



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on May 7, 2024

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The Importance of Vice Presidents and Running Mates

Who will presumptive GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump select for his running mate? Will he pick someone who solidly supports America First, or place more emphasis on selecting someone who will increase his chances of getting back into the White House? The question is hugely important, since whomever Trump selects could become president. As history shows, presidential candidates in the past have at times picked a running mate who holds dissimilar views, only for that running mate to become president.

While the Framers of the Constitution did not anticipate the role of the vice president to be that of a partisan political actor, and definitely had no inkling of the modern concept of a “running mate,” that changed very early in American history with the rise of political parties.

In fact, the delegates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention devoted very little space in the new U.S. Constitution to the office of vice president. In Article II, which concerns the Executive Branch of the federal government, it was said of the office, “In Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President, and the Congress may by Law provide for the Case of Removal, Death, Resignation or Inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what Officer shall then act as President, and such Officer shall act accordingly, until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.”

Article I — which concerns the law-making, or legislative branch — also briefly mentioned the office: “The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided.”

The Federalist Papers (aka *The Federalist*) is a collection of newspaper articles written by three ardent supporters of the Constitution — James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay — explaining and arguing for the Constitution’s ratification in New York state. Hamilton, who had very little to say about the office of vice president, wrote in *The Federalist*, No. 68, “The Vice President is to be chosen in the same manner with the President [through the vote of presidential electors].” He added, “The appointment of an extraordinary person as Vice President has been objected to as superfluous, if not mischievous. It has been alleged that it would have been preferable to have authorized the Senate to elect out of their own body an officer fitting that description [as president of the Senate].”

Hamilton explained that there needed to be an officer who could, if necessary, break tie votes in the



Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Secretary of Defense

Poor choice: Donald Trump’s selection of Mike Pence of Indiana might have helped Trump marginally in three states in the Midwest — Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin — but it is doubtful that Trump would ever ask Pence to run with him again.



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Senate. “And to take the senator of any state from his seat as a senator, to place him in that of President of the Senate, would be to exchange, in regard to the state from which he came, a constant for a contingent vote.”

And, of course, as all presidents of the United States are mortal, there is the consideration that someone must be ready to take over in case there is a vacancy in the office. “The other consideration is that ... the Vice President may occasionally become a substitute for the President in the supreme executive magistracy.”

It is in this scenario — the vice president becoming the president’s substitute — that the question of who is vice president becomes most important. After all, eight presidents have died in office; four by an assassin’s bullet, and four by natural causes.

Following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, there was another concern. What if President Kennedy had *not* died from his horrific head wound, but had been rendered unable to function in the office? A president in an extended comatose state would create all sorts of frightening possibilities. This led to the enactment of the 25th Amendment, which provided that a president who was incapacitated either mentally or physically could be removed from the office in an action initiated by the vice president. It also clearly stated that the vice president actually becomes president in case of a presidential vacancy, rather than simply becoming a “substitute,” or an “acting president.”

Running Mates Become the Norm

Once two political parties emerged prior to the 1800 presidential election, Thomas Jefferson, the candidate of the Republican Party (not the same as the modern party by that name), needed a “running mate” from the North, as Jefferson was a Virginian from the South. This would “balance the ticket” geographically, thus drawing votes from the North that Jefferson might otherwise not be able to get.

Aaron Burr of New York became that running mate.

The original method of choosing the president and vice president, under the Constitution, was that presidential electors were to vote for two different individuals. The person finishing first would become president, and the person finishing second would become vice president. Thus, John Adams became the first vice president under George Washington, and following the election of 1796, Thomas Jefferson became vice president under John Adams.

By 1800, Adams was the candidate of the Federalist Party, nominated by the Federalist leaders in the House of Representatives to oppose Jefferson. Jefferson was the logical choice as the Republican Party’s hopeful.

Electors supporting Jefferson also named Burr on their ballots, resulting in a tie between them, narrowly ahead of Adams. As no one had won in the electoral vote, the constitutional stipulation that the House of Representatives would then choose the president while the Senate would elect the vice president went into effect. This created the odd situation in which the lame-duck Federalist-controlled House would choose between two Republicans.

Rather than step aside, Burr saw this as his opportunity, hoping the Federalists in the House would prefer him over their hated rival, Jefferson. This is a prime example of why the selection of a running mate is so important. It is, as with a presidential nomination, important to select candidates for high



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office with moral character, which Burr did not have.

Fortunately, Alexander Hamilton — the leader of the Federalist Party — had the moral character that Burr lacked, and while he was a bitter rival of Jefferson's, he urged his fellow Federalists in the House to either vote for Jefferson or abstain, and let the Republicans pick Jefferson over Burr. After 30 ballots, Jefferson was chosen as president. Relations between Burr and Hamilton continued to deteriorate, and Burr eventually killed Hamilton in a duel.

For the next few years, the office of vice president did not seem very important, as the office of secretary of state was the principal steppingstone to the presidency. James Madison, secretary of state for Jefferson, followed him as president, and his secretary of state, James Monroe, followed Madison. John Quincy Adams, secretary of state for Monroe, defeated Andrew Jackson in the election of 1824. (This led to the second, and so far the last, time that the House of Representatives elected the president, as neither Adams nor Jackson received a majority of the vote in the Electoral College).

Still, after Vice President Martin Van Buren won the White House in 1836, it was not until George Bush followed President Ronald Reagan in 1988 that a "sitting" vice president was elected again.

But that did not mean the office was unimportant, especially when President William Henry Harrison died only 32 days into his term, to be succeeded by his vice president, John Tyler, in 1841. Vice President Millard Fillmore succeeded President Zachary Taylor upon Taylor's death in 1850.

The practice of "balancing the ticket" did not end with the Jefferson-Burr team of 1800. The regional balancing act of Democrat Andrew Jackson of Tennessee with New York's Van Buren was successful in 1832, as was the ticket of the Whig Party's Harrison of Indiana and Tyler of Virginia in 1840.

However, the consequences of the Harrison-Tyler ticket should be a powerful argument against "balancing" the ticket for ideological reasons. Harrison was the candidate for the Whig Party, but Tyler was a former Democrat. Tyler had left the Democratic Party, not for any philosophical differences with their policy positions, but rather over personality differences with the man who during that time dominated the Democratic Party — Andrew Jackson. Tyler opposed the key points of the Whig platform, which included opposition to a nationally chartered Bank of the United States, federal spending on infrastructure (then called "internal improvements"), and high protective tariffs. Once being thrust into the White House by Harrison's untimely demise, Tyler proceeded to veto practically every Whig proposal that passed Congress.

A question must be asked: What is the point of selecting a running mate in order to win an election, if the result is that the party's positions would be blocked were that person to become president?

A Republican and Democratic Ticket

Perhaps the most unusual ticket was put together in 1864, in the midst of the Civil War. Republican Abraham Lincoln had been elected president in 1860 with only 40 percent of the popular vote because the Democratic Party had split into three factions. With the casualties of the war continuing into the hundreds of thousands, Lincoln's chances for reelection in 1864 were diminishing. The anti-war Democrats in the North had won several seats in the 1862 off-year congressional elections, and Lincoln knew he needed to somehow unite behind himself all those in the North wanting to continue the war.

This is why Andrew Johnson, a former U.S. senator from Tennessee (the only member from a state that



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seceded who refused to leave his post in the Senate) and a Democrat, was made Lincoln's running mate in 1864. Johnson was for keeping the South in the Union, and would give pro-Union Democrats added incentive to support Lincoln's reelection. However, Radical Republicans — those who desired a war of vengeance on the South — were suspicious of Johnson. For that election, the Republicans used the name Union Party. This ploy certainly worked, and Lincoln won, but after John Wilkes Booth killed him in April 1865, the White House passed from a Republican to a Democrat.

Johnson actually continued many of Lincoln's intended policies, attempting to reunite the country during Reconstruction, but the Republicans understandably viewed Democrat Johnson with suspicion. Republicans who had tolerated the relatively more moderate Lincoln absolutely detested Johnson, and he endured an impeachment trial in the Senate, ultimately surviving by one vote. Neither party wanted him as their nominee in 1868.

The post-Civil War years saw little thought given to the office of vice president, except when President James Garfield was assassinated in 1881, putting Chester Arthur into the White House. But that led to little difference in policy, as both men were typical of the Republicans of that time period.

Teddy Roosevelt and the Progressive Era

That was not the case, however, in 1900, when President William McKinley, a Republican, was essentially given New York Governor Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt as his running mate (presidential nominees did not simply pick their own running mates during this time period). New York Republicans, disenchanted with the "progressive" politics of Roosevelt, were seeking a way of getting him out of the governor's office. These New York Republicans were able to convince enough gullible national Republicans that his presence on the ticket would "unite" the party, arguing it made little difference who was vice president of the United States. However, it mattered a great deal when a left-wing anarchist assassinated McKinley in 1901.

Roosevelt, like other progressives, had little regard for constitutional restrictions on the power of elected officials. As president, he adopted what has been called the "stewardship theory" of presidential authority. In his view, unless the Constitution specifically said he *could not* do something, he *could* do it. Progressives saw the Constitution more as an impediment to their agenda than as a rule book to be followed.

Now, the progressive movement had political power, and they used it to begin the implementation of their Big Government programs. Whatever benefit Teddy Roosevelt brought to the ticket in the presidential election of 1900 for the Republicans was not worth the consequences of having him in the White House. While McKinley was a reluctant interventionist in foreign nations, Roosevelt was a huge advocate of projecting American power around the world, extending the progressive policies abroad.

But Roosevelt wasn't finished when he left the White House in 1909. In 1912, he came out of retirement to run for president again in that year — this time on the Progressive Party ticket after he failed to take the Republican nomination away from the more conservative William Howard Taft — splitting the Republican vote and placing a fellow progressive, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, into the presidency. Wilson, of course, gave us the federal income tax (allowed by the 16th Amendment) and the creation of the Federal Reserve System.

Teddy Roosevelt's cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was thrust into national politics on the strength of that



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now-famous name. He was placed on the 1920 Democratic Party ticket as the running mate of progressive Democrat James Cox.

After President Warren Harding died in office in 1923, he was replaced by his vice president, Calvin Coolidge. Rather than pick someone from the more progressive wing of the Republican Party, in an attempt at ideological balance, conservative Harding (from Ohio) had chosen conservative Coolidge (from Massachusetts). The two won the most massive popular-vote political-party landslide in American history, and Republicans won contests all over the country, even in places they had never won before. This demonstrates the value of choosing a running mate who shares the ideals of fidelity to the Constitution and limited government.

Although he lost the 1920 election, Franklin Roosevelt won the governorship of New York state in 1928, propelling him into the White House in 1932 when the Great Depression destroyed the political fortunes of the Republican Party. Such were the consequences of putting Theodore Roosevelt on the Republican ticket in 1900 — not only did it give us Theodore, it also gave us Franklin.

Kennedy and Johnson

When FDR ran again in 1944, many leaders in the Democratic Party were aware that Roosevelt's poor health indicated that he would likely not complete a fourth term. This meant that the person who was picked as his running mate would likely be president sometime during that term. There are different theories as to why these Democratic leaders wanted Missouri Senator Harry Truman to replace Henry Wallace as FDR's vice president. Some believe that these leaders feared Wallace was too favorable toward the Soviet Union, while others contend that they believed Truman would be easier to control. Whatever the reason for the choice of Truman, Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945 is more evidence that the choice of a president's running mate can have significant consequences.

Improper balance: Many felt John F. Kennedy's choice of Lyndon Johnson as his running mate provided a "religious" balance, as the Catholic Kennedy needed a "Southern Protestant" on the ticket with him. On November 22, 1963, an assassin's bullet made Johnson president, illustrating the importance of the selection of the vice-presidential candidate. (Wikimedia Commons/Public domain)



Republican Dwight Eisenhower's running mate, and eventual vice president, Richard Nixon, did lose the election of 1960 to Democrat John F. Kennedy, but had Eisenhower not chosen Nixon as his running



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mate in 1952, Nixon would have never become president, winning the elections of 1968 and 1972.

And, of course, it was in the election of 1960 that Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts opted to create what was dubbed “the Boston-Austin Axis,” by asking his major opponent for the Democratic nomination, Senator Lyndon Johnson of Texas, to join the ticket. As a rich man from Boston, Kennedy realized his weakness in the South, particularly in Texas. There is little doubt that Catholic Kennedy saw a southern Protestant as helpful, as well. At that time, no Democrat had ever won the presidency without carrying Texas (at least before Texas’ entrance into the Union, and not counting the 1864 election when Texas was part of the Confederacy). With Johnson on the ticket, Kennedy won, but just barely. In fact, some contend that there was enough fraud in the election that it is possible Nixon really won. By 1963, Kennedy was in danger of losing Texas in 1964. That is why Kennedy took that fateful trip to Dallas in November 1963 — to shore up his chances of carrying the Lone Star State again.

Reagan’s Disastrous Selection of George H.W. Bush

Ronald Reagan’s decision to pick George H.W. Bush for his running mate in 1980 was considered at the time a masterstroke by the political pundits because it “united the Republican Party” and contributed to Reagan’s 44-state landslide victory over incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Bush had been Reagan’s most difficult opponent in the Republican primaries, and had even criticized Reagan’s support for supply-side tax cuts as “voodoo economics.”

How much Bush actually helped Reagan electorally in the 1980 general election is debatable, but one can say with some assurance that had Reagan not picked him, Bush would have never been president of the United States. Bush’s election in 1988 is largely credited to the voters believing it was “Reagan’s third term.”

Bush was an establishment Republican, supported by globalists such as David Rockefeller, and he launched the war against Iraq in 1991, calling for a “New World Order” to come out of that conflict. In a speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Bush chose to blame not the Japanese for the attack, but instead the “isolationists” in the United States, such as the America First Committee, who had opposed American entry into the war in Europe.

Before running for president in 1980, Bush ran the Central Intelligence Agency, and only left that post when President Jimmy Carter replaced him in 1977. He was the very essence of a “Republican in Name Only.”

When running for president in 1988, Bush called for a “kinder, gentler America,” which President Reagan’s wife, Nancy, understandably took as a coded attack upon her husband’s presidency. This conformed with what Democrats had been saying about Reagan during his entire presidency. Bush’s administration was filled with Republicans who had opposed Reagan, such as Dick Cheney.

In short, Bush was no conservative. His lackluster presidency led to the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. A different Republican president, not picked from the Rockefeller wing of the party, would have likely defeated Clinton in 1992.

After eight years of Clinton followed the presidency of George W. Bush. After all of the foreign interventions of the Clinton years, Bush — the governor of Texas — called for a “more humble foreign policy,” saying that the United States had no business being the world’s policeman.



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It was all rhetoric, of course, as Bush the Younger simply continued the globalist policies of Bush the Elder. After eight years of the younger Bush, disgusted voters picked a Democrat, Barack Obama — and his running mate, Joe Biden.

In other words, the choice that Reagan made in 1980 has contributed greatly to our present problems, 44 years later.



Consequences: While Ronald Reagan's selection of George H.W. Bush as his running mate in 1980 helped unite the Republican Party, the consequences of that choice have been enormous. Bush himself was elected in 1988, and this led indirectly to the election of George W. Bush in 2000, giving us 12 years of the Bush brand of Republicanism. (Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain)

What's at Stake

All of this should be understood as Donald Trump considers his 2024 running mate.

Many believe that a female running mate would help Trump attract suburban women. While Nikki Haley might come to mind in this regard, her positions on important issues, particularly foreign policy, are so at odds with Trump's that this would be a risky proposition. After all, one must realize that there is no guarantee that Trump — or any other president — will even finish a term, if American history is any indication. Other women, such as Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, are probably on the list, as is South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem.

Some have suggested Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina, who might help Trump increase his percentage of the vote in the black community. But exactly how much Scott can help Trump in the black community is uncertain.

Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin is a solid conservative from a swing state, but Republicans need to hold on to every Senate seat they have. Johnson will have a tough battle getting reelected, but his chances of winning are probably better than another Republican winning an open seat. Other senators who might excite conservatives, such as Ted Cruz of Texas, Rand Paul of Kentucky, or Mike Lee of Utah, would, if picked, create a special election for their seats in the closely divided Senate.

Ominously, the wrong Trump pick this time could have more immediate negative consequences. Reagan had been president less than three months when John Hinckley's assassination attempt almost made



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Bush president in 1981 rather than 1989.

It would be a terrible thing if the American people elected Trump in November only to have an assassin make the wrong running mate president instead. With the intense hatred for Trump, stirred up by the globalists and their allies in the media, that is something that, sadly, must be considered when his running mate is chosen.



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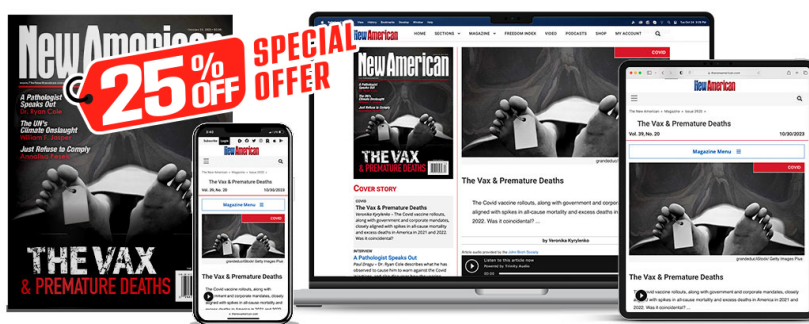
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