2000 Vice Presidential Selection

A Haphazard Process at Best, April 2000

Governor Tom Ridge’s emergence as a serious vice-presidential possibility this year has become big news, not just in Pennsylvania but nationally as well. Interest in Ridge has generated a plethora of articles examining his chances or speculating about whether he would be a good choice. History tells us, however, that the selection process is chaotic, haphazard, and unpredictable.

Throughout history the selection of the vice president has often been anticlimactic. The person selected was usually picked to balance the ticket, whatever that happened to mean in any presidential election year, and was accomplished normally with little fanfare. Not uncommonly, Presidential candidates have been elected with lackluster and unqualified running mates. Some have been unknown and without national stature. Theodore Roosevelt’s running mate, Charles Fairbanks, is representative of the first example, while Richard Nixon’s vice presidential choice, Spiro Agnew, exemplifies the second. A stunned press core responded to Nixon's announcement of Governor Agnew as his running mate with the cry, "Spiro who?", illustrating how unpredictable the selection can be.

Certainly, some have been controversial, as was George Bush’s selection of Dan Quayle in 1988, a choice that haunted Bush, but did not devastate his campaign. The Quayle selection brought forth a sally of criticism that the Indiana senator did not have the requisite qualifications to be vice president, much less president. To illustrate how haphazard the process can be, neither the Republican nominee George Bush nor his top advisors had interviewed Quayle before his selection.

Of late the selection, however, has been more climactic. The presidential nominees are well known many months before the national conventions. The convention platform debates are meaningless exercises in party coalition bartering, and other party fights are rare. So for months in advance of the convention the press core speculates endlessly about the vice presidential choice, endlessly handicapping the various possibilities. The emergent candidate, however, has as often as not been a surprise to everyone, maybe even to the presidential nominee himself.

But the eccentricities of the selection process notwithstanding, it has always mattered who was to be vice-president. John Adams, the nation’s first vice president, called the office “the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived. Many great men shunned the office, believing as Daniel Webster once said about it "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead." And once in office, vice presidents from John Adams to Hubert Humphrey essentially have been an unhappy lot. They found the position powerless, demeaning, and subservient. But those characterizations are exaggerated.

Throughout history the vice presidency has been one of the more common avenues to the White House. One in six vice presidents overall has succeeded directly to the presidency by virtue of death or resignation. In modern times (from 1960 to 2000) the vice presidency or the vice
presidential nomination has become the best route to a later presidential nomination of either party and to the presidency itself.

Nixon’s tenure as vice-president under Eisenhower led to his nomination in 1960 and in 1968. Walter Mondale’s nomination in 1984 was directly related to his vice presidency under Carter. Similarly, George Bush’s 1988 nomination success was based on the grass roots work he accomplished while vice president. This year, Al Gore’ victory is clearly linked to his tenure as vice president

In short, party nominees since World War II have come overwhelmingly from the ranks of sitting vice presidents and former vice presidents. The list is formidable: Truman in 1948; Nixon in 1960; Johnson in 1964; Nixon and Humphrey in 1968; Ford in 1976; Mondale in 1984; and Bush in 1988. Few who seriously entertain the thought of becoming president will turn such an offer down. Even losing vice presidential candidates, can in losing, establish and enhance their national reputations and emerge as their likely party nominee in the future.

Myths abound about the vice presidential role in winning the election. Despite widespread accounts to the contrary, the vice presidential selection has been insignificant historically to the election of a presidential ticket. In only one presidential election in American history was the vice presidential running mate instrumental in bringing about electoral victory. That was in 1960, when Lyndon Johnson’s selection as John Kennedy’s running mate was essential to John F. Kennedy’s victory. He brought Texas and three or four other southern states into the Democratic column along with their 54 to 59 electoral votes, the needed edge for a Kennedy victory. But that election stands alone, with no comparable historical precedent. Vice presidential candidates can strengthen, but do not elect, tickets in American politics. And so, Walter Mondale in 1976, George Bush in 1980, and Al Gore in 1992 brought support and credibility to their respective national tickets, but the addition of none of them brought victory.

Certainly the selection of Tom Ridge as Bush's running mate will enhance the likelihood of Bush carrying Pennsylvania's 23 electoral votes. At this moment, no state is more competitive. The most recent Keystone Poll has Bush and Gore neck-and-neck, at 43% each. But history tells us that Bush will lose or win the election himself, for reasons other than the identity or help of his running mate.

Former governors run think tanks, become television commentators, or college professors. Vice presidents become presidents. Tom Ridge's future is as unpredictable as the vice presidential selection process.

By:

G. Terry Madonna, Director
Center for Politics & Public Affairs
Millersville University

Dr. Michael Young, Director
Survey Research Center
Penn State Harrisburg