Introduction to the Vice Presidency

After the first attempt at creating an organization to make a “more perfect union” did not work (the first attempt was the Articles of Confederation) the writers of the Constitution devised a system whereby the nation would be organized into three branches: a Legislative Branch, an Executive Branch and a Judicial Branch. The three branches were created by the Constitution, and governing under them began in 1789 after the 1788 election under the presidency of George Washington, and the vice presidency of John Adams.

To avoid a scramble to succeed George Washington who had been put into office by acclamation, the founding fathers had to come up with a way to succeed him. After a few attempts to make a sensible procedure, they amended the Constitution (Amendment XII to develop an electoral college made up of the number of members of the House of Representatives plus two from each state to represent the senators, with at least 1 member representing the House even though not all states had a large enough population to merit a full representative.

The amendment reads: “The electors shall met in their respective states and vote by ballot for President and Vice President, one of whom, at least, shall not be an inhabitant of the same state with themselves; they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as Vice-President, and they shall make distinct lists of all persons for as President, and of all persons voted for at Vice-President and of the number of votes for each which lists they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate; The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted;

“The person having the greatest Number of votes for President, shall be the President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed; and if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by states, the representation from each state having one vote; a quorum for this purpose shall consist of a member or members from two-thirds of the states, and a majority of all the states shall be necessary to a choice. And if the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the Vice-President shall act as President as in the case of the death or other constitutional disability of the President.

“The person having the greatest number of votes as Vice-President, shall be the Vice-President, if such number by a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed, and if no person have a majority, then from the two highest numbers on the list, the Senate shall choose the Vice-President; a quorum for the purpose shall consist of two-thirds of the whole number of Senators, and a majority of the whole number shall be necessary to a choice. But no person conditionally ineligible to the office shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States.”

We must remember that the people who were in power and eligible to vote in the early days of our nation were men with money and property as well as those who had standing in the community. At the beginning of the new nation, the vice president was the person who received the second greatest number of votes for president in the electoral college. The states’ electors, called the electoral college, made the decisions of who would become the president and who would become the vice president.

The founding fathers did not realize that political parties would develop and that there would being a slate of candidates running for president and vice president. The original plan was simply that people would be candidates for president and vice president.

In 1796, when John Adams was elected president, and Thomas Jefferson was elected vice president, people realized it was not good to have the president and vice president be political opponents. For example, in 1800, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were running as a “ticket” together, against John Adams and Thomas Pinckney, and the result was a tie that proved difficult to resolve.

In the early 1800s, there developed a two-party system which affected the selection of president and vice president. People ho advocated for a strong central government came to be known as Federalists. The opposition group had no special name, but the adherents were referred to as anti-Federalists. Later, the opposition party became known as “Republicans.”

The other amendment pertaining to the vice presidency, Amendment XXV, was ratified in 1967. Among other topics, it dealt with presidential succession and was put into operation during the Nixon presidency.

Over the nation’s life between the founders in the 18th Century and today, relationships between the president and vice president have evolved. Vice presidents have taken on a stronger role sharing a portion of the president’s scope of duties. Most vice presidents brought significant public service experience to the office, including as members of Congress or as state governments. Some came to their role as president of the Senate already familiar with that body.

The language of Section 1. Of Amendment XXV adopted in 1967 states that “In case of the removal of the President from office by his death or resignation, the Vice President shall become President.” Section 2 of that amendment states that whenever there is a vacancy in the office of the Vice President, the President shall nominate a Vice President who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of both Houses of Congress.”

Before Amendment XXV was adopted, a vacancy in the presidency would lead to the election of the vice president to the presidency. Nine vice presidents ascended to the presidency that way: 8 (John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester A. Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson) came to the presidency via the death of the president, and one came through the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1973 when Gerald Ford (who had been nominated for the vice presidency by President Nixon) replaced him.

Of the 15 vice presidents who went on to become president, eight succeeded to the office on the death of a president (see above), and four of these were later elected president in their own right. Two vice presidents, Hannibal Hamlin and Henry Wallace, were dropped from the ticket after their first term, only to see their successors become presidents after their first term, only to see their successors become president in their own right. When Spiro Agnew resigned, he was replaced under the provisions of Amendment XXV by Gerald Ford who then became president after Richard Nixon resigned less than a year later.

The office of the vice president and the method of selecting the vice president have changed immensely in the intervening almost 250 years of our nation’s life. At the onset of our government, in the late 18th Century, selection of vice-presidential candidates for the nation was made on the basis of political considerations and/or geographical backgrounds, not necessarily hos the two candidates would or could work together. In fact, the usual “job” of the vice president, beside to be available to become president if something happened to the president, was to be the president of the Senate but with no vote unless he or she was needed to break a tie.

There have been 49 vice presidents—from John Adams to Kamala Harris. The stories of the individuals who have served as vice president illustrate the changing character of the office. Information about the vice presidency was gleaned from the internet and from a book by Jules Witcover, entitled, “The American Vice Presidency: From Relevance to Power.