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Upcoming Presidential Elections and Political System in the USA (Part 1)

A) Reading Comprehension

First, read the following text about how the president of the United States of America is actually elected – compiled and adapted mainly from the information on the website of the U.S. National Archives (available at: https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/about) and the article by Sarah Thelen, dated 25th October, 2024, available from the website of RTÉ, i.e. the national public service broadcaster of Ireland (https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/1024/1477152-us-electoral-college-presidential-election-swing-states-2024/) – and perform the following tasks:

Task I: Skim the following text (without going into detail or checking the problematic words and/or expressions), quickly trying to get the general idea of what is the message of all the main sections of the text.

Task II: Read the text, this time at your own pace, and answer the more or less general **Questions 1-9** related to the contents of selected paragraphs of the text listed below. Do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to guess or work their meanings out from the context, just using your intelligence and your own knowledge of the world we live in.

In other words, to be more precise, while trying to understand the text do not forget all the knowledge that you have about the presidential election and the political system in the United States of America. This background knowledge will make it easier for you to understand the contents of the article. (For your convenience, particular questions have also been provided directly under the main sections of the text to which they refer).

1. *What are the 'swing' states in the context of U.S. politics*?
2. *What is a 'national popular vote'*?
3. *What is the role and responsibility of the members of the Electoral College*?
4. *What does the number of the electors in the Electoral College depend on*?
5. *What are the three elements of the Electoral College process*?
6. *What are the criteria preventing a person from becoming an elector*?
7. *Who do U.S. voters actually vote for while voting for their presidential candidate*?
8. *When do the electors become the so-called 'faithless electors'*?
9. *When are the U.S. general election and then the meeting of the elctors held*?

Task III: Read the text one more time, paying attention to detail, and try to work out the meaning of the underlined terms and expressions related to the specialist context of the presidential election and the political system in the U.S.A. At first, do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to work their meanings out from the context (just as in Task II). If, despite your best efforts, you are not able to identify the meanings on your own, use a dictionary.

Task IV: Once you have identified the meanings of the underlined specialist terms and/or expressions, try to think about (or, if nothing springs to mind, find in a dictionary) their possible Polish translations and write them down. For your convenience, a complete list of the underlined vocabulary items in question has been provided under the text (**Vocabulary Checklist 1**), arranged in the order of their appearance in the text.

Task V: Once you have written Polish translations of the underlined terms and/or expressions, try to think about the English synonyms (or synonymous expressions) that you might know to the words and/or expressions in question (if there any – because in the case of specialist terms, optionality is often not allowed). If you can think about any, write them down too. If nothing springs to mind, but you still want to improve your vocabulary, you can certainly consult a dictionary.

Task VI: Once you have completed the Reading Comprehension Tasks I-V (in Part **A** here) and the Listening Comprehensions Tasks I-V (in Part **B** below), move on to **Task VI** in Part **B** below.

How is the president of the United States of America elected?
(Or all you need to know about the U.S. Electoral College)[1]

If you follow U.S. politics at all, you have heard a lot about Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin lately. So much, in fact, that it can be easy to forget that the 2024 U.S. presidential election is a national election involving over 160 million voters living in 50 states, seven territories, and the District of Columbia. However, political attention is focused on just 150,000 voters concentrated in seven states. Why?

Is it because these voters are still undecided between Donald Trump or Kamala Harris? Yes, but they certainly are not the only undecided voters in the U.S.A. Is it because they live in what are described as either 'swing' or 'battleground' states? These are the states in which it still is not clear which party will have a majority, whether because voter preferences either swing between one party and the other, sometimes with significant margins (swing states), or because the race is incredibly close (battleground states)? Yes, again. But, there are more than 150,000 undecided voters in those seven states. Is it because they live in swing counties inside those swing states? Yes, one more time.

→ Question **1**. *What are the 'swing' states in the context of U.S. politics?*

So why does it matter so much where a U.S. voter lives? It matters because the U.S. presidency is not decided by who wins a majority of the national popular vote, but rather by who wins a majority in the Electoral College. Such a system has resulted in several elections in which the eventual presidents would arrive in the Oval Office having received less of the popular vote than their opponents: John Q. Adams (in 1824), Rutherford B. Hayes (in 1876), Grover Cleveland (in 1888), George W. Bush (in 2000) and Donald Trump (in 2016).

→ Question **2**. *What is a 'national popular vote'?*

What is the Electoral College?

The Electoral College is not a place, but a group of electors chosen by the states which gathers for the sole purpose of electing the U.S. president and vice president. The U.S. constitution is very clear that these electors cannot hold public office and that each state's delegation equals its representation in Congress (so each state has as many electors as it does senators and representatives).

→ Question **3**. *What is the role and responsibility of the members of the Electoral College?*

→ Question **4**. *What does the number of the electors in the Electoral College depend on?*

However, while the Constitution clearly specifies what the Electoral College will do (elect the president) and who those electors are not (existing office holders), it very importantly leaves the question of how to select those electors up to the states.

[1] The first part of this text is based mainly on Thelen (2024).

The Electoral College as a Process[2]

To be more precise, the Electoral College is not merely a specific place or a group of selected people, but it should be understood as a process. The Founding Fathers established it in the U.S. constitution, in part, as a compromise between the election of the president by a vote in Congress and election of the president by a popular vote of qualified citizens. The Electoral College process consists of the selection of the electors, the meeting of the electors where they vote for President and Vice President, and the counting of the electoral votes by Congress. Having said that, let us focus on the electors.

→ Question **5**. *What are the three elements of the Electoral College process?*

How many electors are there?

The Electoral College consists of 538 electors. A majority of 270 electoral votes is required to elect the president. Each state has the same number of electors as it has members in its Congressional delegation: one for each member in the House of Representatives plus two senators.

Allocation of electoral votes among the states

Electoral votes are allocated among the States based on the Census. Every state is allocated a number of votes equal to the number of senators and representatives in its U.S. Congressional delegation – two votes for its senators in the U.S. Senate plus a number of votes equal to the number of its Congressional districts. Under the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution, the District of Columbia is allocated three electors and treated like a state for the purposes of the Electoral College. For this reason, in the following sections, the word 'state' also refers to the District of Columbia, and 'executive' to the state governors and the Mayor of the District of Columbia.

Each state (which includes the District of Columbia for the Electoral College) decides how to appoint its electors; however, they must do so according to law enacted before the election day. Currently, all states use the popular vote results from the November general election to decide which political party chooses the individuals who are appointed.

Allocation of electoral votes within each state

All states, except for Maine and Nebraska, have a winner-take-all policy where the state looks only at the overall winner of the state-wide popular vote. Maine and Nebraska, however, appoint individual electors based on the winner of the popular vote within each Congressional district and then two 'at-large' electors based on the winner of the overall state-wide popular vote. While it is rare for Maine or Nebraska to have a split vote, each has done so twice: Nebraska in 2008, Maine in 2016, and both Maine and Nebraska in 2020. The current allocations are based on the 2020 Census, and are effective for the 2024 and 2028 presidential elections.

What are the qualifications to be an elector?

The U.S. constitution contains very few provisions relating to the qualifications of electors. Article II, section 1, clause 2 provides that no U.S. senator or representative, or person holding an office of trust or profit under the United States, shall be appointed an elector. As a historical matter, the 14th Amendment provides that state officials who have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the United States or given aid and comfort to its enemies are disqualified from serving as electors. This prohibition relates to the post-Civil War era. Each state's 'Certificate of Ascertainment' confirms the names of its appointed electors.

→ Question **6**. *What are the criteria preventing a person from becoming an elector?*

[2] The remaining part of this text is based mainly on the information from the U.S. National Archives website ("What is the Electoral College?" June 26, 2024. https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/about).

Who selects the electors?

Choosing each state's electors is a two-part process. First, the political parties in each state choose their own lists (known as slates) of electors sometime before the general election. Second, during the general election, the voters in each state select their state's electors by casting their ballots.

The first part of the process is controlled by the political parties in each state and varies from state to state. Generally, the parties either nominate slates of potential electors at their state party conventions or they chose them by a vote of the party's central committee. This happens in each state for each party by whatever rules the state party and (sometimes) the national party have for the process. The result of the first part of the process is that each candidate running for president in a given state has his/her own unique slate of potential electors.

Political parties often choose individuals for the slate in recognition of their service and dedication to that political party. They may be state elected officials, state party leaders, or people in the state who have a personal or political affiliation with their party's presidential candidate.

The second part of the process happens during the general election. When the voters in each state cast votes for the presidential candidate of their choice, they are voting to select their state's electors. The potential electors' names may or may not appear on the ballot below the name of the presidential candidates, depending on the election procedures and ballot formats in each state.

→ Question **7**. *Who do US voters actually vote for while voting for their presidential candidate?*

The winning presidential candidate's slate of potential electors are appointed as the state's electors – except in Nebraska and Maine, which have proportional distribution of the electors. In Nebraska and Maine, the state winner receives two electors and the winner of each congressional district (who may be the same as the overall winner or a different candidate) receives one elector. This system permits Nebraska and Maine to award electors to more than one candidate.

Are there any restrictions on who the electors can vote for?

There is no Constitutional provision or federal law that requires electors to vote according to the results of the popular vote in their states. Some states, however, require electors to cast their votes according to the popular vote. These pledges fall into two categories – electors bound by state law and those bound by pledges to political parties.

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the Constitution does not require that electors should be completely free to act as they choose and, therefore, political parties may extract pledges from electors to vote for the parties' nominees. Some state laws provide that so-called 'faithless electors' may be subject to fines or may be disqualified for casting an invalid vote and be replaced by a substitute elector. The Supreme Court decided (in 2020) that states can enact requirements on how electors vote. No elector has ever been prosecuted for failing to vote as pledged. However, several electors were disqualified and replaced, and others fined, in 2016 for failing to vote as pledged.

→ Question **8**. *When do the electors become the so-called 'faithless electors'?*

It is rare for electors to disregard the popular vote by casting their electoral vote for someone other than their party's candidate. Electors generally hold a leadership position in their party or were chosen to recognize years of loyal service to the party. Throughout the American history as a nation, more than 99 per cent of electors have voted as pledged.

What happens in the U.S. general election? Why should you vote?

The general election is held every four years on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. When you vote for a presidential candidate, you are actually voting for your candidate's preferred electors, you are telling your state which candidate you want your state to vote for. The states use these general election results (also known as the popular vote) to appoint their electors. They are the only ones who

actually vote for President, which they do at the meeting of the electors (the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December).

→ Question **9**. *When are the U.S. general election and then the meeting of the elctors held?*

What happens after the general election?

After the general election, your state's executive (i.e. governor or – in the District of Columbia – the Mayor of the D.C.) prepares a 'Certificate of Ascertainment' listing the names of all the individuals on the slates for each candidate. The Certificate also lists the number of the votes each individual received and shows which individuals were appointed as your state's electors.[3]

The meeting of the electors takes place on the first Tuesday after the second Wednesday in December after the general election. The electors meet in their respective states, where they cast their votes for president and vice president on separate ballots. Your state's electors' votes are recorded on a Certificate of Vote, which is prepared at the meeting by the electors. Your state's Certificate of Vote is sent to Congress, where the votes are counted (and to the National Archives and Records Administration, as part of the official records of the presidential election).

Each state's electoral votes are counted in a joint session of Congress on the 6th of January in the year following the meeting of the electors. Members of the House of Representatives and Senate meet in the House Chamber to conduct the official count of electoral votes. The U.S. vice president, being the President of the Senate, presides over the count in a strictly ministerial manner and announces the results of the vote. The President of the Senate then declares which persons, if any, have been elected President and Vice President of the United States.

The President-elect takes the oath of office and is sworn in as President of the United States on January 20th in the year following the general election.

(**Note**: You can also take advantage of the reference materials used for the following text (listed in the 'References' section at the very bottom) so that you can learn more about this subject, as well as enjoy the first-hand experience of having access to the authentic U.S. political system related material.)

Vocabulary Checklist 1 (Reading Comprehension):

(A complete list of the terms and/or expressions underlined in the text, arranged in the order of their appearance in the text – for you to work on, as in the Reading Comprehension Tasks IV and V above).

to follow (U.S., Polish, etc.) politics – . . . . . .

to be undecided between (sb/sth) and (sb/sth else) – . . . . . .

to swing between one party and the other – . . . . . .

the race is close – . . . . . .

to win a majority (of the vote) – . . . . . .

to win a majority (in a place, office, etc.) – . . . . . .

national popular vote – . . . . . .

Electoral College – . . . . . .

[3] Certificates of Ascertainment are sent to the National Archives and Records Administration as part of the official records of the presidential election (see: https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/about).

Oval Office – . . . . . .

to hold an office – . . . . . .

public office – . . . . . .

office holder – . . . . . .

Founding Fathers – . . . . . .

a compromise between (sth and sth else) – . . . . . .

qualified citizen – . . . . . .

House of Representatives – . . . . . .

to allocate (sth) – . . . . . .

based on – . . . . . .

census – . . . . . .

Amendment (to the Constitution) – . . . . . .

state governor – . . . . . .

to appoint (sb) – . . . . . .

a winner-take-all policy – . . . . . .

overall winner – . . . . . .

state-wide popular vote – . . . . . .

a split vote – . . . . . .

provision – . . . . . .

person holding an office – . . . . . .

to be appointed an elector – . . . . . .

to be disqualified (from sth/doing sth) – . . . . . .

prohibition – . . . . . .

to confirm (sth) – . . . . . .

slate – . . . . . .

to cast one's ballot – . . . . . .

to vary from state to state – . . . . . .

party convention – . . . . . .

to choose (sb) by a vote – . . . . . .

to run for president – . . . . . .

in recognition of (sth) – . . . . . .

state elected officials – . . . . . .

an affiliation with (sb/sth) – . . . . . .

general election – . . . . . .

to cast a vote (for sb) – . . . . . .

the candidate of one's choice – . . . . . .

ballot (= ballot paper) – . . . . . .

to be appointed as (sth) – . . . . . .

a constitutional provision – . . . . . .

to cast one's vote – . . . . . .

a pledge (to sb) – . . . . . .

Supreme Court – . . . . . .

to be free to act as one chooses – . . . . . .

nominee – . . . . . .

faithless elector – . . . . . .

to be subject to fines – . . . . . .

disqualified (for sth/doing sth) – . . . . . .

invalid vote – . . . . . .

substitute elector – . . . . . .

to be prosecuted (for sth/doing sth) – . . . . . .

to vote as pledged – . . . . . .

to fail to vote as pledged – . . . . . .

to be fined – . . . . . .

to disregard sth – . . . . . .

to hold a leadership position – . . . . . .

official records – . . . . . .

a joint session (of sth) – . . . . . .

to conduct the official count (of sth) – . . . . . .

to announce the results of the vote – . . . . . .

B) Listening Comprehension

Now, watch the BBC News report on the current state of the presidential race in the U.S.A., entitled *Donald Trump and Kamala Harris make final push for votes in US election*, dated 28th October, 2024 (available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmDLXDnawI0), and perform the following tasks:

Task I: Before you watch the BBC News report, read the more or less general **Questions 1-20** related to its contents listed below, trying to understand what they are about. Do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to guess or work their meanings out from the context, just using your intelligence and your own knowledge of the world we live in.

In other words, to be more precise, while trying to understand the questions do not forget all the knowledge that you have about the political system and upcoming presidential election in the U.S.A., in particular the profile of the candidates, their agendas and the most recent developments in their campaigns. This background knowledge will make it easier for you to understand the contents of the questions. And please bear in mind that some of the questions may look problematic at first, but they will become more obvious to understand when you actually watch the video. The questions for you are:

1. *How many weeks away is the election in the U.S.A.*?
2. *Where did the Republican presidential candidate hold a rally*?
3. *How many people arrived at the event*?
4. *What eminent persons did the guest list include*?
5. *What is Donald Trump's home town*?
6. *Was Trump's wife's presence a usual situation during the campaign*?
7. *What issues did Trump focus on*?
8. *Who does Trump say invaded and conquered many US cities and towns*?
9. *What does he pledge to do with these people*?
10. *What is the difference (in percentage points) between Harris and Trump now*?
11. *What are 'battleground states' in U.S. politics*?
12. *What state and city did Kamala Harris visit*?
13. *What did the Democratic candidate do while making her rounds in the city*?
14. *What issues did Harris address during her rally*?
15. *What does Harris pledge to do*?
16. *How many 'battleground states' are there in the U.S.A.*?
17. *What might Donald Trump's closing message be*?
18. *Whom does Trump mean referring to 'the enemies within'*?
19. *What foreign adversaries does he point to*?
20. *What might Kamala Harris's closing message be*?

Task II: Use the link provided above and watch the BBC News report for the first time, trying to answer **Questions 1-20** listed above. Do not get discouraged if you do not understand much (especially while watching the video for the first time) – the point of this part of the listening exercise is to get the general idea of what the report is about and to answer the questions. No-one is expecting you to understand everything that is being said, or even most of it.

If you come across a word/expression that you cannot hear very well, or a word/expression that you can hear well but you do not understand its meaning, do not panic, do not pause and/or rewind the video, but try to work the meanings out from what you can see on the screen and what you know (just as in the Listening Comprehension Task I above) about the political system and current presidential election campaign in the U.S.A. If you cannot answer the Questions 1-20, please repeat the procedure.

Task III: Once you have answered the questions, watch the news report again, this time paying attention to detail and focusing on the English and Polish terms and/or expressions listed in **Vocabulary Checklist 2**, arranged in the order of their appearance in the video (provided below these Listening Comprehension tasks), and try to:

a) in the case of the English terms and/or expressions listed – work out their meanings from what you can see and hear in the video;

b) in the case of the Polish terms and/or expressions listed – find their English equivalents in what is being said in the video.

At first, do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to work their meanings out from the context of what you can see and hear in the video, as well as what you already know about this year's U.S. presidential election (just as in the Listening Comprehension Tasks I and II). If you find it difficult, feel free to pause and/or rewind the video. If, despite your best efforts, you are not able to identify the meanings on your own, use a dictionary.

Task IV: Once you have completed Task III, try to think about (or, if nothing springs to mind, find in a dictionary) possible translations into Polish of the specific English terms and/or expressions in Vocabulary Checklist 2 (unless you have already got their Polish translations listed there, or you had already found their Polish translations when doing Task III). Please, write them down in the empty spaces available in the Vocabulary Checklist 2.

Task V: Once you have written Polish translations of the specific terms and/or expressions, try to think about the English synonyms (or synonymous expressions) that you might know to the words and/or expressions in question (if there any – because in the case of specialist terms, optionality is often not allowed). If you can think about any, write them down too. If nothing springs to mind, but you still want to improve your vocabulary, you can certainly consult a dictionary.

Task VI: Based on the text in Part **A** above (*How is the president of the United States of America elected?*) that you have read and the BBC News video in Part **B** here (*Donald Trump and Kamala Harris make final push for votes in US election*) that you have just watched, make a list of the English terminology items and expressions (in particular the specialist ones) useful in the context of (presidential) elections and election campaigns, especially in the context of the political system in the U.S.A. Finally, write down their Polish terminological counterparts (thus making a Polish-English reference list).

(**Note**: You can also take advantage of the reference materials used for the following text (listed in the 'References' section at the very bottom) so that you can learn more about this subject, as well as enjoy the first-hand experience of having access to the authentic U.S. political system related material.)

Vocabulary Checklist 2 (Listening Comprehension):

(A complete list of the terms and/or expressions underlined in the text, arranged in the order of their appearance in the text – for you to work on, as in the Listening Comprehension Tasks III and IV above).

to make a (final) push for votes – . . . . . .

urządzić wiec – . . . . . .

sb's home state – . . . . . .

spiker Izby Reprezentantów (Kongresu USA) – . . . . . .

running mate – . . . . . .

to steer clear of sb/sth – . . . . . .

główne kwestie – . . . . . .

zwolennicy / zwolenniczki – . . . . . .

to put sb in jail – . . . . . .

sondaże – . . . . . .

percentage points – . . . . . .

stany wahające się, nie opowiadające się zdecydowanie za żadnym z kandydatów – . . . . . .

. . . . . .

at this stage – . . . . . .

how this is gonna go – . . . . . .

jak rozstrzygną/potoczą się te wybory – . . . . . .

nominat / osoba nominowana / kandydat(ka) – . . . . . .

to bring up an issue – . . . . . .

the Biden administration – . . . . . .

we must seize this opportunity (to do sth) – . . . . . .

uczynię wszystko w mojej mocy – . . . . . .

…aby osiągnać ten cel – . . . . . .

najnowsze sondaże – . . . . . .

przewaga jednego punktu procentowego (nad kimś) – . . . . . .

to try to drum up support (among sb) – . . . . . .

persuadable voters – . . . . . .

to cast a ballot (in an election) – . . . . . .

the candidate's closing message – . . . . . .

on the campaign trail – . . . . . .

odmalować coś w ciemnych barwach – . . . . . .

a shift in sb's opinions – . . . . . .

the polls are tied – . . . . . .

overall trends – . . . . . .

sb's lead is slipping – . . . . . .

sb's lead is down to a single point – . . . . . .

Harris's/Trump's poll leads in key states – . . . . . .

the margins of error that come with all polls – . . . . . .

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