



Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

Of the 45 men who have held the office of President of the United States, James Earl Carter Jr. is the longest-lived. On Tuesday, October 1, 2024, President Carter reached a monumental milestone as he celebrated his 100th birthday. Carter has lived through 40% of U.S. history since the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and more than a third of all U.S. administrations since George Washington took office in 1789 — nine before Carter was president, his own and seven since. When Carter took office, just two presidents, John Adams and Herbert Hoover, had lived to be 90. Since then, Ford, Reagan, Carter, and G.H.W. Bush all reached at least 93. When Carter was born in 1924, the male life expectancy was 58, a loaf of bread cost around 9 cents, and you could order a three-bedroom home from a Sears Roebuck catalog for \$2,025. Carter was born under Prohibition, heard FDR give famous radio addresses at 14 years old, and has seen America’s population triple in his lifetime. So, today, let’s look at the life, presidency, and legacy of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States.

[Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter](#) came to the presidency at a difficult time in our nation’s history. The Watergate scandal had rocked the nation and propelled Gerald Ford into the presidency after the resignations of Vice President Spiro Agnew and then President Richard Nixon. The Vietnam War had just ended, but the Cold War still raged. Carter was elected in 1976, defeating the incumbent Republican President Ford, with 297 Electoral College votes to Ford’s 240.

As president, Carter faced some significant struggles. Domestically, the Carter presidency is often most associated with an economic era of [stagflation](#). This was a time of high inflation, high unemployment, and slow economic growth. At the same time, the nation faced an energy crisis, a consequence of Carter’s policies on energy conservation and the manipulation of oil markets by OPEC. Indeed, one of the lasting images of the Carter presidency is long lines as people wait hours at the gas pumps.

On foreign policy, Carter’s record was more mixed. [The Camp David Accords](#) are perhaps the most significant foreign policy victory of the Carter presidency. After 12 days of secret negotiations, Carter brokered this first-of-its-kind agreement between Israel and an Arab neighbor, in this case, Egypt. His “untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts” led to Carter becoming one of just three U.S. presidents to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.

Carter’s foreign policy struggles primarily surrounded one event: [The Iran Hostage Crisis](#). Carter’s critics saw his inability to resolve the situation as a sign of weakness, made worse by a failed military rescue attempt that resulted in the deaths of several U.S. soldiers. This foreign policy failure, combined with economic conditions at home, would ultimately cost Carter a second term.

In 1980, Jimmy Carter was defeated in his bid for re-election by Republican Ronald Reagan. The election was a landslide, with Reagan winning 489 electoral votes to Carter’s 49. Following his defeat, Carter retired to Georgia but did not remove himself from public life. In 1982, Carter founded [The Carter Center](#), an NGO that focuses on improving life for people in over 80 countries by resolving conflicts, advancing democracy and human rights, preventing diseases, and improving mental health care. In 1984, he joined Habitat for Humanity



as a spokesperson and leader, and was known for personally working construction projects with his wife, Rosalynn. Through his work, Carter has spent the decades of his post-presidency serving as an informal American ambassador and diplomat in trouble spots across the globe. At home, he continued to serve as an advisor and mentor to Democratic presidential candidates.

What makes Carter unique is the fact that he will most likely be remembered for his post-presidency years rather than his short time in office. His mission to make government more “competent and compassionate” reinforces what a generous servant leader he was and continues to be. He embodies the importance of civic engagement at all levels. At 100 years old, he’s most looking forward to voting in his 19th presidential election next month.

To Think and To Do: Former British politician Winston Churchill said, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.” Based on what we know about President Carter, how did he embody this principle?

