

Operation Wildfire: Good Things Happen When YOU Vote

Celebrating America 250: The First President

Electing the President¹

Following the first presidential election in 1789, George Washington was unanimously elected President of the United States. With 69 electoral votes, Washington won the support from each participating state. No other president since has come into office with a universal mandate to lead. Washington is also the only Independent elected U.S. President.

Between December 15, 1788 and January 10, 1789, the presidential electors were chosen in each of the states. On February 4, 1789, the Electoral College was convened. Ten states cast electoral votes: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Virginia. New York failed to field a slate of electors. North Carolina and Rhode Island were unable to participate because they had not yet ratified the Constitution. After a quorum was finally established, the Congress counted and certified the electoral vote count on April 6.

According to Article II of the Constitution, each elector in the Electoral College possessed two votes. The candidate who received a majority of the votes was elected president. The candidate with the second most votes in the Electoral College, whether a majority or a plurality, was elected vice president. Behind Washington, John Adams, who most recently had served as the first U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, finished with 34 electoral votes and became the first Vice President of the United States. Being from Massachusetts, Adams' election provided the administration a regional balance between the south and north.

The Right to Vote

Originally the U.S. Constitution didn't say much about who had the right to vote. The country's framers left it up to the states to decide. Most states initially limited voting rights to white male property owners. Over time they extended voting rights to nearly all white men. Why were women excluded? The framers of the Constitution—and many who followed them for more than the next 100 years—believed that women were childlike and incapable of independent thought. They believed that women could not be counted on to vote responsibly, so they left women out of states' voting laws.²

Shaping the Presidency

George Washington played an essential part in shaping the role and function of the presidency. We've gathered a few, quick facts that you may not know about the Father of Our Country.³

- **George Washington is the only U.S. President to have never occupied the White House.**
Washington lived in New York and then later in Philadelphia. Washington did, however, specify the location of the ten-mile square federal district, the President's mansion (the White House) and the Capitol.
- **George Washington established the tradition of a cabinet of advisors.**
While the Constitution calls for the creation of executive departments, it only explained that the heads of executive departments were unelected officials who had to answer to the president. Washington defined how these roles would function.

The current presidential cabinet includes sixteen members (fifteen heads of executive agencies and the vice president), but Washington's cabinet included just four: Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson,

¹ Presidential Election of 1789, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/presidential-election-of-1789>

² Why Women Couldn't Vote, [https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/women_couldnt_vote\[1\].pdf](https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/women_couldnt_vote[1].pdf)

³ Ten Facts About Washington's Presidency, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/ten-facts-about-washingtons-presidency>

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Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of War Henry Knox and Attorney General Edmund Randolph. Washington also set the precedence for how these roles would interact with the presidency, establishing the cabinet as the chief executive's private, trusted advisors.

- **Washington signed the first copyright law.**

President Washington signed the Copyright Act of 1790 into law. The act intended to protect the author of any map, chart, book or books printed within the United States and that authors would have the sole right of printing, reprinting, publishing and vending such map, chart, book or books.

- **The first Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued by President Washington.**

President Washington formalized the holiday by issuing a proclamation designating November 26 as a national day of thanksgiving.

- **Washington vetoed only two bills while President.**

The first bill that Washington vetoed was the Apportionment Bill of April 5, 1792, believing that the law would not divide each state's population evenly when determining representation. On February 28, 1797, Washington vetoed a bill aimed at cutting the size and cost of the military. The veto was used based on the advice of Secretary of War James McHenry.

- **President Washington delivered an important address on religious tolerance.**

In his address, Washington reinforced the ideal of religious liberty in American life. Washington's remarks established a precedent for protecting religious liberty and pluralism in the U.S. that persists to this day.

- **Washington's second inaugural address was the shortest ever delivered.**

Delivered March 4, 1793, the second address clocked in at less than two minutes and was only 135 words in length.

- **Washington's Farewell Address is one of the most celebrated documents in American history.**

Do you know that since 1896, the United States Senate has commemorated George Washington's birthday with an annual reading of the Farewell Address, all 7,641 words, by a selected sitting senator? At the conclusion of the reading, the chosen senator signs and writes his or her thoughts on the significance of the address in the pages of a leather-bound book maintained by the Secretary of the Senate.