

History Matters: Peaceful Transitions of Power

As America faces a contentious election, it is important to remember that one of the key features of democracy is the peaceful passage of power from one leader to another. Respect for the democratic process as outlined in the Constitution is fundamental to the health and success of democracy. Leaders derive their power from the will of the people, expressed through free and fair elections.

Leaders and citizens are compelled to show respect for the legal framework that guides the nation and promotes stability. The passage of power allows for the will of the people to be enacted. It invites national unity and gives reason for collaboration and compromise within the government.

The peaceful passage of power is a cornerstone of American democracy that dates to the foundation of the Republic and begins with George Washington's decision to step down after two terms as president. As we noted earlier in this series, Washington was aware he was setting an important precedent for the success of the new nation.

His example was followed by President John Adams, who was the first president to leave office after losing to a political rival, Thomas Jefferson. Adams' administration marked a rise in contentious political factions. Adams was angry and disappointed when he lost his bid for a second term, he left Washington without attending Jefferson's inauguration. Yet, he never questioned the outcome of the election.

While John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, failed to attend their successors' inaugurations, most exiting presidents, more than three dozen, have displayed respect for the ritualized ceremony that surrounds the passing of power to their successor.

Peaceful transitions protect the integrity of all democratic institutions, including Congress, the judiciary, and the electoral system. In so doing, they

serve as a vital symbol of respect for the voice of the people over individual ambition.

A firm commitment to democratic values ensures public trust in the institutions of government and demonstrates that no single person or party is above the democratic process. Leaders understand that their actions while in office, as well as while leaving it, will be judged by voters, and know that they will be held accountable for the security of future elections.

The peaceful transfer of office is a signal to supporters of both parties that the electoral process remains within the framework of democracy and is not accomplished through force, unrest or corrupt influence. It ensures electoral outcomes are based on the will of the people, highlighting the powerful importance of voter participation in the democratic process.

The U.S. has long been a global example of stable democracy, with peaceful transitions of power showcasing its leadership and the resilience of democratic systems. This tradition is essential not only for preserving America's unity and stability but also for inspiring those seeking freedom worldwide. By upholding peaceful transitions, the U.S. strengthens global stability and gives hope to others fighting for democracy. Without this example, both our own unity and the hope for democratic freedoms around the world would be greatly diminished.