

The First 100 Days

Name: _____

100...99...98...

When a new president takes office on January 20th, the clock starts ticking. The "First 100 Days" of a presidential term has become the yardstick by which we measure the success of the new executive. There are many things that are closely judged during the first three months of a new administration.

- How well does the new president transition into power?
- Which campaign promises turn into successful legislation? Which fall flat?
- How are the cabinet nominations received by Congress? The American public?
- How are both domestic and foreign policy challenges handled?

As these questions demonstrate, the American people, politicians, and pundits are on the lookout for success, or failure, between inauguration and late April. But remember: a president's term is four whole years or 1,461 days.



The Press plays a large role in tracking and reporting on the actions of a new administration.



Roosevelt broadcasting a radio fireside chat from the White House in 1933.

The Backstory

The idea of the First 100 Days hasn't always applied to the president; in fact, it's an invention of the 20th century. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 during the dark days of the Great Depression. He ran against the sitting president, whom many blamed for the economic crisis. Roosevelt's campaign promised a "new deal" for the struggling American people. It worked. Roosevelt enjoyed a landslide election win, and, after taking office, he outlined his plan for helping America recover as quickly as possible.

He set a goal of 100 days and persuaded a supportive Congress to fast track a legislative agenda that would achieve that lofty goal. The result was 15 new major pieces of legislation that created the foundation of the New Deal and greatly expanded the role of the federal government in stabilizing the economy and workforce. No previous president had steered that much legislation in such a short amount of time, and none has since. Roosevelt set the bar for all presidents to follow. How would they fare in their first 100?

Win Some, Lose Some

The success of a president's First 100 Days is usually based on a final bill count, as well as any other major achievements for which he or she takes credit. For the sake of the history books, the legacy of the president is a mix of early wins and how the rest of the term shakes out. There are plenty of examples of strong starts followed by weak terms, and of shaky starts followed by great leadership from the White House.



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Looking Back

Here are a few notable examples of how the First 100 Days worked for or against past presidents.



Truman announces the surrender of Japan, ending World War II.

Inheriting Big Problems. Harry Truman took office in the last days of World War II and Dwight Eisenhower focused on ending the war with Korea. Both efforts took up time that could have otherwise been spent on promoting legislation to Congress. *Points awarded for ending wars, but none for creating new laws.*

Early Missteps. John Kennedy approved an unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, focusing on foreign policy and failing to achieve much on the domestic policy front. Both Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter compromised their relationships with Congress early in their term, limiting their ability to get bills passed through to their desks. *It's always easier to build on successes than it is to dig out of a hole.*



Reagan gives a televised address, outlining his plan for tax reduction in 1981.

National Drama. Like Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan capitalized on national economic strife (high unemployment and inflation) to get legislation passed on taxes and spending cuts. Lyndon Johnson took office after the assassination of John Kennedy and used this time of national unity (along with his experience in the Senate) to pass major legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964. *Timing is important if you want a big win.*

The Big Split. One party winning the presidency does not guarantee that congressional elections will result in victory for that party as well. Many presidents have found themselves with the majority of Congress opposing them in party affiliation and agenda goals. *Remember, laws can't be passed without Congress creating the bills first.*

How Important is the First 100 Days?

There is a lot of energy spent on making predictions, tracking efforts, and penning reflections regarding a president's First 100 Days. It starts during the election season, continues through the transition period, and is followed during the first 100... then, becomes history. So, does success or failure in the first 7% of a term really matter? There are two schools of thought:

It does and should matter.

- Transition periods are times in which momentum behind a new president builds or... doesn't.
- It is always better to start strong, rather than make up for lost time.
- Opinions about the administration start to gel and can determine how the American public and Congress approach the president's efforts.

It doesn't really matter.

- The way we judge the First 100 Days is silly; counting the number of bills passed is too simple of an approach.
- Things don't work in nice and tidy 100 day increments. If a law is eventually passed on day 122, is that considered a failure?
- Think of it this way- is it fair to judge your entire four years in high school based on your grades and experience in those first few months of your freshman year?

Regardless of which school of thought you adopt, there is no denying "The First 100 Days" is a fixture of presidential history. Presidents care about it, pundits talk about it, and the public pays attention to it.