INTRO

The Constitution: we’ve all heard of it, but how many of us have read it? Raise your hand if you’ve ever been made to read and understand the whole Constitution. (Wait for people to raise hand) So, hardly any of us. It’s okay, I hadn’t read it either until a few weeks ago.

Buried deep in the flowery, old-timey language of the Constitution is a clause that essentially determines who is, and who is not, eligible to be President of the United States. Specifically, that a person has to be 35, has to have lived in the US for 14 years, and, perhaps most confusingly, that the person has to be a “natural-born citizen.”

I’d heard of this clause before, just like most of you probably have. But I’d always heard it paraphrased, and none of my teachers ever went into detail about it. I started to wonder what exactly the Constitution said about being president. For example, does the Constitution ever define what a natural-born citizen is? Have there been caveats to the rule? I decided to hit the books and get my questions answered.

After all, this law is something that was the backbone of our democracy for centuries. We, the people, need to know about the laws we follow, especially those that literally dictate who is and is not fit to lead us. An uneducated public is the easiest to exploit, so let’s get educated.

Not only do we need to know what this clause says in detail, we all deserve to know why the founding fathers decided to put it into our most significant document, as well as how this clause serves us today, over 200 years after it was written.

BODY 1: WHAT IT IS

Let’s start with what the Constitution says explicitly. Article II, Section I, Clause 5 of the Constitution states that “No Person except a natural-born citizen…shall be eligible to the Office of President.” This is what we refer to as the Natural-Born-Citizen Clause.

Pretty clear, right? Well, not exactly. The Constitution never outright states just what a “natural-born citizen” entails. Is it limited to people who were born in the United States? Do we count people who have been naturalized, or can immigrants not run for president?

Today it has been taken to mean that a natural-born citizen includes, at least, people born in the United States and in US territories, like Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Somewhat less obviously, any person born anywhere to at least one parent who is a US citizen is automatically a natural-born citizen. These ways of being granted citizenship fall under an umbrella called birthright citizenship, to be contrasted with citizenship granted later in life, such as naturalization. This means that any immigrant, even if they’re legal, cannot legally be elected to the presidency.

So now we know what the clause means. But what did the founding fathers want it to mean? Why is it even there in the first place?

BODY 2: HOW IT HAPPENED/WHY IT WAS THERE INITIALLY

Alexander Hamilton stated in number 68 of his Federalist Papers that the newly formed United States of America needed to protect themselves from, quote, “the desire in foreign powers to gain an improper ascendant in our councils.” Hamilton was saying, essentially, that we required the Natural-Born-Citizen Clause to protect against the “cabal, intrigue, and corruption” that was foreign influence.

The clause was meant to protect us from other countries. Does it?

BODY 3: TODAY

In the past few election years, this clause has been brought up numerous times. The most recent example is Ted Cruz, whose eligibility for office was questioned by Donald Trump. Cruz was born in Canada, to a mother who was a US citizen (making him eligible for presidency, most legal scholars agree) and a father who was a citizen of Cuba.

This issue was also raised in the case of President Obama, who not only was born in the US but also had an American mother.

Other than presidential elections, the Natural-Born-Citizen clause doesn’t visibly affect us much nowadays.

CONCLUSION

The Natural-Born Citizen Clause of the Constitution is meant to protect the United States from foreign influence, even today, by saying that only true US citizens can lead this nation. Over the years, we’ve defined a “true US citizen” by birthplace and parents.

Now that you know about how our government judges eligibility for the Office of President, I’d like you to ask yourselves if this clause protects you, as individuals, the way the founding fathers would’ve wanted it to.

I hope I’ve left you today with a greater knowledge of our presidency eligibility process. Thank you.