

The Flight of the Lame Duck

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In politics, a **Lame Duck** is an official who remains in office after their successor has been elected. Because they aren't sticking around, their political "wings" are clipped; they lose their influence because everyone is already looking toward the next person in charge.

Lesson Plan: The Flight of the Lame Duck

1. The Origin Story

Start with a quick hook about the term. It actually comes from the **London Stock Exchange** in the 1700s, referring to a broker who couldn't pay their debts and had to "waddle" away in disgrace.

In politics, it's less about debt and more about **diminishing power**.

- **Why are they "lame"?** They can't easily pass new laws because other politicians are waiting for the "new boss" to arrive.
- **Who are they?** Usually a President or Member of Congress who lost an election, chose not to run again, or reached their term limit.

2. The Legal Fix: The 20th Amendment

Before 1933, the "Lame Duck" period lasted for four months (November to March). This was a disaster during crises like the Great Depression, as the country sat in limbo waiting for FDR to take over while Herbert Hoover's power evaporated.

The **20th Amendment** shortened this gap by moving Inauguration Day from March 4th to **January 20th**.

3. Classroom Activity: "Power vs. Freedom"

Divide the class into two groups to debate the "Lame Duck Paradox." Even though these leaders lose influence, they gain a unique kind of freedom.

The Lame Duck Downside

"Dead on Arrival": Opponents often ignore their proposals.

Staff Exodus: Top advisors start looking for new jobs.

Gridlock: Major legislation usually stalls until the new term.

The Lame Duck "Superpower"

Political Courage: They can make unpopular but necessary decisions without fearing a lost election.

Pardons: Presidents often use this time to issue controversial executive pardons.

Legacy Building: They focus on finishing long-term projects or foreign policy deals.

4. Discussion Prompt: The "Golden Hour"?

Ask your students: *If you knew you were leaving your job in two months and didn't have to worry about being "re-hired" by the voters, what is one big change you would try to make?*

Teacher's Tip: Use this to discuss recent transitions or local examples (like a retiring principal or a graduating senior class officer) to make the abstract concept feel more personal.

National Lame Duck Day is celebrated on **February 6th** specifically because that was the day the **20th Amendment** was ratified in 1933. Before that, the "lame duck" period was a marathon, not a sprint!

Here is some of the best trivia to share with your students:

1. The "Waddling" Stockbrokers

Long before it was used in the White House, "Lame Duck" was an insult in the **1700s London Stock Exchange**. It referred to a broker who couldn't pay his debts and had to "waddle" out of Exchange Alley in disgrace. By the 1830s, the term migrated to the U.S. to describe "broken-down" politicians who were essentially broke on political capital.

2. The Four-Month Ghost Town

Before 1933, a president elected in November didn't take office until **March 4th**.

- **The Reason:** In the 1700s, it took months for news to travel by horse and for newly elected officials to pack their bags and move to D.C.
- **The Problem:** By the 1900s, trains and telegrams made this wait unnecessary. In 1932, during the Great Depression, the country had to wait four agonizing months for FDR to take over while the economy spiraled, because Herbert Hoover no longer had the "mandate" to act.

3. "The Lame Duck Amendment"

The **20th Amendment** is actually nicknamed the "Lame Duck Amendment." It chopped the transition time down from four months to about ten weeks.

- **Fun Fact:** If the 20th Amendment hadn't passed, Abraham Lincoln might have been able to prevent some of the early escalations of the Civil War. Instead, he had to sit at home in Illinois for four months while Southern states seceded, because he didn't have the legal power to stop them yet.

4. The Productive "Quackers"

Being a lame duck doesn't always mean being lazy. Some of the most famous (and controversial) moments in history happened during these sessions:

- **The Midnight Judges:** In 1801, John Adams stayed up until his very last night in office signing appointments for new judges just to annoy his rival, Thomas Jefferson.
- **The Impeachment:** President Bill Clinton was actually impeached by the House of Representatives during a lame-duck session in 1998.
- **The Censure:** The Senate famously voted to condemn (censure) the controversial Senator Joseph McCarthy during a lame-duck session in 1954.

5. Why Ducks?

Biologically, ducks are "lame" when they are **molting**. During the time they shed their old feathers to grow new ones, they cannot fly, making them vulnerable to predators. It's a perfect metaphor for a politician who has lost their "flight" (power) but is still stuck on the pond.

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The "Lame Duck" True or False Challenge

- 1. The term "Lame Duck" was originally used to describe people who failed to pay their debts in the 1700s.**
- 2. Before 1933, a new President didn't take office until June.**
- 3. A "Lame Duck" session of Congress happens after an election but before the new members are sworn in.**
- 4. The 20th Amendment is officially nicknamed the "Mallard Amendment."**
- 5. President John Adams once stayed up until midnight on his last day in office just to appoint judges that his successor didn't like.**
- 6. Lame Duck politicians have more power than usual because they don't have to worry about being re-elected.**
- 7. National Lame Duck Day is February 6th because that is the day the 20th Amendment was ratified.**
- 8. If a politician decides to retire and not run for office again, they are considered a "Lame Duck" the moment they make that announcement.**

True or False Answers

- 1 - **TRUE.** It started in London's stock market to describe "bankrupt" brokers who had to waddle away from their debts.
- 2 - **FALSE.** They took office on **March 4th.** The 20th Amendment moved it to January 20th because four months was way too long to wait.
- 3 - **TRUE.** This is when the "old" Congress meets one last time to finish up business.
- 4 - **FALSE.** It is popularly known as the "**Lame Duck Amendment.**"
- 5 - **TRUE.** They are famously known in history books as the "**Midnight Judges.**"
- 6 - **FALSE.** While they have more "freedom," they usually have **less power** because other leaders are waiting for the new person to take over and often refuse to cooperate with them.
- 7 - **TRUE.** It marks the day the "long" lame-duck period officially ended in 1933.
- 8 - **TRUE.** Even if they didn't "lose" an election, they are still a lame duck because everyone knows their time in office is coming to an end.

For the Teacher: The "Why"

If students ask why we bother with this, you can explain that it's about the "**Peaceful Transfer of Power.**" The Lame Duck period is the "handshake" between the old leader and the new leader. Even if it's awkward, it's how our democracy stays stable!