

# The opening vignette illustrates

one channel by which individuals and groups can influence the presidency. Each presidency is shaped not only by the person who holds the office but also by the support of constituencies within the public, the support of Congress for presidential policy priorities, and the societal context of the day. Each presidential term can be molded and manipulated in many ways, with the result that one president may appear strong, and the next, weak—or a president may be both effective and ineffectual during the course of just one term. In looking at the roles presidents play in conducting their office, as well as the sources of their power, we consider in this chapter why some presidents are more effective than others.

The presidency is constantly evolving. The institution of the presidency that George W. Bush has left behind is not the one that George Washington left behind. In the discussion that follows, we examine the development of the presidency in order to gain historical perspective on how the individuals who have served as president have changed the nature of the institution over time and what the impacts of those changes are for presidents today.

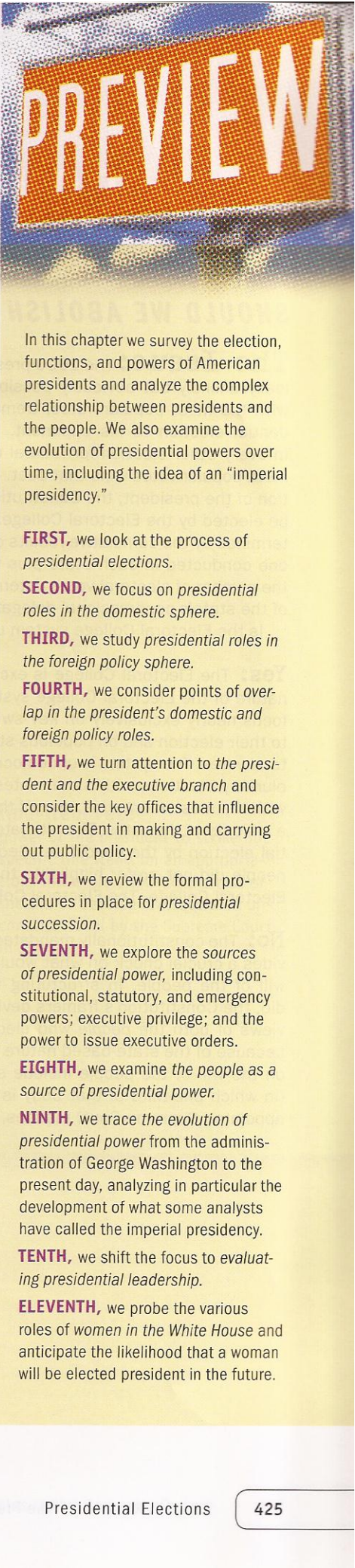
The institution of the presidency has changed in part because of the evolution of the public expectations of the institution that, for many Americans, embodies their government.<sup>1</sup> It is fitting therefore that this chapter often looks through the prism of civic engagement to probe into the complicated relationship between the people and the presidency. We consider that even within this most “imperial” of the American institutions of government, the people, like the Students for Obama described in the vignette, play a vital part in determining not only who serves as president but also how effective and successful the president is in exercising the executive power.<sup>2</sup>

## Presidential Elections

The relationship between Americans and their president begins well before a president takes the oath of office. In presidential election years, nonstop campaigning provides ample opportunities for the public to learn about presidential candidates and their positions on issues. Campaigns also present many avenues for participation by the people—for example, by volunteering in or contributing to candidates’ campaigns or even just by debating candidates’ views around the water cooler. Although these opportunities for citizen engagement are especially abundant during a presidential election year, similar chances to get involved arise well before, because potential candidates typically position themselves years in advance of election day to secure their party’s nomination and to win the general election.

As discussed in Chapter 8, the delegates to the national conventions are chosen by citizens in each state who vote in their party’s primary election. After the nominees have been decided, typically by late August, they and their vice-presidential running mates begin their general election campaign. Usually the parties’ choice of nominee is a foregone conclusion by the time of the convention. Eligible incumbent presidents (that is, those who have served only one term) are nearly always renominated, and the nominee of the opposing party is often determined by the primary results.

The votes tallied on Election Day determine which presidential candidate’s slate of electors will cast their ballots, in accordance with state law. There are 538 electors in the Electoral College because the number of electors is based on the number of members of Congress—435 in the House of Representatives, 100 in the Senate—plus three electors who



In this chapter we survey the election, functions, and powers of American presidents and analyze the complex relationship between presidents and the people. We also examine the evolution of presidential powers over time, including the idea of an “imperial presidency.”

**FIRST**, we look at the process of *presidential elections*.

**SECOND**, we focus on *presidential roles in the domestic sphere*.

**THIRD**, we study *presidential roles in the foreign policy sphere*.

**FOURTH**, we consider points of *overlap in the president’s domestic and foreign policy roles*.

**FIFTH**, we turn attention to *the president and the executive branch* and consider the key offices that influence the president in making and carrying out public policy.

**SIXTH**, we review the formal *procedures in place for presidential succession*.

**SEVENTH**, we explore the *sources of presidential power*, including constitutional, statutory, and emergency powers; executive privilege; and the power to issue executive orders.

**EIGHTH**, we examine *the people as a source of presidential power*.

**NINTH**, we trace *the evolution of presidential power* from the administration of George Washington to the present day, analyzing in particular the development of what some analysts have called the imperial presidency.

**TENTH**, we shift the focus to *evaluating presidential leadership*.

**ELEVENTH**, we probe the various *roles of women in the White House* and anticipate the likelihood that a woman will be elected president in the future.



# DEMOCRACY

## THE CONVERSATION OF

### SHOULD WE ABOLISH THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

**The Issue:** The 2000 presidential election saw a historically unlikely but obviously possible occurrence: the candidate with the most popular votes, Democrat Al Gore, lost the presidential election to his opponent, Republican George W. Bush. In every other election for federal office, the candidate with the most popular votes wins that seat. But instead of the direct election of the president, the Constitution requires that the president be elected by the Electoral College. Essentially, the winner is determined by the cumulative results of fifty-one separate elections, one conducted in each state plus the District of Columbia, with the number of electoral votes determined in proportion to the size of the state's congressional delegation.

Is the Electoral College system unfair? Should we abolish it?

**Yes:** The Electoral College is exclusive and undemocratic. The nature of the Electoral College system demands that candidates focus nearly exclusively on key swing states that will be pivotal to their election and on populous states that carry the most electoral votes. The system is undemocratic because of its reliance on plurality elections within the states. In a plurality, the candidate with the most votes wins, even if that candidate does not receive a majority of the votes. The ultimate victory in the 2000 presidential election by the candidate (George W. Bush) whom the most people did not prefer highlights the undemocratic nature of the Electoral College. The Electoral College should be abolished.

**No:** The constitutionally mandated Electoral College system provides a crucial check on what would otherwise be the unchecked will of the people. In structuring the Electoral College as they did, the Constitution's framers devised a way of representing the views of both the *people* who elect the electors and the *states* because of the state-based nature of the elections. Other checks on the will of the people include staggered senatorial elections (in which one-third of that body is elected every two years) and appointed Supreme Court justices, and these are evidence of the

framers' view that the will of the people needed to be tempered. If the Electoral College were abolished, the most populous geographical regions would dominate in presidential elections. Urban areas would have tremendous clout in presidential elections, and less densely populated rural areas would be virtually ignored. The current structure strengthens the power of the states and in this way ensures that our federal system remains strong.

**Other approaches:** Because of the difficulty of abolishing the Electoral College, various schemes have been proposed that would make it almost impossible for the loser of the popular vote to win the presidency, including awarding a state's electoral votes proportionally instead of on a winner-take-all basis, dividing electoral votes by congressional district (currently done in Maine and Nebraska), and awarding extra electoral votes to the winner of the popular vote. Legislation recently passed in Maryland, Hawaii, Illinois, and New Jersey would commit those states' electors to vote for the winner of the popular vote if states representing a 270-vote majority in the Electoral College enact similar legislation.

### What do you think?

- ① Do you think that the Electoral College should be abolished, should remain the same, or should be reformed? Why? If your answer is "should be reformed," what changes would you implement?
- ② If the Electoral College were abolished, what impact would the change likely have on voters in your home state? Does that scenario influence your view?
- ③ Americans revere the Constitution as a near-sacred document. Typically, citizens are reluctant to advocate amending the "supreme law of the land." Does reluctance to amend the handiwork of the Constitution's framers influence your view?

represent the people of the District of Columbia. A presidential candidate today needs a simple majority of votes (270) to win the presidency. On the Monday following the second Wednesday of December, the slate of electors chosen in each state meet in their respective state capitals and cast their electoral votes. The results are then announced in a joint session of Congress in early January. In most presidential elections, however, the winner is known on election night because analysts tabulate the outcome in each state and predict the electoral vote. The winner takes the oath of office as president in inaugural ceremonies on January 20.