Q49 – Why is the Electoral College important?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The Electoral College is important because it decides who is elected president of the United States. Here's how it works.

Each state has a number of electoral votes equal to the size of its delegation to Congress. Wyoming, for instance, has one representative and two senators – therefore three electoral votes. The popular vote in each state determines which candidate wins all that state's electoral votes – except for Maine and Nebraska which split their electoral votes. The candidate that wins a majority of electoral votes – 270 or more – becomes president.

Four times so far in our history, the winner has lost the popular vote but won the Electoral College vote – and, therefore, the presidency. Some people ask why the Founders of the republic created the Electoral College. Why not elect the president with a simple majority of the national vote? In that case, a candidate might win the presidency by campaigning in densely populated regions and racking up votes there – while ignoring the rest of the country.

The Electoral College forces candidates to campaign in big states and small. In big cities and small towns. Candidates thus learn about the interests of the whole nation. And the winner represents a broader cross-section of the citizenry.

As a result, the Electoral College helps prevent the tyranny of the majority – a constant fear of the Founders. The states were meant to be the bedrock of our federal republic. By deciding who is elected president, the Electoral College helps safeguard the power of the states.