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## Why Trump, Clinton VP picks are such a big deal this year

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's choice for vice president will be the most consequential decision that the candidates will make during the course of the presidential race.

Historically this selection has had only a small effect on the race, but by choosing a vice president, the candidate is making clear who they think should be a key advisor and worthy successor. It may not have been the goal, but modern-day vice presidents have become a crucial member of the president's policy team — the only one he cannot actually get rid of — and by far the most likely potential successor for the party's nomination.

While vice presidents were historically laughing stocks, over the last half century the position has changed. For 124 years, from 1836 until 1960, only seven vice presidents ascended to the presidency and they all did so based on the death of a president — and four of those seven could not even get their party's nomination for the presidency after they moved up. Not one vice president received their party's nomination for the presidency at the end of their term.

However, starting with Richard Nixon, seven of the last 12 vice presidents went on to win their party's nomination for the presidency in the next election. The five who didn't get the nomination all have their own reasons — Spiro Agnew, who resigned in disgrace; the unelected Nelson Rockefeller, who died before the next election; Dan Quayle, who never escaped ridicule; Dick Cheney, who had severe health problems; and Joe Biden, who didn't run this time due to Hillary Clinton's ability to cloak herself in the mantle of both of the last two Democratic presidents.

Biden's difficulty in mounting a primary race against Clinton points out why the VP is so important. Biden could have run, but he clearly thought that Clinton had established her credentials as Obama's and her husband's preferred successor. The reality is that in modern times the running mate is seen as the heir apparent. Any president leaving office still possesses a large degree of popularity at least with his or her own party's voters, enough that the candidate seen as close to the party leader has the best chance of grabbing that nomination. That person is generally the vice president. And presidents want their vice presidents to move up. This succession is a ratification of the president's own term.

There are some real reasons for the recent change in VPs succession ability. During the political convention era, presidential candidates were selected by state leaders and machine bosses. The vice president was chosen at the last moment, and it was used as a bargaining chip to get the presidency and a way to provide a consolation prize to the losers. The result was that many of the men who were taken as VPs were neither prominent nor powerful.

What has changed is that presidents are not chosen by a small group of leaders, but instead by the mass of voters in popular elections in primaries and caucuses. The nominee is no longer beholden to the convention, so he or she has the ability to choose their own running mate. There is no longer a focus on soothing losing factions, but instead the goal of the VP choice is to boost the chances of winning in November. The result is that vice presidential candidates are now, with a couple of glaring exceptions, prominent political figures by the time they are selected, with much higher name recognition and a better ability to form a political organization if and when they want to run for president.

Just as important, vice presidents are now key players in the president's governing team. For most of their history, the vice president was an ignored part of the administration. The rare exceptions — men like Martin Van Buren and Garrett Hobart, McKinley's first VP — are so rare that they can be listed. The vice presidency was famously called the "superfluous excellency" by John Adams and FDR's first vice president John Nance Garner stated that it was "not worth a bucket of warm spit" — at least that's the cleaned up version.

But starting with Harry Truman, who made his vice president a member of the National Security Council, VPs have become players in politics. The last three, Gore, Biden and Cheney all played central roles in their administrations. We probably can expect that to continue.

There's a good reason for this development. The president wants a vice president to have a real role, as an active and engaged VP makes the president look like he or she can make good choices. And unlike everyone else, the vice president is the only official the president cannot get rid of during an initial term. Presidents can fire the entire cabinet, replace all the generals, divorce a spouse and disown a child, but they have no power to act against the vice president. Not only do VPs retain their position, they may play an outsized role in critical policy. Since they break a tie vote in the Senate, they could pass judgment on the key legislation in a president's term. Better to have the VP in the tent than out of it.

For the country, this is actually a very positive development. Presidents are always seen as listening to powerful unelected individuals — from Jackson's kitchen cabinet to Obama's Valerie Jarrett or Bush's Karl Rove. The advisors are unelected and completely unvetted by the populace. The vice president is someone who will receive the full press attention and will need the tacit approval of the voters to start the job. For America it is much better to have this elected official serving as a chief advisor.

Right now, both candidates are looking to use the vice presidential selection to bolster perceived weaknesses in their campaigns. Clinton is looking at Senators who may help her with the aggrieved Bernie Sanders supporters such as Senators Sherrod Brown or Elizabeth Warren and Labor Secretary Tom Perez, assist with a particular ethnic group like HUD Secretary Julian Castro or Senator Cory Booker, or help with a specific state like Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia. For Donald Trump, the pick seems more designed to assist with his lack of electoral experience and proved further conservative bonafides, whether it is former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Governor Chris Christie, Governor Mike Pence or Senator Jeff Sessions.

The choice of running mates is not likely to swing an election. From an electoral standpoint, vice presidents have been a wash. But from a leadership, a governing and a legacy perspective, vice presidents are extremely important. In essence, the presidents must live with or live down their vice president. So they better do a good job in picking one.

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