

INTRODUCTION

What exactly does the president do in the White House? Most people understand that the President of the United States is the leader of the country, but they may not be able to explain all the duties and powers that come with that position. The Constitution specifically lists several presidential requirements and responsibilities, but other roles have developed as the country has grown and changed. Learn about the requirements to become president and how the president carries out some of the major duties of this important position.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY



Image 1. President Franklin D. Roosevelt fulfilling his role as Commander-in-Chief in 1941. President Roosevelt is shown in the Oval Office signing a declaration of war against Japan after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Constitution is the document that contains the foundational laws for the United States. Article II Section 1 of the Constitution discusses the function of the executive branch and the presidency. It lists three requirements to run for president: a candidate must be at least thirty-five years old, must be a natural-born citizen—meaning they were born in the United States—and must have lived in the United States for at least fourteen years.

Once elected and sworn into office, the President of the United States moves into the White House. A presidential term lasts four years. Presidents can serve a maximum of two four-year terms, although they must be re-elected to serve a second term. The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1947, set the two-term limit after Franklin D. Roosevelt served as president for twelve years. Although elected to a fourth term, Roosevelt died shortly after his final inauguration in 1945.

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



While living and working in the White House, the president has many roles. The president serves as Commander-in-Chief, Chief Administrator, Chief Executive, Chief Legislator, Chief Diplomat, Chief of Party, Chief of State, and Chief Citizen.

As **Commander-in-Chief**, the president is the head of all branches of the U.S. military. The role involves managing the armed forces and deciding if or when it is necessary to use military force. While Congress holds the authority to declare war, the president can request and sign declarations of war drafted by Congress. **Image 1**, above, pictures President Franklin D. Roosevelt fulfilling his duties as Commander-in-Chief as he signs a declaration of war against Japan in 1941. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln met with generals and visited troops in camp, seen in **Image 2** in the chart. Other presidents have exercised their authority as Commander-in-Chief even when the nation was not engaged in war. In 1957, for example, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, to provide protection to African American children integrating the previously all-white school despite community protests.

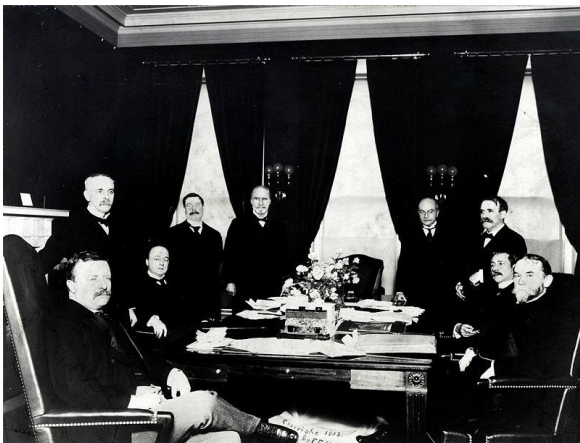


Image 3. President Theodore Roosevelt carrying out his duties as Chief Executive. President Roosevelt is shown holding his first cabinet meeting in 1902.

The president also heads the entire executive branch of the federal government as **Chief Administrator**. The executive branch is composed of the White House and more than a dozen federal departments and agencies including the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Energy. The president is also tasked with enforcing the laws of the nation as **Chief Executive**. To help with this enormous task, the president appoints a Cabinet. The Cabinet refers to the group of people who advise the president and run the various government

agencies. **Image 3**, to the left, shows President Theodore Roosevelt holding his first Cabinet meeting in 1902. **Image 4**, in the chart below, depicts President Jimmy Carter meeting with advisors in the

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



White House Cabinet Room during the Iran hostage crisis in 1980. The Constitution does not explicitly require or define the Cabinet and its relationship to the president. While President George Washington had only four official cabinet members, today there are twenty-four Cabinet-level positions. They meet in the White House Cabinet Room in the West Wing, seen in **Image 5** in the chart. Refer to **Image 6**, below, to see a photograph of Frances Perkins—the first woman appointed to a Cabinet-level position under President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. As Secretary of Labor, Perkins was instrumental in helping President Roosevelt carry out the New Deal, a collection of policies which put millions of Americans back to work during the Great Depression.

The president also acts as **Chief Legislator**. While the president does not write laws—that is the role of Congress—the president does have the authority to sign a bill into law or veto, or prevent, a bill from becoming law. **Images 7 and 8** depict some of the many examples of presidential bill signings including President William Howard Taft signing New Mexico into statehood in 1912 and President Ronald Reagan making Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a national holiday in 1983. Presidents do, however, advise Congress on their legislative goals, usually in a speech called the State of the Union. Typically given each January, the president delivers a State of the Union address, reflecting on the current state of the country and detailing their hopes and goals for the upcoming year. **Image 9**, in the chart, is a photograph of President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivering the State of the Union before a joint session of Congress in 1939.

As **Chief Diplomat**, the president works with U.S. diplomats to build relationships with other countries. One way the president fulfills this role is through hosting State Visits, in which foreign leaders visit the president at the White House. **Image 10**, to the right, shows President Dwight Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower welcoming Queen Elizabeth II to the White House during a State Visit in 1957. View **Image 11**, in the chart, to see an engraving depicting President James Buchanan welcoming the first delegation



Image 10. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower greet Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at the White House (1957).

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



of officials from Japan to the White House for a State Visit. The Japanese officials came to the United States to ratify the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, which established trade between the United States and Japan. If you look closely, you can see that people were so eager to see the visitors that some even stood on pieces of furniture.

In modern American politics, major presidential candidates are typically affiliated with either the Democratic or Republican party. During campaigns, presidential candidates appeal largely to members of their respective political party to gain support. Once elected, the president, as the highest ranking official affiliated with the party, inevitably becomes the leader of their political party, or **Chief of Party**. In this unofficial role, the president supports other governmental candidates who have similar policy goals and helps other party members gain support.



Image 12. President Barack Obama awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to actor Tom Hanks in 2016.

The most visible presidential role is **Chief of State**. In this position, the president serves as the public face of the country. The role of Chief of State is fulfilled primarily through conducting ceremonial events, such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom reception. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian honor, presented to individuals who have made significant contributions to the nation and world. **Image 12**, to the right, depicts President Barack Obama awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to actor Tom Hanks in 2016.

Finally, it is important to remember that the president is also a citizen. As **Chief Citizen**, the president represents all citizens and sets an example for civic behavior in times of both peace and crisis. During World War I, instead of using groundskeepers to cut the grass, President Woodrow Wilson kept a flock of sheep to graze on the White House lawns. The wool sheared from the sheep was sold at auction to raise money for the Red Cross. President Wilson acted as Chief Citizen, encouraging Americans to support the

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



war effort on the home front. To see President Wilson's sheep grazing on the South Lawn in 1919, view **Image 13** in the chart.






Presidents have many roles and responsibilities that they perform simultaneously during their term(s) in office. Despite challenges, history reveals that presidents can use their position to create great and lasting changes for our nation. The opportunity to be a part of history drives many to seek the office of the President of the United States.

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT









IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Franklin Roosevelt Signs the Declaration of War Against Japan	1941	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/2238.tif.info
2	President Lincoln with Gen. George B. McClellan with Officers in Antietam	1862	Alexander Gardner	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Abraham%20Lincoln/1126.tif.info
3	Theodore Roosevelt's First Cabinet Meeting in the New Executive Offices	1902	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/3013.tif.info
4	Carter and Others Meet in the Cabinet Room During the Iranian Hostage Crisis	1980	Unknown	Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Jimmy%20Carter/2952.tif.info
5	Cabinet Room, George H.W. Bush Administration	1991	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1018.tif.info



ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



6	Francis Perkins at White House	1935	Harris & Ewing	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/hec2013008456/
7	William H. Taft Signs New Mexico into Statehood	1912	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/William%20H%20Taft/9468.tif.info
8	Ronald Reagan Signs Bill Proclaiming Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday a Holiday	1983	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/111113.tif.info
9	President Roosevelt Delivering the 1939 State of the Union Address	1939	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/1112171.tif.info
10	The Eisenhowers with Prince Phillip and Queen Elizabeth II	1957	Kathleen Revis	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/575.tif.info
11	Reception of the Japanese Envoy by President Buchanan in the East Room	1860	The Illustrated London News	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1304.tif.info

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



12	Tom Hanks Receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom	2016	Matthew D'Agostino	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Events/113846.dng.info
13	White House Sheep on the South Lawn	1919	Harris & Ewing	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/1159.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Collection: “The Hospitality of Diplomacy” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Classroom Resource Packet: “Diplomacy and the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Classroom Resource Packet: “The President’s Office” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Which role of the president do you think is most important? Why? Share your thoughts with a classmate or family member and ask which role they think is most important.

For older learners:

- Using the essay, make a list of all the presidential roles discussed. Then, take a current news article about the president and address what role the president is fulfilling. Support your answers with historical evidence.

ROLES OF THE PRESIDENT



- Consider the fact that only natural born citizens can run for president. Do you think naturalized citizens—people born in other countries but then gain American citizenship—should also be able to run for president? Write a persuasive essay to garner support for your stance and be sure to cite specific evidence to support your claims. Remember, naturalized citizens can still run for high offices such as congressional seats or become a member of the president’s cabinet.
 - Examples: Madeline Albright, born in Czechoslovakia, and Henry Kissinger, born in Germany, were both Secretaries of State. Salud Carbajal, who was born in Mexico, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2016 for California’s 24th District.

For younger learners:

- Make a “Help Wanted” poster advertising the job of President of the United States. Imagine that you want to get the most capable candidates to run for president and you’ve decided to write an ad to put in the newspapers, billboards, and on the internet as a way of publicizing the position. Your “help wanted” ad should list and explain the president’s key roles and responsibilities.