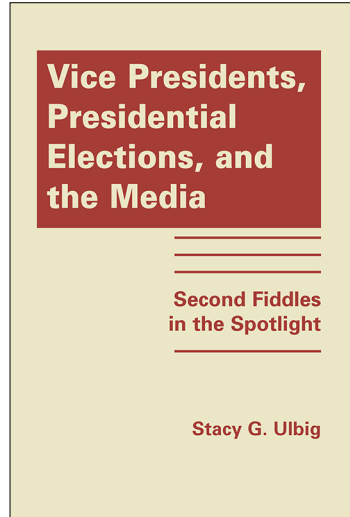


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Vice Presidents, Presidential
Elections, and the Media:
Second Fiddles in
the Spotlight

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ISBN: 978-1-935049-56-2 hc



FIRSTFORUMPRESS

A DIVISION OF LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS, INC.

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314
Boulder, CO 80301
USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
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1

Do Voters Care About Vice Presidents?

At a campaign rally on his 72nd birthday, Presidential candidate John McCain introduced American voters to the woman some have called a “moose-hunting hockey mom and former mayor of Wasilla, Alaska,” (Katz 2008) as his running mate in the 2008 presidential election. American voters responded with a collective, “who?” and then proceeded to bombard their internet search engines with the name “Sarah Palin” (PR Newswire 2008). Five days later, more than 37 million people sat in front of their televisions where they met the woman they had been speculating about as she delivered an acceptance speech “full of moxie” at the Republican National Convention (McCarthy 2008). The public remained intensely interested in Palin when she followed up her strong Convention performance with lackluster—some would say embarrassing—public appearances and became the target of late night talk show hosts and the writers at *Saturday Night Live*.

There is little doubt Sarah Palin received more attention than vice presidential candidates normally do. Debate rages, however, about just how much she actually mattered in the 2008 Presidential campaign. While some saw McCain’s selection of Palin as “[t]he most fateful decision [he] ever made” (The Richmonder 2008) and claimed she was “probably the most damaging vice-Presidential nominee in American history” (Chait 2010), others pointed out how unfair it is to isolate Palin for the ticket’s loss given McCain’s many challenges in the election (Daniels 2008).

Rating McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin as a vice presidential running mate as the second of the top ten reasons why McCain lost the 2008 Presidential election, Richmond (2008) points to Palin’s failure to assure voters she was capable of serving as vice president, and perhaps eventually president, as the reason many voters turned away from the

ticket. Similarly, Chusid (2008) points out the ways in which Palin alienated Independent voters, ultimately pushing them toward the Obama-Biden ticket. Taking on the question of why economic conditions failed to explain the outcome of the 2008 election as they had in most previous presidential contests, Johnston and Thorson (2009) argue “the answer to this question starts with Sarah Palin.” Noting that “vote intentions were closely tied to Palin’s approval ratings” through most of the campaign, they view Palin’s influence on voters as the factor that most precisely predicted McCain’s electoral support. Given these perspectives, it is perhaps no surprise Richmond (2008) concluded that “Sarah Palin . . . was probably the biggest mistake John McCain made.”

Countering the avalanche of blame targeted at Palin, political scientist James Campbell reminded the public that the bottom of the ticket rarely means much to voters. “We know that [vice presidential candidates] don’t matter and that they don’t have a direct effect on the vote,” he said in an interview early in the 2008 campaign season (Liasson 2008). Recalling Lyndon Johnson’s ability to bring Texas’s valuable electoral votes to the Kennedy ticket, he pointed out that it had been nearly 50 years since a vice presidential nominee actually made a difference in an election. He also reminded listeners of Dan Quayle’s poor rapport with the public as evidence that even when the public takes a negative view of a vice presidential candidate, the ticket still often wins. Empirical research largely supports Campbell’s assertions, with Brox and Cassells (2009) noting how unlikely it was that “Palin had much of an impact on presidential voting” (360) since she failed to influence the votes of women or to help distance her ticket from the legacy of the Bush administration. Even when researchers isolate the ways in which Palin probably did cost McCain votes, they typically conclude that “Palin’s campaign performance did not necessarily change the election outcome” (Elis, Hillygus, and Nie 2010: 589). Estimates suggest that negative voter feelings about Palin cost McCain about 1.6 percentage points on Election Day, but since Obama’s winning margin was seven percentage points, it seems unlikely Palin, alone, caused the Republican loss. So, it is not surprising that some, like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, believe that “in the end nobody votes for vice president, they vote for president” (ABC News 2012).

The countervailing views expressed about Palin’s influence in the 2008 Presidential election highlight a conundrum of modern American presidential politics. Even though many believe vice presidential candidates hold only minor import for most voters, the vice presidential candidates are often treated as if they can play such a meaningful role in voter decision making as to change an election outcome. These

conflicting views remain pervasive because each contains some element of truth. Most of the time vice presidential candidates are nothing more than second fiddles, playing little role in the ultimate decisions voters make; however, there are instances when some vice presidential candidates take center stage and play a very large part in helping voters decide how to cast their ballots. So who cares about these second fiddles and why?

The research presented in this book highlights the variable impact vice presidential candidates of the past 40 years have had on voters and examines the role that the media plays in making some of them more electorally important than others. Throughout, I draw on established research about the important role of information in campaigns, the media's role in conveying this information and priming voters to consider some elements of the campaign more than others, and the ways in which individual-level partisanship can mute these media effects.

What Part Do Second Fiddles Play?

Every four years journalists and academics alike engage in a riveting game of “veepstakes,” attempting to guess the eventual vice presidential nominees on each ticket. While much wild speculation flies about exactly who the eventual nominee will be, the general consensus is that electoral imperatives compel the selection of vice presidential candidates. The actual qualifications of the candidate to serve as president if called upon have traditionally been viewed as inconsequential. The selection of a vice presidential candidate, it is argued, “is far more likely to be based on short-term electoral calculations than on long-term governance considerations” (Sigelman and Wahlbeck 2008: 855). Such was the case in 1988 when George H.W. Bush considered dropping Dan Quayle for actor Clint Eastwood as his running mate for the presidency (Dwyer 2011). Lagging opponent Michael Dukakis by more than 15 points in the polls, Bush seriously, though briefly, considered opting for Eastwood, a Republican mayor, in an effort to stir some voter excitement about the ticket. In fact, the idea that that the person occupying the bottom of the ticket serves as nothing more than an electoral marketing device used to secure votes (Witcover 1992; Sigelman and Wahlbeck 2008) has been so strong that some believe that “[i]f elected, the vice president could look forward to being replaced four years later” when a different vice presidential candidate might prove more electorally beneficial (Nelson 1988: 859).

When it comes to getting elected, presenting voters with a balanced ticket seems to be the driving force behind vice presidential candidate

selection (e.g., Goldstein 1982; Natoli 1985; Nelson 1988a and b; Polsby and Wildavsky 2012; Pomper 1963). “[T]he conventional wisdom is that presidential candidates seek to balance their ticket by choosing a running mate who contributes key qualities that the presidential nominee lacks” (Hiller and Kriner 2008: 402). For instance, an older presidential candidate will choose a younger running mate, a less politically experienced presidential candidate will choose someone with a long and credible political career to join the ticket, or a liberal presidential candidate will seek a moderate, or even conservative, partner. Studies have validated that vice presidential candidates who strike a balance with the presidential candidate on factors such as age, experience, ideology, gender, race, religion, or state or regional affiliation stand a better chance of being asked to join the ticket (Baumgartner 2008; Bryce 1893; Goldstein 1982; Hiller and Kriner 2008; Hurwitz 1980; Mayer 2000; Sigelman and Wahlbeck 1997; Watson and Yon 2006).

While there are any number of potential factors on which a ticket might be balanced, geographical region and home state represent the factors most frequently emphasized by scholars (Dudley and Rapoport 1989; Goldstein 1982; Hiller and Kriner 2008; Witcover 1977). Selecting a running mate from a different region of the country than the presidential candidate, it is argued, can “[shore] up support for the nomination among party factions and [mollify] any lingering intrapartisan divisions after the convention as the critical fall campaign season approach[es]” (Hiller and Kriner 2008: 404; see also Rohde 1991). Offering the bottom of the ticket to a candidate from a populous state holds the promise of securing a good number of precious electoral votes (Adkison 1992). As Sigelman and Wahlbeck (1997) point out, “the temptation to ‘go hunting where the ducks are’ is virtually irresistible for an electorally motivated politician” (857). The 1960 Kennedy-Johnson ticket epitomizes both of these concerns (Hiller and Kriner 2008). Hailing from a Southern state, Johnson offered the opportunity to reach across a long-standing intra-party faction and stem third party challenges from conservative Southern Democrats who were displeased with Kennedy’s nomination. As a bonus, Johnson’s populous home state of Texas offered the possible reward of a large number of valuable electoral votes.

Contrasting the considerable efforts put into forecasting the selection of vice presidential candidates, there is relatively little empirical work on the importance of these candidates once they are named. The scant existing research into the actual impact that vice presidential candidates have on aggregate electoral outcomes offers

mixed findings. While some studies have failed to identify any vice presidential home state advantage, others isolate some minimal effects. Neither Holbrook (1991) nor Dudley and Rappaport (1989) locate any substantial evidence of “the ‘friends and neighbors’ effects in vice presidential candidates’ home state” (Dudley and Rappaport 1989: 540), though the latter did find some effects in small states. And while Campbell (1992) found vice presidential home state to be related to electoral success, this factor was among the weakest of the sixteen predictor variables he studied. Similarly, others have discovered only a small (2-2.5%) “home state bump” in votes that can be attributed to vice presidential candidates (Campbell, Ali, and Jalazai 2006; Garand 1988; Holbrook 1991; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983; Rosenstone 1983).

Vice presidential impact on individual-level vote choice has been just as elusive to capture. There is some evidence that voters’ perceptions of vice presidential candidates do indeed have an impact on vote choice, though it is likely a small one. Adkison (1982) finds that feelings about the bottom of the ticket can affect vote choice, but that the “running mate usually hurts a ticket but does not help it much” (333). Although Frankovic (1984) found that voters who took vice presidential candidates into consideration favored the Mondale-Ferraro ticket, the extremely small impact this had led her to conclude that the vice presidential candidates “mattered only marginally in the public’s final voting decision” (47). Similarly, Wattenberg (1984; 1995) finds a connection between voters’ evaluations of vice presidential candidates and their ultimate vote choices but concludes that the effect is likely a small one affecting only about 0.75 percent of the presidential vote share or less. At the same time, others (Romero 2004) can isolate no connection between voter perceptions of vice presidential candidates and ultimate vote choice. Results such as these have led some to argue that “[t]here is little evidence to suggest that vice presidents add greatly to or detract severely from the popularity of presidential candidates with voters” (Polsby and Wildavsky 2012: 142).

On the whole, scholars tend to simultaneously argue that politicians give great consideration to the electoral significance that vice presidential candidates might play but concede that those at the bottom of the ticket remain little more than afterthoughts in voters’ minds on Election Day. These electoral second fiddles, it seems, must prove worthy to join the orchestra but end up playing only minor parts in the symphony of presidential election campaigns.

When Might Second Fiddles Matter?

Why is it that most vice presidential candidates matter so little to voters while a few of those occupying the bottom of the ticket come to command so much voter attention? In this book, I attempt to explain why vice presidential candidates typically do not have an impact on voters, and yet, why sometimes they do. Relying on an informational theory of elections, I argue that the variable impact of vice presidential candidates can be explained, at least in part, by the varying amounts of information voters have about them. Voters are likely to consider candidates they know better than those they have heard little about. Since voters receive most of their campaign information from the mass media, I focus on the media attention given to these candidates as the key explanatory factor. I argue that heightened media attention to vice presidential candidates during the Presidential campaign primes voters to consider their feelings about these candidates more when making a vote choice. Vice presidential candidates covered more heavily by the media will mean more to voters and thus have a larger impact on their ultimate vote choice.

In the chapters that follow, I investigate the varying impact vice presidential candidates have had on voters in presidential elections over the past four decades. Examining all presidential elections from 1972 to 2008, I illustrate the important role media coverage plays in giving some vice presidential candidates more electoral impact than others. Along the way, I highlight important distinctions with regard to the types of media coverage likely to be most important, as well as the types of voters most likely to be affected by such coverage.

In the next chapter, I take on three main questions. Given the general impression that vice presidential candidates have little electoral impact, I first answer the question of why we should expect vice presidential candidates to affect voter decision making at all. After reviewing arguments about why those at the bottom of the ticket should or should not affect voter decision making, I develop a theory of how media coverage will make some vice presidential candidates more meaningful to voters than others. Second, I approach the question of which voters should be most affected by vice presidential candidates. Given the importance of the media in exposing voters to vice presidential candidates, I explore the differential impact that media portrayals of vice presidential candidates have on partisans and non-partisans. I argue that media messages will most strongly affect voters lacking pre-existing partisan allegiances, and thus these voters will be most likely to react to media portrayals of vice presidential candidates.

Finally, I explore the empirical question of how much vice presidential candidates have actually affected the vote choice of partisan and nonpartisan voters over time. After establishing a measure of vice presidential impact, I review the varied impact of vice presidential candidates from 1972 to 2008.

This measure of vice presidential impact serves as the dependent variable in the analyses that follow, with chapters 3-5 presenting investigations into the causes of the varied impact that vice presidential candidates have had. In chapter 3, I start to unravel the mystery about why some vice presidential candidates matter more to voters than others by asking whether candidates receiving more media coverage have a greater impact on voters than those receiving less media attention. After reviewing the arguments about the importance of campaign information in voter decision making, I draw on media priming research to explain how increased media attention to vice presidential candidates can cause voters to more readily consider their feelings about these candidates when making a vote choice. I then measure the amount of media coverage given to the bottom of the ticket over time, illustrating that some vice presidential candidates have received more media attention than others. Using this measure, I find that vice presidential candidates who draw more (and more intense) media coverage exert a stronger impact on voter decision making.

In chapter 4, I move beyond the sheer amount of media coverage to investigate whether the tone of media portrayals matters. After discussing the research that suggests voters tend to weigh negative information about candidates more heavily than positive information, I develop measures of media negativity and test to see if such coverage leads voters to consider some vice presidential candidates more than others. Somewhat surprisingly, I find that negative coverage of candidates in presidential elections plays little role in accounting for why some vice presidential candidates have mattered more to voters than others. Importantly, however, negative media coverage plays quite a large role in explaining the electoral impact of incumbent vice presidential candidates at reelection time.

In chapter 5, I explore whether media attention to candidates' sociodemographic characteristics seems to account for the impact these candidates have on voters. After reviewing the literature about how voters use such characteristics as information shortcuts, I examine the connection between media coverage of candidates' race, sex, religious preference, and marital status and vice presidential impact on voters. The findings show that when the media focuses more on a vice presidential candidate's sex or religious preference (and to a lesser

degree, his/her marital status), especially in a negative way, voters are more likely to let the candidate affect their vote choice.

Finally, in chapter 6 I ask whether media coverage of vice presidential candidates' personality traits seem to explain why some of these candidates matter more than others to voters. I first review the ways in which job-related personality traits have been shown to influence voting in presidential elections, and then I investigate the connection of media coverage of candidate traits traditionally important to voters and the impact of vice presidential candidates. Findings reveal that while the overall amount of attention the media gives to candidate traits does not increase candidate impact on voters, more negative coverage of two key vice presidential traits (political experience and intelligence) leads voters to consider some candidates more than others when casting a ballot.

I bring all this research together in the concluding chapter where I review key findings and non-findings from the previous chapters, tying them to the existing academic knowledge about presidential elections, the role of the media, and the importance of religion and gender in American politics. I then discuss the historical importance of vice presidential candidates in elections of the past four decades, highlighting the reasons why four vice presidential candidates came to exert a much stronger impact on voters than others. I conclude by speculating about how the findings presented in this book speak to the role vice presidential candidates are likely to play in future elections.