

The brand new United State of America in 1779 invented the first presidency in the world. Even during the Revolution against Britain, the founding fathers had not yet decided what to call their first leader, nor did they spell out his duties or his limits. We owe the system we have to George Washington, whose knowledge of ancient Rome's republic shaped this new leadership role.

Washington selected "Mr. President" as his title, a modesty never seen in the world before. The Founding Fathers designed a system in which they (the country's leadership) voted on whom would become president. The term of office was established at 4 years, which could be renewed by a new vote. Washington himself established the tradition (not then in our laws) of stepping down after two terms. When Washington did just that, returning to his farm at Mount Vernon, Britain's King George was astonished that anybody should voluntarily surrender power.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe was governed by local kings, with the exception of Venice, which had a republic from the 8th to 18th centuries. This city-state was run by its merchant class, which elected a leader, the Doge, who had lifetime tenure. After its fall, there were no republics until our own, followed briefly by the French Revolution, which quickly morphed into monarchy.

There was not much precedent for the new United States to draw upon in determining its governing structure. Fortunately, our founders, the country's elites, most of them educated as were the British upper classes, schooled in Roman and Greek history and enriched by the Enlightenment, established the world's first participatory government.

The American president was the executive administrator over a House of Representatives (members elected by educated property owners) whose numbers reflected the populations of the various states; and a Senate, whose members were appointed by State governors, two for each state.

The presidency changed upon the election of Andrew Jackson, who then saw to it that the elites would be replaced by every adult White male citizen, drunk or sober. What followed were decades of lackluster Presidents and growing divisions over our original national sin, the institution of slavery. This was the first experience with populism, which dominated American governments until the country erupted in Civil War, upon the election of Abraham Lincoln, an opponent of slavery. Slaves were emancipated and all adult males were eligible to vote. Black voters in the South, however, were intimidated into not voting.

The next significant president was Theodore Roosevelt, who was Vice President under William McKinley, assassinated in office. Roosevelt used the presidency to address some unmet national needs: to begin to level the playing field between the monumental wealth of our largest industries and their labor, who had been abused and kept powerless. TR was the first to address our amazing national heritage, designating spectacular lands as National Parks and National Monuments, saving them from despoliation by industry.

In 1914, a Constitutional Amendment was introduced to permit public voting for Senators. This was ratified and applied by 1919. In 1920, women were at last given the right to vote, making us the first country in the world with total adult participatory governance. We became officially the first country in the world to have universal adult voting, for legislature and presidency.

The next change to the presidency came when Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for four elections, challenging President Washington's model. After his death, the term for presidents was by law limited to no more than two terms.

From our country's founding, American presidents observed norms of behavior (with the exception of Andrew Jackson), which involved behavior, demeanor, and over time disclosing their assets upon taking office, as well as transparent medical information provided regularly. Rule of Law was a given, until Richard Nixon violated that standard and was forced out of office. Today, we have a president who is violating every presidential norm. He is under investigation for corruption and conspiracy with a foreign power. Our system of checks and balances is at work; is it also time to change presidential norms into laws?

683 words

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