

Making Sense of...The U.S. Presidential Transition

Overview:

- On November 7th, [various news outlets](#) called the election in favor of former Vice President Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 Presidential Election. After this, President-Elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris began [the presidential transition of power](#).
- The modern origin of the presidential transition phase is framed by [the 20th Amendment](#). This originating document was ratified in 1933 to create the initial timeline of presidential transition with presidential and vice presidential terms ending on January 20th, effectively transitioning from one administration to another.
- While the 20th Amendment was successful in defining a transition period of administrations and the [lame-duck period](#) for the president, it was the [Presidential Transition Act of 1963](#) that created the current structure of the presidential transition phase. This transition structure includes the process of sharing national security briefings, office spaces, funding and necessary equipment.
- The most [recent amendment](#) to the act was signed into law by former President Barack Obama, effectively creating a transition period starting six months prior to the November election and establishing a [White House transitions council](#) to oversee the presidential transition phase.
- It is the role of the [General Services Administration](#) (GSA), which coordinates all the other federal agencies, to initiate this process through the appointment of a [Federal Transition Coordinator](#) who prepares the other agencies. It falls under the purview of this coordinator to then send a [letter of ascertainment](#) which effectively starts the transition process with transition of funds and services to the incoming administration.

Readings:

- [What is The GSA, and What is Role Does It Play in The Presidential Transition?](#), CBS News
- [The Delay in The Presidential Transition, Explained](#), Vox
- [Presidential Transitions](#), National Archives
- [White House, Escalating Tensions, Orders Agencies to Rebuff Biden Transition Team](#), The Washington Post
- [Five Myths About Presidential Transitions](#), The Washington Post
- [Presidential Transition: As More Republicans Break with Trump, He Refuses to Budge](#), The New York Times

Questions for discussion:

- Given that although traditional media outlets have called the race, but President Trump has not yet conceded, should the GSA Administrator still begin the transition for the projected winner?
- In the midst of the events of 2020, what do you see as the priorities for an incoming president, and what might be needed from an outgoing administration during a transition?
- What is the implicit value of a smooth transition between presidencies, beyond logistical concerns? What does it mean for our democracy?
- How might policies be put in place to ensure the presidential transition process takes place when a winner is called? Should this be done?
- What are the dangers of a shortened and/or less cohesive, transition?