

The official count of electoral votes and the ratification by Congress of the incoming president is supposed to be a ceremonial celebration of our free and democratic process. Unfortunately, the events of January 6, 2021, will be known as an extraordinary and unprecedented day in American history. Pro-Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol to disrupt this final electoral count. Lawmakers were in the process of certifying the Electoral College votes won by President-elect Joe Biden.



Official Count of Electoral Votes

The routine exercise of confirming the votes in the presidential election takes place every four years, as it has been done since the country was founded. The formal processes of verifying and certifying the election results had gone forward on schedule since the November results of the election when Biden defeated President Trump. States certified their results, and the Electoral College affirmed Biden's win on December 14th.

The Constitution writers decided that the reported and sealed ballots from the electors (who meet and vote in their respective states) would be delivered to "the seat of government" and entrusted to the president of the Senate — who's also the vice president of the United States. The ballots remain sealed until the vice president opens them on January 6th and hands them to "tellers" to read out and tally.

Feeling pressure from the president, Vice President Mike Pence confirmed his role in the process in a lengthy letter to members of Congress, stating he did not have the power to throw out the electoral votes that would make Biden the next president. "It is my considered judgment that my oath to support and defend the Constitution constrains me from claiming unilateral authority to determine which electoral votes should be counted and which should not."

Completing the Constitutional Duty

After the rioters were finally cleared from the building, Senators and members from the House of Representatives went back to work. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced after hours of chaos that legislators would reconvene to continue their Constitutional duty of certifying the Electoral College vote that determines the next president.

The obviously shaken Vice President and members of Congress gave passionate speeches about the events of the day. Here is a sampling of the reactions:

- "As we reconvene in this chamber, the world will again witness the resilience and strength of our democracy, for even in the wake of unprecedented violence and vandalism at this Capitol, the elected representatives of the people of the United States have assembled again on the very same day to support and defend the Constitution of the United States." — Vice President Mike Pence
- "Today, a shameful assault was made on our democracy. It was anointed at the highest level of government. It cannot, however, deter us from our responsibility to validate the election of Joe Biden." — Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi
- "This failed insurrection only underscores how crucial the task before us is for our republic. Our nation was founded precisely so that the free choice of the American people is what shapes our self-government and determines the destiny of our nation — not fear, not force, but the peaceful expression of the popular will." — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

The purpose of Congress convening is to formally tally the Electoral College votes, not litigate election matters. Concerns about state elections were raised — and rejected — in courts. More than a dozen Republican senators said they would object to at least one state's election results. After the violence and chaos, several Senate Republicans abandoned their plan to cast objections. Only six senators, all Republicans, sustained the Arizona objection.

The Transfer of Power

Despite the chaos, the system was working as the Framers of the Constitution intended. It follows the same process as that for George Washington in 1789. At 3:32 a.m. the following morning, Pence cited the results for Biden's victory in Vermont, which pushed the Democrat past the 270 electoral votes needed for Congress to confirm him as the next president, nearly 15 hours after the joint session began. In the wake of these events, President Trump made the following statement: "Even though I totally disagree with the outcome of the election, and the facts bear me out, nevertheless there will be an orderly transition on January 20th."

On January 20th, Joe Biden stood on the United Capitol steps and took the oath of office, becoming the 46th president of the United States. Donald Trump joined three other presidents (John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Johnson) not attending their successor's inauguration. The inauguration celebration was unlike any before, including a ceremony honoring the victims of the coronavirus.

QUESTIONS

EXPRESS YOUR OPINION - What questions about right and wrong, fairness or injustice, did the events of January 6th raise for you? _____
