

## SECTION 2

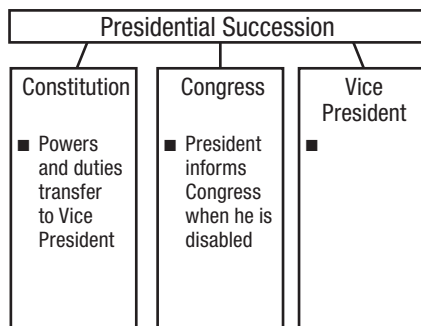
# Presidential Succession and the Vice Presidency



▲ Service men read of President Franklin Roosevelt's death, April 12, 1945.

### Guiding Question

**What occurs when the President is unable to perform the duties of the office?** Use a chart like the one below to keep track of the main ideas about presidential succession.



### Objectives:

- Explain how the Constitution provides for presidential succession.
- Understand the constitutional provisions related to presidential disability.
- Describe the role of the Vice President.

In the history of the United States, there have been 47 Vice Presidents. Fourteen of these men have gone on to become President. Some succeeded to the presidency because the President was assassinated, died, or resigned. Other former Vice Presidents were elected on their own.

## What does the Constitution say about presidential succession?

**Presidential succession** is the plan to fill a vacancy in the presidency. If the President dies, resigns, or is impeached and convicted, the Vice President becomes President.

The Constitution did not originally have a way to fill the office of President if it became vacant. It stated only that the “powers and duties” of the President were to be transferred to the Vice President, not the office itself. In 1841, President William Henry Harrison died and Vice President John Tyler succeeded him as President. This became the practice for filling a presidential vacancy. This practice became part of the Constitution when the 25th Amendment was adopted in 1967. It said that the Vice President would become President if the President died, resigned, or was removed from office.

The **Presidential Succession Act of 1947** set the order of succession following the Vice President. If the Vice President is unable to take the office, the Speaker of the House is next in line for the presidency. The complete line of succession appears on the next page ([Figure 13.1](#)).

✓ **Checkpoint** What happened in 1967?

## Presidential succession

Scheme by which a presidential vacancy is filled

## Presidential Succession Act of 1947

Law specifying the order of presidential succession following the Vice President

## What happens if the President becomes disabled?

Before 1967 and the passage of the 25th Amendment, no guidelines existed in the Constitution for deciding what to do when a President was disabled. The 25th Amendment filled this gap in the Constitution. It says that the Vice President will become Acting President if the President informs Congress that he or she cannot carry out the duties of the office. Or, the Vice President and a majority of the members of the Cabinet can inform Congress that the President is disabled. The President decides when to go back to the duties and informs Congress. The Vice President and a majority of the Cabinet may challenge this decision. In that case, Congress has 21 days to decide the matter.

 **Checkpoint** What happens if the President becomes disabled?

## What are the duties of the Vice President?

The Vice President has only two formal duties according to the Constitution. The first duty is to preside over the Senate. The second is to help decide if the President is disabled. Through the years, the office of Vice President has been considered unimportant.

**Fig. 13.1** How Government Works

## Who Is Next in Line?

The Vice President is first in line to succeed to the presidency should the office become vacant. A vacancy has occurred nine times. In each case, the Vice President did succeed to the office. ***When did the practice of vice-presidential succession actually become part of the written Constitution?***

Lyndon B. Johnson became President when John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963.

### The Line of Succession

1. Vice President
2. Speaker of the House
3. President pro tempore of the Senate
4. Secretary of State
5. Secretary of the Treasury
6. Secretary of Defense
7. Attorney General
8. Secretary of the Interior
9. Secretary of Agriculture
10. Secretary of Commerce
11. Secretary of Labor
12. Secretary of Health and Human Services
13. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
14. Secretary of Transportation
15. Secretary of Energy
16. Secretary of Education
17. Secretary of Veterans Affairs
18. Secretary of Homeland Security

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Vice Presidents themselves have described the office that way. In fact, however, the office is very important, because the Vice President is “only a heartbeat away” from the presidency.

The low opinion of the vice presidency is partly due to the way candidates for the office are chosen. The President is carefully selected based on his or her qualifications, but the Vice President is chosen mostly to **balance the ticket**. This means the choice of the vice-presidential candidate is meant to attract voters, perhaps from a particular geographic region. Political parties do not usually consider the possibility of succession to the presidency when choosing a vice-presidential candidate.

## What is the vice presidency like today?

The vice presidency has taken on more importance in recent years. Vice President Dick Cheney was considered the most influential Vice President in the country’s history to that point. Vice President Joe Biden had a 36-year Senate career and significant foreign relations experience before becoming Vice President.

Even though the Vice President has risen in importance, none has yet become a true assistant to the President. One reason for this may be that the Vice President is not subject to removal from office by the President. The President can never fire the Vice President. If the office of Vice President becomes vacant, the 25th Amendment says that the President must nominate a Vice President. Both houses of Congress must confirm this nomination by a majority vote. This is written into the 25th Amendment (1967).

### Balance the ticket

The practice of choosing a presidential running mate who can strengthen a presidential candidate’s chance of being elected



### Reading Strategy Visualizing

How could this paragraph be written differently to create a stronger picture in your mind?

## SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

### Essential Questions Journal

Go to your **Essential Questions Journal** to work on this chapter’s Essential Question.

1. **Guiding Question** Use your completed chart to answer this question: What occurs when the President is unable to perform the duties of the office?

### Key Terms and Comprehension

On a sheet of paper, write the answer to each question. Use complete sentences.

2. What is presidential succession?
3. What two official duties does the Constitution assign to the Vice President?
4. Which amendment deals with presidential disability?
5. What does it mean to balance the ticket?

### Critical Thinking

6. **Demonstrate Reasoned Judgment** Do you think the attempt to “balance the ticket” is a good way of selecting a Vice President? Why or why not?
7. **Synthesize Information** How can the past experiences of a Vice President help the position rise in importance?