THE CONSTITUTION WITH CARL

Volume 21 - The Twentieth Amendment - The Lame Duck

The Lame Duck: Why New Leaders Start in January

Central question: Why do new leaders start in January now?





Every November, Americans choose their leaders. But for most of the nation's history, the winners then waited, and waited. A president elected in November did not take office until March 4, four months later. A new Congress, chosen in November, held a term that began the following March, but it usually did not sit down to work in regular session until the December of the following year, thirteen months after the voters had spoken. In between, the leaders the voters had just retired kept governing. People called them lame ducks.

This amendment is the Constitution's calendar repair. It moved the starts and finishes of terms from March to January, and it did a second job just as important: it wrote down, ahead of time, who serves if a president elect dies or cannot take office, so the hardest cases would already have answers written down before they could happen. Six short sections do all of this work, and this book reads every one of them.

For ages 7 to 11. Level Up boxes reach to age 13.

START HERE

Meet Carl and the Four Strands

Carl the Cardinal is Calendar Carl in this volume. He holds a big January calendar page with a plain grid and nothing written on it. The page is blank on purpose. This amendment does not fill in anybody's schedule. It fixes the dates on which power changes hands for the president, the vice president, and the members of Congress, in every year, before anyone knows who those leaders will be. That is the wise way to write a rule: settle it while nobody knows whose turn it helps.

The four strands, kept separate

Strand	What it is
THE WORDS	The amendment itself, in ORIGINAL WORDS, plus a PLAIN LANGUAGE EXPLANATION set apart from it.
THE HISTORY	Why the old calendar made sense in 1789, the trouble it caused, and the long campaign that changed it.
COURTS HAVE SAID	Named cases with years. This book's courts page is short, and it tells you honestly why.
STILL DEBATED	Real disputes that remain. Stated fairly, never as settled fact.

How to use this book

- Read the words aloud first. Then read the explanation.
- Write, draw, point, or dictate your answers. All of those count.
- The dates in the history pages are real and checked. The counting activity on page 15 uses the real election calendars of 1860, 1932, 1934, and 2024.
- Keep the labels straight. The amendment is the words. The Presidential Succession Act of 1947 is a law Congress passed using the amendment's permission. The question on page 14 is still debated, and no court has settled it.
- Family Talk is where the family viewpoint lives. It is never presented as a court holding.

CARL'S ONE DISTINCTION

Carl keeps one distinction in front of him through this whole book: **become President** is not the same as **act as President**. Section 3 uses both phrases, on purpose, a few lines apart. A person who becomes President holds the office. A person who acts as President does the job for a time, until a President qualifies. Pages 5 and 12 slow down on exactly where each phrase stands.

MEET CARL BOX

Carl points to the top corner of his calendar page, to the first days of January. Under the old calendar, January was the middle of the long wait: the old leaders still serving, the new leaders still watching from home. Under this amendment, January is when the country changes hands, quickly, in the open, at an hour fixed years in advance. Carl's calendar has no names on it because the rule was written for whoever the voters choose.