**Transcript**

NOTE: This transcript was generated using an automated transcription service, and may contain typographical errors.

[00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

[00:00:06] President Barack Obama gave a speech to his supporters as he neared the end of his presidency.

[00:00:12] In 10 days

[00:00:14] The world will witness a hallmark of our democracy. [boos] No, no, no, no, no.

[00:00:20] And to me, the best part about it is that he kind of scolds them, right?

[00:00:24] He says, no, no, no, no, no. We don't boo an essential tenet of democracy, the peaceful transfer of power.

[00:00:32] Thank your lucky stars that we have it. Protect it.

[00:00:37] The idea that for all our outward differences, we're all in this together, that we rise or fall as one.

[00:00:44] I'm Hannah McCarthy.

[00:00:45] I'm Nick Capodice.

[00:00:47] This is Civics 101. Today we are talking about one of the many principles that keeps our democratic heads above the authoritarian water, the peaceful transition of power.

[00:00:56] Well, the procedures are set out in the Constitution. I mean, that's the whole reason you have a constitution, right?

[00:01:02] This is the inimitable Linda Monk, a.k.a. the Constitution Lady, a.k.a. author of The Bill of Rights, A User's Guide.

[00:01:09] When Linda says that the procedure is set out in the Constitution, does it literally say there will be a peaceful transition of presidential power?

[00:01:17] It does not. But Linda's point is that the Constitution does tell us that we are to hold a free and fair election and the winner of that election will become the president. And the framers put this in writing because they knew and this was before we had political parties, they knew that people would squabble and disagree, and they even feared that foreign nations might get involved trying to influence presidential elections.

[00:01:42] Gee, what a novel idea. So the Constitution itself sets it up. That's the norm. The norm is that we've got some disagreements. We're going to have elections.

[00:01:51] And here's how we keep the government in power.

[00:01:56] So this peaceful transition of power is like an unwritten rule. Here's [00:02:00] how power will change hands. And as long as you uphold the Constitution, that power shift will be peaceful. But has it truly been peaceful throughout U.S. history?

[00:02:09] It had been untested, really, until the defeat of John Adams.

[00:02:15] Incumbent Federalist President John Adams against his Democratic Republican vice president Thomas Jefferson. This is the election of 1800 and Jefferson wins. It was the first time a sitting president lost reelection.

[00:02:28] We should note, Adams was only our second president.

[00:02:31] That was when people look to say, are we going to be able to survive a transfer of power with such diametrically opposed candidates? And then Jefferson in his inaugural speech says, we are all Federalists, we are all Republicans. It was clear what the divisions are there breaking into political parties. And Jefferson tries to bring the nation together, saying essentially, we're all Americans.

[00:02:54] Which is what Barack Obama was getting at in that speech.

[00:02:56] Isn't it that accepting election results and letting someone else take up the mantle is what helps us to keep a functioning democracy.

[00:03:04] Even when people are very, very sore losers.

[00:03:07] Like when Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 and seven states seceded.\

[00:03:13] There was a peaceful transfer of power.

[00:03:15] But then the unsuccessful states decided to declare their own nation.

[00:03:22] So even on the verge of a civil war and I know there was even a failed assassination plot against Lincoln, but it was accepted that one person lost the other one and the winner would be president.

[00:03:33] And his opponents did not refuse to acknowledge that he had won. They just made for the hills after he did. No presidential candidate in American history has ever refused to concede to the victor. Until 2020.

[00:03:47] It's a time of grieving right now. Grieving is necessary because we have forever lost our calling to a peaceful transfer of power through an election. That's forever. [00:04:00] Now, maybe that'll make us more humble about what's required to do that and more protective of our electoral process, because all we have to do is look around the world and see where those kind of challenges happen and what the consequences are. May maybe now we've been given a taste of that medicine and instead of bragging about it, will be servants to it.

[00:04:27] That about does it for the peaceful transition of power. For this episode.

[00:04:31] I mean, if any of you have questions about how things are going around here, just ask us drop us a line at Civics101@nhpr.org. We're in this with you.