GUIDE TO READING

Main Idea
Every four years, electors selected by popular vote cast their ballots for president and vice president, whose terms of office are established in the United States Constitution.

Key Terms
Electoral College, elector

Reading Strategy
Categorizing Information
As you read, categorize information by completing a chart like the one below with information about the U.S. presidency.

Qualifications for President

Harry S Truman was the thirty-third president of the United States, serving from 1945 to 1953. The president heads the executive branch of the United States government. The presidency is the top political job in the country. Because of the power and global influence of the United States, the president is generally considered to hold the most important job in the world. Our country’s first president was George Washington. Just as the nation has grown tremendously since that time, so has the office of the presidency.

The constitutional requirements for the presidency remain the same as they did when George Washington was president. The U.S. Constitution lists only three rules about who can become president of the United States. A person must be (1) at least 35 years old, (2) a native-born American citizen, and (3) a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. By law, anyone who meets these qualifications can become president. Of course, someone who hopes to become president must have many more qualifications than those three.

So far, every American president has been a white male. All but one have been Protestant Christians. Most have won elections before. Most have had a college education. Many have been lawyers. Most came from states with large populations.

Only in the past few decades has the presidency become a possibility for a wider group of Americans. John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic president in 1960. In 1984 the
Democratic Party nominated Geraldine Ferraro as its first female vice-presidential candidate. Four years later Jesse Jackson, an African American, ran a close second in the race to become the Democratic candidate for president. In 2000 the Democrats nominated Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman as the first Jewish candidate for vice president.

**ELECTING A PRESIDENT**

Presidential elections take place every four years in even years divisible by the number 4—for example, 1996, 2000, and 2004. The Constitution does not provide for direct popular election of the president. Instead, it set up an indirect method of election called the **Electoral College**. The Constitution says that each state “shall appoint” electors, who then vote for one of the major candidates. Although the ballot will show the names of the presidential candidates, when you vote for a candidate, you are actually voting for a list of presidential electors pledged to that candidate.

Each state has as many electoral votes as the total of its U.S. senators and representatives. The Electoral College includes 538 electors. (Washington, D.C., has three electoral votes.) This means that the states with large populations have more electoral votes than less populated states. In almost every state, the Electoral College is a “winner-take-all” system. Even if a candidate wins the popular vote by just a tiny majority, that candidate usually gets all of the state’s electoral votes. Candidates thus pay much more attention to these states during election campaigns. Even so, the electoral votes of a few small states can decide the outcome of a close election.

To be elected president or vice president, a candidate must win at least 270 of the 538 electoral votes. The winner-take-all system makes it difficult for third-party candidates—candidates not from the two major parties—to win electoral votes.

Although the winning presidential candidate is usually announced on the same evening as the popular election, the formal election by the Electoral College doesn’t take place until December, when the electors meet in each state capital to cast their ballots. Congress counts the electoral votes and declares the winner as the next president. You will read more about the Electoral College system in Chapter 10.

**DEFINING**

**What is a presidential elector?**

**TERM OF OFFICE**

Presidents serve four-year terms. Originally the Constitution placed no limits on how many terms a president could serve. The nation’s first president, George Washington, served for eight years, then refused to run for a third term. Presidents followed Washington’s example and no president served more than two terms until 1940, when Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for and won a third term. In 1944 Roosevelt won a fourth term. The Twenty-second Amendment, ratified in 1951, limits each president to two elected terms in office, or a maximum of 10 years if the presidency began during another president’s term.

**SALARY AND BENEFITS**

The president receives a salary of $400,000 per year, plus money for expenses and travel. The president lives and works...
in the White House, which contains a private movie theater, a small gym, a bowling alley, and a heated pool. A White House domestic staff of more than 80 people takes care of the president’s family.

In addition, the president has the use of Camp David, a beautiful estate in the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland, about 60 miles north of Washington, D.C. It serves as a retreat and as a place to host foreign leaders. When presidents need to travel, they command a fleet of special cars, helicopters, and airplanes. For long trips, the president uses Air Force One, a specially equipped jet.

Identifying What is the maximum number of years that a U.S. president can serve in office?

The Vice President

The vice president is elected with the president through the Electoral College system. The qualifications for the office are the same as those for the presidency. The Constitution gives little authority to the vice president. Article I states that the vice president shall preside over the Senate and vote in that body in case of a tie.

Vice presidents are usually not very visible to the public. Their activities rarely receive front-page newspaper coverage. Yet, if the president dies, is removed from office, becomes seriously ill, or resigns, the vice president becomes president. Nine vice presidents have become president due to the death or resignation of a president. John Adams, our nation’s first vice president, described the situation well. He said,

“I am Vice President. In this I am nothing, but I may become everything.”

Presidential Succession

Eight presidents have died while in office. The original wording of the Constitution states that if the president dies or leaves office during his term, the vice president takes on the “powers and duties” of the presidency. Early government officials were not sure what that meant. Should the vice president become president, or should he remain vice president while doing the president’s job?
In 1841 Vice President John Tyler settled the question when William Henry Harrison became the first president to die in office. Tyler declared himself president, took the oath of office, moved into the White House, and served out the remainder of Harrison’s term.

In 1947 Congress passed the Presidential Succession Act, which indicates the line of succession after the vice president. According to this law, if both the president and vice president die or leave office, the Speaker of the House becomes president. Next in line is the president pro tempore of the Senate, then the secretary of state and other members of the cabinet.

**Twenty-Fifth Amendment**

Twenty years later, remaining questions about presidential succession were answered with the adoption of a constitutional amendment. The Twenty-fifth Amendment says that if the president dies or leaves office, the vice president becomes president. The new president then chooses another vice president. Both the Senate and House of Representatives must approve the choice. This amendment also gives the vice president a role in determining whether a president is disabled and unable to do the job. Should that occur, the vice president would serve as acting president until the president is able to go back to work.

The Twenty-fifth Amendment has been used only three times. In 1973 Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned, and President Richard Nixon replaced him with Gerald Ford, a representative from Michigan. When Nixon resigned from the presidency in 1974, Ford became the new president and chose Nelson A. Rockefeller to be his vice president. In 1985 President Ronald Reagan informed Congress that he would need to undergo surgery and be unable to carry out his presidential duties. As a result, Vice President George H.W. Bush served as acting president for about eight hours.

**Reading Check**

*Defining* What was the purpose of the Twenty-fifth Amendment?

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**SECTION ASSESSMENT**

**Checking for Understanding**

1. **Key Terms** Write complete sentences about the United States presidency using each of the following terms: **Electoral College**, **elector**.

**Reviewing Main Ideas**

2. **Describe** What three qualifications for the U.S. presidency are listed in the Constitution of the United States?

3. **Identify** What are the constitutional duties of the vice president of the United States?

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Making Inferences** What did John Adams mean by saying, “I may become everything”?

5. **Sequencing Information** In a graphic organizer like the one below, explain the order of presidential succession.

Who replaces the president in order of succession?

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**Analyzing Visuals**

6. **Identify** Examine the chart—Presidential Succession—on page 168. Who is fifth in line to become president of the United States?

7. **Research** In the library or on the Internet, research the gubernatorial succession in your state. What is the line of succession if the governor dies or leaves office?