



CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

Inauguration Day

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.



Every four years, we have one of the most important [civic celebrations](#) we can imagine: Presidential Inauguration Day! Since 1937, under the [20th Amendment](#), this special day is almost always held on January 20th, a few months after the general election and a little more than a month following the vote of the [Electoral College](#). According to the 20th Amendment, the term of a president and vice-president ends at noon on the 20th of January, so the new president and vice-president are sworn in as close to noon as possible. This is to avoid any question about authority and power in the executive branch. But what is the significance of the inauguration?

Inauguration Day is a symbol of the American political system. It reflects the vote of the people, as a president is either sworn into office for the second time (or third or fourth if you are Franklin Delano Roosevelt, [but that can't happen anymore!](#)), or power is peacefully transferred to a new leader. One of the most important aspects of this symbolic event is the Inaugural Address.

The purpose of a president’s first Inaugural Address is to lay out [their vision](#) of the United States of America. Most often, this address explains their goals for the country, and how they will seek to bring together the people of this nation after what may have been a contentious election.

The newly elected president’s goal most often is to provide Americans with an uplifting, uniting, and hopeful promise of what will happen in the next four years, and to share with other nations how the next four years will unfold.

Another important symbolic aspect of the presidential inauguration is that, historically, the previous president attends as a symbol of a transition of power between elected leaders, but this is not required; John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, Andrew Johnson, and Donald Trump all [chose](#) not to attend the inauguration of the men to whom they lost. Oftentimes, additional former presidents will also attend. The inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009 became the first time in history [every living former president](#) was in attendance at the swearing-in ceremony.

“But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principles. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”
--**Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address**
“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”
--**Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address**

During the modern Inauguration Day, the swearing in of the president in Washington, DC is often preceded or followed by a parade while the speech is attended by thousands of excited Americans. This event requires a great deal of planning on the part of the Architect of the Capitol, in collaboration with the elected president’s team and local leaders. At times, [current events](#) have limited the crowds, but it’s important to note, that you do not need a large audience to actually swear in the president! No matter what, the new president will continue a tradition begun by the first president, George Washington, and seek to ensure the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” and this great experiment in republican government “entrusted to the hands of the American people”.

To Think and To Do: Watch or listen to the Inaugural Address on January 20th. How does the newly inaugurated president lay out their vision for our government, and how does it reflect the goals and purposes of government as provided in the [Preamble to the Constitution](#)?

- Learn MORE** about Inauguration Day.
- [Inaugurations and the White House](#), from The White House Historical Association
 - [Inaugural Addresses \(Washington 1789 - Biden 2021\)](#), from The American Presidency Project
 - [America 101: What Happens on Inauguration Day?](#), from The History Channel



The new president, Richard Nixon, is greeted by the outgoing one, Lyndon Johnson, during the 1969 Inauguration.



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