephant.  From that moment on, the elephant has symbolized the Republican Party.

Today, Democrats may argue that the donkey is tough, while Republican may say the elephant is strong.

**4. American Elections and Economics, Part I**

In November, 2020, Americans will vote for a U.S. President and Vice President. One idea that is a large part of every election is how each candidate thinks the U.S. government will get involved, or leave alone, the economic activities of Americans. Because the U.S. President has great influence on American economic policy, it is important to know the differing views on economic policy to choose which one works the best. In this first article of two, I will trace the economic history of the western world from the 1400s through the 1700s.

Up through the 1400s, Italian city-states had a big advantage over other European cities. Italians controlled the trade between Asia and Europe. Italian control of the Mediterranean trade and with Asian products ended when the Atlantic countries explored and colonized much of the world, beginning with Columbus discovering America in 1492.  Power shifted from the south of Europe to the Atlantic countries.  New ways of thinking and acting regarding money led what historians call The Commercial Revolution.

Perhaps most important to the Commercial Revolution was the beginning of capitalism. Capitalism is an outlook and behavior taken by people who freely make, buy, and sell goods. In capitalism, people take risks in the hopes of improving their financial situation. Money that is earned is called profit.  Individuals who earn a profit reinvest for more profit. In capitalism, hard work and risk taking is rewarded. Individuals tend to work harder for themselves because they get to enjoy the benefit of their labor. Bankers are ready to loan people capital in the hopes that they will be repaid with interest. The government’s role in capitalism is to be a sort of umpire, who makes sure that each citizen has an equal chance of competing. Government is not supposed to become an active participant in the affairs of the economy under capitalism in that it should not choose winners and losers but should make sure all follow the same rules (laws).

During the Commercial Revolution and through the 1700s and 1800s, Europe did not enjoy capitalism. However, the governments of Europe did allow more individuals than ever to invest their money and to act on their own. It was the beginning of capitalism. Called mercantilism, European kings believed that all economic activity of the state should benefit the king. The king limited who could get involved in economic activities, although in Europe there were still more individuals than elsewhere in the world who were allowed to do business.

It had once been that all Christians were forbidden to earn interest from loaned money. Some elements in society were against the drive for wealth, as William Shakespeare expresses in his play “The Merchant of Venice,” set in 16th century Europe. Generally, over time, material ambition became more accepted in European society. Johannes Fugger of Augsburg was the head of a very successful banking family. The Fuggers funded the quest of Spanish King Charles I (1500-1558) to become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

New kinds of businesses emerged. The idea of the corporation emerged: a legal entity that had the rights of an individual. A joint-stock company was one where business people could put their money together to raise huge amounts of capital. Each person bought stock in the company and owned a share of it. These large amounts of capital were used to fund large enterprises, take huge risks, and reap or lose great amounts of wealth. Insurance products came into existence that guaranteed business ventures.

Merchants used their money to build new businesses, like manufacturing things. Cloth manufacturing was one such business. In a company that worked as a “domestic system,” weavers were paid to make cloth in their homes. Capitalists paid weavers with wages and raw materials. They then sold the goods in the market for a profit.  Over time, they brought the raw materials and workers in one location, called the factory system.

Global trade increased the European standard of living in the 1700s and 1800s. Europeans invested in tobacco and sugar plantations in America and in coffee plantations in Asia. Owners took the profits from these businesses and reinvested them. The standard of living of citizens who lived in countries that followed some practices of capitalism greatly increased, while the standard of living of people who lived in countries that did not adopt any element of capitalism either stagnated or decreased. From the 1500s on, Europeans, though not representing the largest population of the world, enjoyed the fruits of the beginnings of capitalism and rapidly modernized.

**Questions**

1. What happened on November 8th, 2016?
2. Why did power shift from Italy to other European countries after 1492?
3. What is capitalism?
4. What is a corporation?
5. What happened to the European standard of living in the 1700s and 1800s?
6. Do some research. How do the different political candidates view capitalism?

**5. American Elections and Economics, Part II**

One idea of capitalism is best understood as “laissez-faire.” This is a French term meaning the absence of government getting involved in economic affairs. The idea is that individuals will better make decisions for themselves and their families than someone in government. At the end of the Medieval Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern Ages, many European kingdoms followed the economic policy of mercantilism. Mercantilism is very different than capitalism. Under mercantilism, kings established colonies to acquire gold and natural resources. Colonies existed to enrich the kings and the mother country. Because mercantilism always favored the kings at the expense of the colonies, colonists eventually demanded freedom.

In the 1600s and 1700s, there are many examples of mercantilism.  Led by the “Sun King” Louis XIV, France established her empire in North America. Spain had already built a huge empire in the 1500s, conquering most of South America and large parts of North America. The 1600s was known as the “Golden Age of Spain” in part because of all the gold Spain took from the Incas and the Aztecs. Great Britain had colonies all around the globe, in North America, South America, and Asia. The Dutch and the Portuguese also had colonies. Each colonial power sought to reap benefits of having cheap raw materials to take back to the home country. And, each kingdom had economic control over its colonists, making laws that restricted the economic freedoms of the colonists. This means that the central government, not the individuals, controlled the colonists.

The American Revolution (1775-1783) was the first of many where colonists overthrew the royal powers and established republics with much greater economic freedom. After founding a republic in 1776, the United States of America implemented a laissez –faire economy, and individual Americans had great freedom over their economic decisions. The U.S.A. was an experiment for capitalism. This freedom over their economic lives continued at least until 1913, when the United States passed the 16th amendment, which allowed for federal taxation of income. In the 1800s, America was the immigration destination for most of the world. In 1776, the United States of America was the newest county in the world, with no navy and no standing army. By the time of World War I, the country was perhaps the mightiest. Economic freedom was one of the main factors that led to the rapid growth of the American economy in the 1800s.

History provides us with two examples of the effects of an economic system run by a central government, and one run by individuals in society. In the mercantilism that Europe’s kings practiced in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s, colonists eventually objected to the tight control kings placed on them and eventually revolted, like the Americans in the American Revolution. In the late 1700s and 1800s, American benefitted from capitalism. Under this economic system, Americans became the wealthiest and freest people of the world, and the poor had the greatest opportunities to better their own lives.
**Questions:**

1. What is mercantilism?
2. What is capitalism?
3. What does laissez faire mean?
4. Name one example of a country using mercantilism as its economic policy.
5. Name one example of a country and time period where capitalism was the main economic policy.

**6. Economic Issues of the 2016 Elections**

 In 2016, Americans chose candidates to represent the Democrat and Republican parties, and these two candidates competed against each other in the general election in November. Each candidate had a tax policy that reflected their philosophy and ideas. To understand how tax policies impact a country’s economy, it is helpful to look at the actions and results of past Presidents.
​
**The 2016 Democrat Candidates and Taxes**
The two main Presidential candidates for the Democrats were Senator Bernie Sanders and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Both candidates favored raising taxes, especially on those Americans who earn higher incomes. Bernie Sanders called for a top marginal income tax rate of 90% and to increase the death tax so that “Trump and his billionaire friends and their families will end up paying more.” Marginal tax rate means the rate on the next dollar that is earned. The death tax is paid by a person’s estate when they die. This means, there is a tax on dying.

**The 2016 Republican Candidates and Taxes**
There were many Republican candidates, but the top in polling at the beginning of the primaries were Donald Trump, Senator Ted Cruz, Senator Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, former governor Jeb Bush, governor Kasich and governor Christie. Each had their own tax plan, but they all intended to cut income taxes and business taxes from their current rates. One of the biggest tax cuts appeared to be from candidate Ben Carson, who favored a 14.9% flat tax on income, and a reduction to “0” of all capital gains tax.

**Goals of Taxation**
One of the most recognized goals of taxation is to raise revenue to pay for government programs. The U.S. government supplies an army and runs social welfare programs like Social Security and Medicare. Other Americans argue that it is unfair that others make more money than some, and thus, some politicians see taxation as a way to make people’s income the same. And still, other politicians argue that when Americans get to keep more of their own money, they are better able to make economic decisions than government, and their choices will grow the economy. A stronger economy means more people working and more people paying taxes.

**Taxes, Presidents, and History**
There may be differences of opinion on tax cuts and how they affect the government, but there is only one history. Since 1962 through 2016, we have three instances in history where the U.S. government has drastically cut taxes. President John F. Kennedy cut the top tax rate from 90% to 71% in 1962. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan cut the top tax rate from 70% to 50% in 1981, and then in 1986, he dropped the top tax rate to 28%. In the 2000s, President Bush cut income taxes from a high of 39.6% to 35%.  In each of these largest tax cuts in the past 60 years during each President’s terms, revenue to the U.S. government grew, individual income grew, unemployment fell, and the gross domestic product grew over 3.5%. What appears to have happened is that because individuals were allowed to keep more of their money, they invested it into businesses or spent more on consumer goods. This seems to have increased the overall growth of the economy. President Trump also drastically cut taxes. That tax cut and its effects will be discussed in another article.

**President Obama and Taxes**
President Obama raised taxes many times, including 22 different taxes included in the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare). Overall, this had a detrimental effect on the American economy and the American worker. During his presidency, revenue to the U.S. government grew, however, individual income fell, the number of people unemployed grew to 92.5 million people, and gross domestic product grew at a 2% rate. While there are other factors affecting the economy, tax policy is one of the most consequential. How a voter views taxes and sees the effects of taxes greatly affects how he chooses a President.

**Questions**

1. Who are the main Presidential candidates for Democrats and Republicans?
2. How do the candidates for the political parties differ in how they view tax policy?
3. What are at least two goals of tax policy?
4. What affects did the tax cuts of Kennedy, Reagan and Bush have had on the U.S.?
5. What affects did the tax hikes of President Obama have on the U.S.?

**7. Bernie Sanders and Socialism**

In a rare event in American political history, a self-proclaimed Socialist is one of the major candidates for the U.S. Presidency for two Presidential elections, 2016 and 2020. Socialist Senator Bernie Sanders (Vermont) competed very well against Senator Hillary Clinton (New York) for the Democratic nomination for the President and he is currently competing very well against Joe Biden. Even though Sanders has become a household name, many Americans do not know what a Socialist is.

Socialists believe that society functions best when members are forced to share economic goods and an elite in government owns the means of production and decides how the goods are shared. This means, for example, that if someone earns $100,000 and another earns $10,000 a year, both should enjoy the $110,000 equally. Socialists think it is unfair that one person should benefit more than another because of his ability, effort, or circumstances in life.  Socialists think that the government should determine how much money a person is allowed to keep and how much he should give to others. Some socialists think all people should have the same income, where other socialists think some people can earn more than others. But all socialists agree that the government should determine a minimum amount that each person in society should earn, regardless of his situation, effort, work habits, successes or failures.

A socialist thinks that it is the role of government to make decisions regarding private property. For example, if a family has 10 children the socialist thinks that the government should make sure the larger-sized family has a large enough house for the bigger family. This could mean that taxes from the family with 2 children could go to the family with 10 children to support them.

A socialist thinks that the individual rights of the citizen come second to the needs of the state, and it is the role of the government to determine what the needs of the state are. We have many examples in history over the last 200 years to help us understand what a socialist state may decide is the need of the state. In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) in the 1900s, the government decided that religion was an enemy of the people. The U.S.S.R. forbade religious practice and tortured and murdered millions of people to enforce the ban on religious practice. The U.S.S.R. also forbade private ownership of land and businesses and murdered many more millions to enforce this. It is likely that 40 million Russians were murdered by the U.S.S.R. to enforce socialism. Because of the tragic consequences of the U.S.S.R., many Americans fear socialism.

Senator Sanders describes his political philosophy as democratic socialism. Sanders argues that he does not want government to take away others’ property or severely limit individual’s rights, but he would like government to heavily tax those who are successful, and he wants government to distribute this money evenly. Sanders was a fan of the U.S.S.R. and visited there with his wife right after they married. Still, he says that unlike in the U.S.S.R., where people were forced to follow the government or die, he wants people in the U.S.A. to vote and choose a government that will raise taxes. Sanders thinks that the amount of money in a society is fixed, and it is the government’s job to distribute it evenly among all.

**Great Questions You Can Ask Your Kids**
1. Who is Bernie Sanders?
2. What is a socialist?
3. What happened in the U.S.S.R. in the 1900s?
4. What is democratic socialism?
5. What do you think of socialism?

**8. Tax Policies of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, 2016**

On Tuesday, November 8th, Americans voted Donald Trump President of the United States of America. Each offered a different tax plan for the country. One candidate favors individuals and businesses keeping more of the money they earn and the other candidate favors raising taxes on individuals and businesses. One candidate believes that individuals and businesses make better decisions with their own money and another candidate believes that when a person makes a great deal of money, the government will make better decisions what to do with the money.

Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton planned to raise taxes on individual and business income. Clinton wanted to raise taxes to limit tax deductions and to place an extra 4% tax on individuals with incomes over $5 million. This would raise the marginal tax rate on those earning more than $5 million to 43.6%. Clinton wanted to enact a minimum 30% minimum tax on individuals. She wanted to have the estate tax rise to 45%. The estate tax is tax on a person’s estate after he dies. Clinton would like to raise the top tax on investments (long-term capital gains) to 47.4%.

Candidate Trump wanted to lower taxes on individuals and businesses. Trump planned to get rid of the current tax brackets and replace them with three rates: 12%, 25%, and 33%. (Currently, tax rates are 10%, 15%, 25%, 28%, 33%, 35%, and 39.6%. The more a person makes, the higher his tax rate is.) Trump wanted to eliminate the investment income surtax. This means he wants investors to not be taxed extra for investing. Trump wanted to lower the top corporate tax rate from 39% to 15%. Trump wanted to eliminate the estate tax, so that when a person dies, all of his wealth transfers to his family tax free.

The tax plans of the two Presidential candidates and their respective political parties greatly differed from each other. The Republicans and candidate Trump thought that lower taxes would allow Americans to keep more of what they make. They think that individuals and businesses will then spend and hire more, and that this would improve the economy. The Democrats and candidate Clinton thought that higher taxes will make the wealthier pay more to the government, and the government will be able to take that money and invest it wisely. They think that government leaders will make decisions that improve the lives of Americans.

**Great Discussion Questions to Ask Your Kids**

1. Who were the two Presidential candidates in 2016 and what political parties did they represent?
2. What was Hillary Clinton’s tax plan?
3. What was Donald Trump’s tax plan?
4. Why did Clinton believe her tax plan was better than Trump’s tax plan?
5. Why did Trump believe his tax plan was better than Clinton’s tax plan?
6. What is your opinion? Which tax plan is better and why?
7. What are you basing your answer on?



**Electoral Map of the United States of America – 270 Needed to Win**

**2016 Electoral Map**





