

This Day in History... January 20, 1937

First January Presidential Inauguration Day

On January 20, 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first US president to be sworn in under the new rules of the 20th Amendment. Since then, every president has been sworn in on January 20.

The US Constitution originally set the length of terms for federal elected officials, but it didn't set specific dates for when those terms began or ended.

After the required nine states ratified the Constitution in September 1788, the Congress of the Confederation chose March 4, 1789, as the date "for commencing proceedings" of the new government. Though most officials were sworn in on that date, they didn't begin their operations until April.

The Constitution also didn't set a date for federal elections. Congress later passed a law in 1792 requiring presidential electors to be chosen in November or early December. Then in 1845, this was reduced to a single election day in early November.

As a result, this created a lengthy four-month lame duck period between the election and inauguration. In the early days it was likely a benefit to have this large gap. It gave newly elected officials time to get their affairs in order and make their way to the capital. A drawback to this system was that a lame duck Congress or administration might not have the time or ability to deal with new issues that arose.

The issue of the lame duck period was especially significant twice in our history. The first time was in 1861. At that time, several Southern states began seceding from the Union following Abraham Lincoln's election the previous fall. Because he and his Congress wouldn't be inaugurated until March, he had to wait several months before he could address the issue. Similarly, in 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt had this lengthy wait while America struggled through the Depression. His New Deal programs that were aimed at revitalizing America's economy and workforce couldn't be implemented until he was inaugurated in March.

Concerns over this lame duck period rose and eventually, the 20th Amendment was crafted and proposed on March 2, 1932. In part, it proposed to move Inauguration Day up to January 20. It also stated that if the Electoral College couldn't choose the president or vice president, the incoming Congress, rather than the outgoing one, would choose.

On January 23, 1933, Missouri became the 36th state to ratify the Amendment. With this, three-fourths of the states approved it and it became law. It was too late for the amendment to apply to Roosevelt's first term, but it was in effect for his second. On January 20, 1937, Roosevelt and his vice president, John N. Garner, were the first people in their offices to be sworn in on the new set date. Read Roosevelt's inaugural address from that day here.

Most of the presidential inaugurations since 1937 have taken place on January 20. In 1957, 1985, and 2013, the 20th fell on a Sunday. So the incoming presidents took their oath of office in private on that date, and then again in a public ceremony the next day, January 20.



From the Prominent Americans Series



This stamp was issued for the 200th anniversary of the Constitution.



America's first mourning stamp



This stamp was issued for Roosevelt's 100th birthday.

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