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Origins and evolution of the vice presidential home state advantage

After being elected the first vice president of the United States, John Adams embarked upon a week-long journey from his home in Braintree, Massachusetts, to the nation's then-capital, New York City, on the picturesque spring day of April 13, 1789. The 54-year old Adams, who had contributed so greatly to the government of his state and the birth of a new nation, was treated to a "hero's send-off" by the people of his state and his region – punctuated by cannon salutes, municipal awards, and the gift of a locally manufactured brown broad-cloth inaugural suit – as he traveled ceremoniously with a parade of cavalymen and a forty-carriage caravan along the southwestern route. His neighbors' celebratory spirit bespoke pride and confidence not only in Adams and his achievements, but also in the knowledge that a leader from their own stock would now hold the second-highest office in the nation's new system of government. And so, "All through Massachusetts and Connecticut people lined the road to cheer Adams as one of their own, a New England man" (McCullough 2001, 394).

While surely gratified by such celebrations – he did, after all, have a reputation for inordinate vanity – Adams was considerably less enthusiastic than his fellow New Englanders about the vice presidency. "My country," he famously lamented, "has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived."¹ Indeed, by measure of actual power, it was a rather hollow office. The United States Constitution, ratified by the requisite three-quarters of states the previous summer, invested the vice presidency with minimal formal duties. First, as "President of the Senate," he would cast a vote in the rare event of a tie among senators (Article II, Section 3),² and every four years he would open certificates containing the votes of the various states in the Electoral College (Article II, Section 1). Second, and most significantly, he would "exercise the Office of President of the United States" (Article II, Section 3) under conditions not specified in the Constitution until ratification of the Twenty-fifth Amendment in 1967³ – but understood, at least in subsequent practice, to encompass presidential death or incapacity. The first set of duties demanded little of the vice

president, while the second – invoked on eight occasions⁴ to date, and not for the first time until 1841 – constituted his most significant governmental function. It was with the latter duty in mind that Adams most aptly described the nation's second office: "I am vice president. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 486).

Historical perspective

Whereas the president's power expanded – through evolving constitutional interpretation and executive assertion – from the Washington Administration to Franklin Roosevelt's establishment of "The Modern Presidency," the vice president's power(lessness) remained static and comically underwhelming until the mid- to late-twentieth century. In the meantime, its reputation as a dead-end job for politicians whose only prospect of relevance lay in presidential mortality made the vice presidency the butt of endless jokes – and not least among individuals who actually held the office. Most famous is the story of two brothers, variously attributed to Vice Presidents Thomas Marshall, Alben Barkley, and Hubert Humphrey⁵: "One became a sailor and went to sea; the other became vice president of the United States. Neither has been heard from since." The vice president, Marshall once mused, is like "a man in a cataleptic fit; he cannot speak; he cannot move; he suffers no pain; he is perfectly conscious of all that goes on, but has no part in it" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 486); his chief activity was "to ring the White House bell every morning and ask what is the state of health of the president" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 487). After being selected as Franklin Roosevelt's running mate in 1944, Harry Truman gave a similar, and ultimately ironic, assessment: "The Vice President simply presides over the Senate and sits around hoping for a funeral" (McCullough 1992, 298–299). Death, in fact, has been a recurring theme of vice presidential jokes. When Daniel Webster was offered the Whig Party's vice presidential nomination in 1848, he declined, explaining: "I do not propose to be buried until I am dead" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 490).

Even in recent years, despite more than a half-century of expanding vice presidential power, the vice presidency is often described in similar terms. When asked about the possibility of becoming George W. Bush's running mate in 2000, John McCain scoffed: "The vice president has two duties. One is to enquire daily as to the health of the president, and the other is to attend the funerals of third world dictators. And neither of those do I find an enjoyable exercise."⁶ Even Walter Mondale, who is widely credited with accelerating the expansion of vice presidential power while serving under Jimmy Carter, refused to be considered for the Democratic ticket in 1972 because, he said: "There is no way on earth people can take the vice president of the United States seriously."⁷

The well-known limitations of the office had a profound effect on vice presidential selection, from the earliest years of the republic. In short, the realization that vice presidents would play no consequential role in governing reduced the calculus for selecting a vice presidential candidate to one almost strictly based upon electoral considerations. A vice presidential candidate could appeal to the national electorate, as well as state and regional electorates, on any number of characteristics including experience, vocation, religion, ideology, and so forth. Yet, without doubt, geography was the most important consideration. Whether justified by a sense of shared identity, common interest, or the prospects of energizing state and local party machines, a perception emerged immediately and quite universally that vice presidential candidates' most effective service was to persuade their "friends and neighbors," through reputation or activity, to support the presidential ticket. Voters, it was assumed, would be more responsive to an appeal from "one of our own."⁸ And so, by the early nineteenth century, "the parties had already begun to degrade the vice presidency into a device for geographically balancing the ticket in the election" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 490). Even a century-and-a-half later, "Ticket balancing to unite the party and increase its appeal on election day continued to dominate the selection of vice-presidential candidates" (Milkis and Nelson 2011, 496).

The early republic

A review of vice presidential selections throughout history is instructive in demonstrating the significant, and in some cases seemingly determinative, role of geographic considerations. Even in the first presidential election of 1789, geography appears to have been a predominant factor: "Because Washington, a Virginian, was certain to become President, it was widely agreed that the vice presidency should go to a northerner, and Adams was the leading choice" (McCullough 2001, 392). Washington, who meddled little in the electoral process and did not have the responsibility of choosing a running mate, nonetheless acknowledged this reality. According to a biographer, "Washington remained studiously neutral" about a potential vice president, "saying only that he would probably come from the powerful state of Massachusetts" (Chernow 2010, 551).

Regional balance continued to be a major factor in subsequent vice presidential selections, according to historians. In 1800, with Virginia's Thomas Jefferson heading the Democratic-Republican ticket, a common assumption about the running mate was that "It would have to be a New Yorker, for regional balance." The only "serious question," according to Congressman Albert Gallatin, was which New Yorker it would be – "[Governor George] Clinton or [Senator Aaron] Burr" (Isenberg 2007, 201). Likewise, in 1804, "The selection of Governor George Clinton of New York [to run alongside Jefferson] ... seemed a good maneuver, maintaining a North-South balance" (Ketcham 2000, 433). And in 1812 "[Virginia's James] Madison was glad to have on the ticket

a famous patriot able to draw Northern votes,” in Massachusetts’s Elbridge Gerry (Ketcham 2000, 523).

Broad geographic considerations (e.g., North-South balance) in time gave way to the targeting of a specific battleground state through vice presidential selection. Supreme Court Justice John Catron, writing to fellow Tennessean Andrew Jackson in 1840 to argue for James Polk’s selection as Martin Van Buren’s Democratic running mate, explained: “Our state follows men ... and to a certainty can only be carried by means of a local candidate” (Cole 2004, 357). Four years later, Polk himself made a similar argument to Van Buren, the man he presumed would be the nominee once more in 1844. “The implied message” of his letter to that effect, says biographer Walter R. Borneman (2009, 65), “was that Polk was still the vice presidential candidate Van Buren needed on his ticket if the Democrats were to capture Tennessee’s electoral votes.” After Polk, the “dark horse” candidate, instead won the presidential nomination at that year’s Democratic Convention, some delegates urged their party brethren to target other key states with the vice presidential nomination. “Benjamin Butler suggested that in the interest of harmony – as well as strong Democratic turnout in New York state – the nomination should be offered to Silas Wright,” a US senator from New York (Borneman 2009, 106). Wright declined the nomination, which then was offered to and accepted by the former senator from Pennsylvania, George M. Dallas. This seemed to be a good fit; “Dallas proved acceptable to both factions [of the Democratic Party], and Pennsylvania promised to be a proper geographic balance with Tennessee” (Borneman 2009, 107).

The emergent opposition party, the Whigs, followed suit. Part and parcel with its efforts in each election to balance the delicate North-South cleavage that would eventually ruin the party, Whigs targeted key states outside the presidential candidate’s region through vice presidential selection. In 1852, for instance, Whigs chose former North Carolina Senator William A. Graham as the running mate for Pennsylvania’s General Winfield Scott because, in contrast to a leading rival from Maryland, “Graham hailed from a state with ten, not just eight, electoral votes” that year; thus, “shoring up North Carolina seemed the top priority.” Immediately after Graham’s nomination, a delegate from that state declared the ticket now certain to carry North Carolina by at least 10,000 votes (Holt 1999, 724).

The Republican Party, which soon replaced the Whigs as chief rival to the Democratic Party, was sensitive to geographic concerns as well. Recognizing their limited appeal to southern states (aside from substantial successes in the Reconstruction era, made possible by suffrage limitations that stifled latent Democratic dominance), Republicans focused on balancing the party’s eastern and western power bases while also targeting key electoral states. In 1860 the Republicans ran Hannibal Hamlin for vice president, a “nomination [that] balanced Lincoln, a former Whig from the West, with a former Democrat from the East” (White 2009, 331). Hamlin’s candidacy was, reportedly, intended not

only to provide East-West balance but also to enhance the party's performance in Maine. Because it held elections for Congress and state offices in September, Maine was "considered the 'finger-board' of victory or defeat in that presidential canvass" – with the assumption that a strong performance in the early elections would generate momentum for the presidential vote in November (Waugh 2001, 197).

Post-Reconstruction

Never did the targeting of key electoral states influence vice presidential (or, for that matter, presidential) selection more than in the post-Reconstruction era, when the combination of a solid Democratic South and a Republican-leaning North and West narrowed the electoral map to a small set of states from which both parties sought desperately to extract any conceivable advantage – most conveniently, by selecting a presidential or vice presidential candidate from one of those states. Between the elections of 1876 and 1920, in fact, seventeen of twenty-four major party presidential candidates and seventeen of twenty-four vice presidential candidates (70.8% in each case) came from *only three states*, which also happened to be the most significant electoral battlegrounds in the United States: New York, Ohio, and Indiana.

Historical accounts attest to the primacy of home state considerations in this period of vice presidential selection (and historians' assumptions of a home state advantage). For example:

- 1876 Republican (Hayes-OH/Wheeler-NY): "When the convention selected Congressman William A. Wheeler of New York as its vice-presidential nominee, it ... achieved a balanced ticket that would run well in the crucial states of New York and Ohio" (Hoogenboom 1995, 265).
- 1876 Democratic (Tilden-NY/Hendricks-IN): "His running mate, Thomas A. Hendricks, was from an important, doubtful Midwestern state" (Hoogenboom 1995, 265).
- 1880 Republican (Garfield-OH/Arthur-NY): "It seemed obvious to a good many politicians that the vice-presidential nomination would go to a New Yorker, as it had in 1876, for the state was pivotal in a national election" (Reeves 1975, 178).
- 1880 Democratic (Hancock-PA/English-IN): "With the party's forces apparently united in New York and a native son from Indiana on the ticket, a great many Democrats were convinced they were in a superb position to gain revenge for 'the fraud of 1876'" (Reeves 1975, 187).
- 1888 Democratic (Cleveland-NY/Thurman-OH): "Governor Allen Thurman of Ohio ... did, after all, come from a populous, needed-to-win state. On that basis alone, his being the unanimous choice [of the Convention, for vice president] was understandable" (Brodsky 2000, 223).

- 1892 Democratic (Cleveland-NY/Stevenson-IL): “[I]t was hoped that he [Stevenson] would help the party among the western silverites in general and in Illinois in particular” (Brodsky 2000, 274).
- 1900 Republican (McKinley-OH/Roosevelt-NY): “[Theodore Roosevelt] was popular in New York, which wanted the nomination and was always a hard state for the Republicans to carry in the national campaign” (Leech 1959, 529).
- 1920 Democratic (Cox-OH/Roosevelt-NY): “FDR’s credentials would have placed him on any nominee’s short list [for vice president] ... Above all [he was] a Roosevelt from New York, by far the most populous state in the Union, with forty-five electoral votes, roughly one-fifth of the number required for election” (Smith 2008, 178).

Post-World War II

Prominent historians also have pointed to the assumed vice presidential home state advantage when recounting subsequent vice presidential selections. James MacGregor Burns, the celebrated biographer of Franklin Roosevelt, explains Harry Truman’s selection in 1944 in part by saying: “He was from the Midwest, from a politically doubtful border state” (Burns 1970, 505). Lewis Gould, one of the foremost historians of the American presidency, likewise explains Richard Nixon’s selection as Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate in 1952 by noting: “California’s electoral votes might be crucial in a close election, and Nixon had proved he could carry the state” by winning a US Senate seat there in 1950 (Gould 2003, 330).

In fact, Gould’s (2003) history of the Republican Party, *Grand Old Party*, ridicules several presidential candidates of the later twentieth century for not giving sufficient weight to the vice presidential home state advantage when selecting their running mates. About Barry Goldwater’s selection of New York’s William E. Miller in 1964, Gould writes: “The nominee [Goldwater] would have been better advised to have selected a figure from a border state or the Middle West” (p. 364). As for Bob Dole’s selection by Gerald Ford in 1976, “Dole added little to the Republican chances since Kansas was safely in the GOP column” (p. 410). George H. W. Bush’s selection of Dan Quayle in 1988 was also ill-advised: “Much of the appeal of Quayle ... was cosmetic since Bush was certain to carry Indiana anyway” (p. 443). And Jack Kemp’s selection by Bob Dole in 1996 “brought little electoral appeal to the ticket since Dole had no chance of carrying New York against [President Bill] Clinton” (p. 470).

Over the course of American history, the expectation of a vice presidential home state advantage and its relevance to vice presidential selection had become so ingrained as to appear self-evident. Conventional wisdom dictated that vice presidential candidates should be selected primarily on the basis of electoral

considerations, and that the most effective way to gain an electoral advantage through vice presidential selection was to choose a running mate from a key battleground state whose native appeal would attract otherwise-unsecured electoral votes. To challenge or disregard this perception when choosing a vice presidential candidate seemed rather foolish.

The modern era

The most famous example of a vice presidential home state advantage came in 1960 when Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy selected Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate. As a young senator from Massachusetts confronted by intra-party division over civil rights policy, doubts about his readiness to lead a nation engaged in the Cold War, and suspicions over his Catholic faith, Kennedy made a difficult and, by most historical judgments, brilliant decision in selecting Johnson – then the US Senate’s majority leader and formerly Kennedy’s rival for the presidential nomination.

Johnson’s appeal to Kennedy was multifaceted, to be sure, but no factor attracted more attention then or now than LBJ’s potential to secure electoral votes throughout the South and particularly in his home state of Texas, where opposition to the civil rights policies advanced by Kennedy and the national party threatened to disrupt decades-long Democratic regularity. The electoral opportunity was hardly lost on members of the Kennedy-Johnson campaign. Immediately after Kennedy decided to select Johnson, brother and campaign manager Robert Kennedy directed a campaign adviser “to add up the electoral votes in the states we’re sure of and to add Texas” (Dallek 2003, 271). On the campaign trail and in the press, the candidates and their supporters prominently advertised their “Boston-Austin” alliance. Johnson, for his part, reportedly “was haunted by his fear that Texas would go Republican and that he, on the ticket primarily to ensure his state’s twenty-four electoral votes, would be blamed” (Unger and Unger 1999, 251).

Kennedy’s strategy seemed to work, as he won Texas by the slim but decisive margin of 46,257 votes, or two percentage points. The victory added twenty-four electoral votes to the Democratic column, not enough to decide the election (since Kennedy had a nine-vote electoral majority of 279 without Texas) but important because otherwise Nixon might have pressed vote fraud allegations in Illinois and perhaps challenged the election results. To the vice president-elect’s credit, Democrats held on to a majority of the Old Confederacy states. Lyndon Johnson had done his job: he had delivered Texas, and the South. Such is the judgment of history – as well as Johnson himself. Never one to be accused of modesty, he relayed this update to Kennedy in an election night phone call: “I am carrying Texas and we are doing pretty well in Pennsylvania” (Unger and Unger 1999, 251, emphasis added).

A half-century later, the legacy of the Johnson selection is a curious one. Rather than invigorating the conviction that home state considerations are and should be relevant to vice presidential selection, most often political commentators cite it as a coda to a bygone era of presidential elections, a cautionary note to would-be strategists playing the quadrennial “veepstakes.” Journalists, pundits, and campaign insiders regularly use the Johnson selection to frame a new conventional wisdom: vice presidential candidates used to deliver home states – but those days are over. Examples are so common as to defy exhaustive collection. Here is a sample:

- “Political historians maintain that vice presidential picks rarely matter, pointing to the 1960 election of John Kennedy as the last time the veep candidate – Sen. Lyndon Johnson of Texas – clearly helped pull in a crucial state” (*Christian Science Monitor*, June 21, 2004).⁹
- “From their war rooms, the political pros point out that the last running mate to have any real clout at the ballot box was Lyndon Johnson, who delivered Texas for John Kennedy back in 1960” (*The Economist*, July 8, 2004).¹⁰
- “Geography is not as important as it used to be. The last vice presidential candidate chosen mainly to deliver a state’s electoral votes was Lyndon B. Johnson, and that campaign was in 1960, a year before [Barack] Obama was born” (*Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 2008).¹¹
- “Vice-Presidential choices rarely tip the balance in an election. The last time a Veep played a pivotal role was 1960, when Lyndon Johnson delivered Texas for John F. Kennedy” (*Bloomberg Businessweek*, May 21, 2000).¹²
- “‘1960 was the one year where the vice presidential choice was decisive; Johnson really helped in the south in a tight race,’ says Charlie Cook of the Cook Political Report” (*Washington Monthly*, July/August 1999).¹³
- “Probably Lyndon Johnson was the last time a VP seriously helped carry a state” (Mike DuHaime, former presidential campaign manager for Rudy Giuliani, quoted in *Politico*, August 18, 2011).¹⁴

Bob Ellsworth, who headed Bob Dole’s vice presidential search in 1996, articulated the lessons of the Johnson selection most perceptively. As summarized by Bob Woodward in his book, *The Choice*: “Ellsworth believed that a brilliant pick could be found occasionally, such as John Kennedy’s decision in 1960 to select Senator Lyndon Johnson. Johnson helped carry some key southern states, including his home state of Texas. But such an opportunity for a politically adroit move was rare” (Woodward 1996, 426).

The emergent narrative about vice presidential selection, and the relevance of home state considerations in particular, is a counterintuitive response to the Johnson selection of 1960 and a dramatic departure from the conventional wisdom developed throughout the first century-and-a-half of American presidential

politics. All of which begs two critical questions: (1) what changed?; and, (2) is the perception of a vice presidential home effect *really* dead?

What changed?

Two factors have contributed to increased skepticism about the vice presidential home state advantage and its relevance to vice presidential selection: (1) the expansion of vice presidential power; and, (2) the selection of running mates who did not contribute to the geographic balance of their ticket and/or came from small and non-competitive states.

First and most important is the expansion of vice presidential power since the mid-twentieth century. When and why this expansion took place is a matter of dispute. Some observers trace its starting point to the Eisenhower Administration, when – perhaps inspired by the exigencies of the Cold War and Harry Truman’s sudden and dramatically consequential elevation from vice president to president in 1945 – Richard Nixon was allowed to assume a higher profile in domestic decision-making and international diplomacy as vice president. Reflecting on his role as vice president, Nixon – who, it must be noted, had an interest in portraying his contributions as significant – described his tenure as a turning point:

The vice presidency had traditionally been a political dead end, and most Vice Presidents were old party wheelhorses or regional politicians added to balance the ticket Until Eisenhower completely changed the concept of the office, the Vice President was almost exclusively a ceremonial figure who went to the receptions and dedicated the dams the President didn’t have time for. (Nixon 1978, 104)

Nixon most clearly contributed to the prestige of the vice presidency by earning his party’s presidential nomination in 1960, making him the first sitting vice president to do so since Martin Van Buren in 1836. Hubert Humphrey, the next sitting vice president at the time of a presidential election, also earned his party’s presidential nomination in 1968. Since that time, the only sitting vice president *not* to seek or win his party’s presidential nomination when the incumbent president did not face reelection was Dick Cheney in 2008.¹⁵ The vice presidency’s new function as a stepping stone to the presidency, or at least a presidential nomination, has greatly increased its significance in the modern era.

Most scholars, however, credit Walter Mondale with institutionalizing an active and influential vice presidency. As described by Pika and Maltese (2013, 272), the office “emerged from the shadows during the Carter Administration.” President Jimmy Carter granted Mondale unprecedented access and influence in his administration, providing Mondale with an office in the West Wing of the White House and allowing him daily intelligence briefings and weekly one-on-one lunch meetings. Mondale also played an active role as an administration liaison to Congress, contributing to the passage of national energy legislation

and the Panama Canal treaties (see Gillon 1992). Indeed, whereas “many vice presidents” – including Mondale’s immediate predecessors Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Spiro Agnew, and Gerald Ford – “had previously pursued a more substantial role in policy making, Mondale was unique in the fact that he actually achieved it.”¹⁶

Today, the vice president’s constitutional power remains meager and yet his influence has become significant. Recent presidents have continued to integrate vice presidents into the decision-making and legislative processes, while also using them as high-profile international ambassadors and campaign surrogates. The two most recent vice presidents, Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, bear witness to this expansion of power. Cheney exerted tremendous influence over Bush Administration policies on issues ranging from energy to national security and war strategy. Biden, for his part, has played a key role in shaping the Obama Administration’s domestic policy, most notably on the 2011 debt limit negotiations; and foreign policy, most notably on the war in Afghanistan.¹⁷

The vice president’s expanded role in governance does not, however, mean that running mates are selected on the exclusive or even primary basis of their capacity to govern. Michael Nelson, a preeminent scholar of the presidency, says flatly: “Candidates choose Vice-Presidents based on the sole criterion of how they can help win the election.”¹⁸ While perhaps hyperbolic, this argument is not the same as saying that selections continue, as in times past, to be primarily based upon geography and the healing of intra-party wounds; rather, electoral considerations may encompass a range of concerns among voters about the vice president’s capacity to execute governing functions, advise the president, and succeed the president if necessary.

Milkis and Nelson (2011, 497–498) provide a more nuanced explanation of the vice presidential selection calculus in the modern era:

To meet the new public expectations about vice-presidential competence, most modern presidential candidates have paid considerable attention to experience, ability, and political compatibility in selecting their running mates. Winning votes on election day is still as much the goal as in the days of old-style ticket-balancing. But presidential nominees realize that voters now care more about competence and loyalty – a vice-presidential candidate’s ability to succeed to the presidency and to carry on the departed president’s policies faithfully – than they do about having all regions of the country or factions of the party represented on the ticket.

Indeed, the two most recent presidents – George W. Bush and Barack Obama – selected running mates in Cheney and Biden, respectively, who utterly defied the rules of the past: both came from predictably partisan states with the minimum number of electoral votes. Instead of winning over home state voters, these picks seemed primarily designed to reassure voters *nationwide* about the relatively inexperienced candidates at the top of the ticket: Cheney was a

veteran of Congress as well as a former White House chief of staff and secretary of defense, while Biden was a six-term US senator and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In short, the Cheney and Biden selections addressed major electoral concerns about the presidential candidates that, because of the vice president's expanded role in modern governance, were not and need not be geographic or factional in nature.

The preceding discussion dovetails with the second major change in the politics of vice presidential selection: a series of recent running mates who offered no obvious regional balance or valuable home state targets. Cheney and Biden are only the most recent examples of such selections, not the first ones. In 1992, Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, became the first presidential candidate in more than four decades to select a running mate from a neighboring state – Tennessee's Senator Al Gore.¹⁹ Against all conventional wisdom the Gore selection not only failed to balance the Democratic ticket geographically, but also in terms of age and ideology. Yet it worked; Clinton was elected president in 1992, and then reelected with Gore in 1996.

By breaking the traditional rules of vice presidential selection, and getting away with it, Clinton had set a precedent that could loosen the psychological constraints of ticket-balancing for future presidential candidates. Perhaps emboldened by the Clinton precedent, in 2000 Bush selected in Cheney not just a running mate from a small and safe home state but one who, at the time of Bush's decision, was a fellow legal resident of Texas.²⁰ While all other recent selections have provided geographic balance – aside from Clinton-Gore, only McCain-Palin represented the same US Census region and no running mates have come from the same regional division since 1948 – many have offered little hope of a consequential home state advantage. In 1996, Bob Dole selected Jack Kemp from solidly Democratic New York; in 2000, Gore selected Joe Lieberman from solidly Democratic Connecticut; in 2008, McCain selected Sarah Palin from seemingly-safe Alaska (see Chapter 3 for further discussion); and, again, Cheney in 2000 and Biden in 2008 represented small states sure to vote for the party ticket anyway.

The recent pattern of vice presidential selection does not mean that geography is now considered irrelevant to that process; as we discuss in the next two chapters, there is ample reason to believe that perceptions of a vice presidential home state advantage continue to influence the selection process and campaign strategy more broadly, even in some of the cases just listed. The immediate import of these cases, and particularly the Clinton-Gore ticket, is that they provided precedents for the questioning or outright repudiation of geographic considerations now prevalent in public discussions of the vice presidential selection process. For instance, in 2012 media critic and *Daily Beast* columnist Howard Kurtz wrote: "In the old days, geographic balance was practically a must. But ever since Bill Clinton of Arkansas picked Al Gore of neighboring Tennessee, that seems less important in the media age."²¹ Likewise, in 2008, *Politico* reporter Jonathan Martin wrote: "Regional balance, it seems, no longer matters

in a rapidly homogenizing country. Vice presidents are increasingly picked for reasons other than their ability to deliver their home state or region – as was the case with [John] Edwards, Kemp, and Cheney.”²²

In other words, geography used to be relevant to vice presidential selection, but the rules have changed. This is the new conventional wisdom. Or is it?

Is the perception of a vice presidential home state advantage really dead?

Stuart Rothenberg, author of the Rothenberg Political Report and a prominent political pundit during election seasons, published a provocative column on April 27, 2012, titled “Truth about Mitt Romney’s running mate choice.”²³ The truth referenced in this title was that, according to Rothenberg, vice presidential candidates exert so little influence on voting in presidential elections that then-rampant speculation over the 2012 veepstakes was essentially a waste of time. Citing Dick Cheney’s recent comment that “it’s pretty rare” for a vice presidential candidate to influence the outcome of a presidential election, Rothenberg says the former vice president “was reflecting the views of most serious students of American politics.” Echoing the emergent conventional wisdom summarized in the preceding section of this chapter, Rothenberg explains:

There are, of course, exceptions, including the 1960 presidential race when the selection of Lyndon Johnson probably allowed the Democratic ticket to carry Texas. But the homogenizing of American culture (via television and the Internet) and the increased polarization of the country and ideological purity of the two parties have made it less likely that a running mate can “deliver” his or her state.

In conclusion, Rothenberg ridicules the ongoing veepstakes obsession. “So go ahead and have fun if you enjoy listening to the speculation,” he writes.

Play the VP selection game at cocktail parties or around the kitchen table. Write your comments about the best pick for Romney, or the worst, at the end of articles on the Web. Just remember that the 2012 election is between President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

Rothenberg’s analysis is representative of the prevailing conventional wisdom among political journalists and pundits, not only because it echoes comments detailed earlier in this chapter about the irrelevance of the vice presidential home state advantage, but also because he does not consistently apply the lesson so confidently advanced by those comments. In March 2012, one month before the dismissive column just cited, the *Rothenberg Political Report* featured a column – written by Stuart Rothenberg – titled “Who else for vice president but Marco Rubio?”²⁴ As the then-presumptive nominee of the Republican Party, Rothenberg writes that Mitt Romney would “need to look for the right running mate to help him unify the party and breathe some excitement into the Republican

ticket. In other words, he'll need Florida Sen. Marco Rubio." He goes on to note that "Rubio, of course, isn't the only Republican who could enhance a Romney ticket" – Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal were promising alternatives. How to choose between them? Rothenberg begins with the home state advantage: "Like Jindal, McDonnell comes from a Southern state and should appeal to the party's conservative base. But Virginia is a swing state, unlike Louisiana, which gives the popular McDonnell some extra appeal as a running mate." Advantage McDonnell.

This was not the first time Rothenberg had played the veepstakes or focused on home state considerations in doing so. In 2008 he told CNN that Virginia Governor Tim Kaine "makes a lot of sense" as a running mate for Barack Obama. His explanation: "Virginia is going to be one of the two or three key states for Obama."²⁵

Nor is Rothenberg alone in his contradiction. Chris Cillizza, founder and editor of the *Washington Post* blog "The Fix," authored a post on August 9, 2012, titled "The vice presidential pick is overrated. Here's why."²⁶ After observing that "The political world – up to and including this blog – is consumed at the moment with trying to divine the identity of Mitt Romney's vice presidential pick," Cillizza provides this stark cautionary note: "The simple reality is that the vice presidential pick – viewed through the lens of recent history – has almost no broad influence on the fate of the ticket and, to the extent the VP choice has mattered, it's been in a negative way." As for considerations of a home state or region advantage: "The most common argument for why the vice presidential pick matters is geography. But, there's scant evidence in recent VP picking that geography really matters." In fairness, Cillizza's focus here seems to be on the selection process more than voting behavior. Nonetheless, he labels the vice presidential pick as "overrated," describes the impact of running mates as neutral or negative, and the column includes a photo with the caption: "Lyndon B. Johnson (second from left), the last VP pick that really mattered" – from which a reader clearly draws the conclusion that vice presidential candidates do not deliver home states or regions.

Cillizza does, however, go on to credit Al Gore with delivering not only Tennessee but much of the South twenty years earlier:

The last vice presidential pick who could make a real argument that he helped the presidential nominee win a swing state or one that leaned against his party was Al Gore in 1992. After the Democratic presidential nominee had lost the Volunteer State by 16 points in 1984 and 1988, Bill Clinton and Gore carried it – thanks in part to the popularity of the then Tennessee Senator (and his father) [former Tennessee Senator Al Gore, Sr.].

Indeed, Gore could "lay a solid claim to delivering a region for the presidential nominee," even though Clinton came from the neighboring southern state of Arkansas. This, in itself, is no contradiction to Cillizza's earlier arguments, for he

explains that circumstances have changed dramatically in the subsequent two decades. The first change has been technological, says former George W. Bush campaign adviser and White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, “With communications reaching everywhere for the last two decades, the race is about the presidency, not the vice-presidency.”²⁷ The second change concerns recent precedents in vice presidential selection, detailed earlier in this chapter; citing the selections of Cheney, Lieberman, Edwards, Biden, and Palin, Cillizza concludes that the presidential nominees – and their senior staffs – “grasp the declining importance of geography.” Apparently, the author does as well.

Not so. In 2012, as in previous election years, Cillizza authored a “veepstakes” series for “The Fix” that evaluated and ranked top vice presidential contenders, with the first edition coming even before the Republican presidential nomination was decided. A look at any of these lists reveals Cillizza’s substantial and recurring focus on geographic considerations. For instance, the inaugural edition of *Veepstakes 2012* discusses the strengths and weaknesses of ten potential running mates, usually in three to five sentences.²⁸ Home state considerations are mentioned as pros or cons for five candidates, and regional considerations are mentioned for one. Explaining the credentials of Marco Rubio, who heads the list, Cillizza writes: “He’s from Florida, a major swing state.” Of Bob McDonnell, ranked second: “McDonnell is the popular governor of perhaps the swingiest state, er, Commonwealth in the country.” Meanwhile, Susana Martinez comes from New Mexico, “and the Land of Enchantment is regarded as a swing state this fall;” Paul Ryan “is from a swing state”; and, unfortunately for Chris Christie, “there’s no way that Christie on the ticket delivers New Jersey.”

A similar pattern is found in Cillizza’s 2008 lists.²⁹ For example, Tim Kaine “is also the highest ranking elected official in an emerging battleground state and his popularity coupled with Obama’s appeal to African American voters statewide and white voters in northern Virginia could make the contest for the Commonwealth a barnburner.” Likewise, Tim Pawlenty “has been elected twice in a Democratic-leaning state that is almost certain to be a battleground in the fall.”

An enduring perception

Rothenberg and Cillizza are not unique; rather, they exemplify a profound disconnect common if not pervasive among political commentators between how they characterize the vice presidential home state advantage, in general, and how they apply that knowledge to specific cases. This is not to say that they are dishonest or even wrong in doing so; rather, it is to say that, emphatic declarations to the contrary notwithstanding, the perception of a vice presidential home state advantage is not dead, after all.

In Chapter 2 we provide a more systematic analysis to justify this claim. We begin by analyzing the content of “veepstakes” candidates’ profiles appearing in major media outlets, to gauge journalists’ perception of a vice presidential home state advantage. Then, to determine whether this perception is shared by the individuals most directly affecting vice presidential selection, we turn our attention to the presidential campaign – specifically, to top campaign advisers and the presidential candidates themselves.

Notes

- 1 See: www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/johnadams. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 2 As of 2013, the vice president had cast a tie-breaking vote in the Senate on 244 occasions (Pika and Maltese 2013, 272). Vice President Joe Biden cast no such votes during his first term in office.
- 3 Proposed and ratified in the wake of President Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, the Twenty-fifth Amendment provides for vice presidential succession in cases of the president’s death or removal from office (Section 1), and when the president is declared “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office” (Section 3).
- 4 Or nine occasions, if one counts Gerald Ford’s ascension to the presidency following the resignation of Richard Nixon.
- 5 Milkis and Nelson (2011, 486) attribute the quote to Marshall; Smith (2008, 177–178), to Barkley; and Unger and Unger (1999, 255), to Humphrey. The original source of the joke is uncertain.
- 6 “Meet the Press,” March 3, 2000. Transcript accessed via the Lexis/Nexis database.
- 7 Neal, Steve. 1984. “And now, the race for second place.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 10. Available at: <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1984/06/10/page/73/article/and-now-the-race-for-second-place>. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 8 Perhaps the most telling indicator of this assumption is found in the original draft of the US Constitution. Article II, Section 1 required electors to “vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same state with themselves.” This same requirement was later incorporated into the Twelfth Amendment, which altered the manner in which members of the Electoral College cast ballots for president and vice president. It would seem that even the framers of the Constitution sensed that electors were more inclined to vote for candidates from their home state. To that point, note that the original language of Article II, Section 1, and the Twelfth Amendment, does not prohibit electors in general from voting for presidential and vice presidential candidates from the same state; rather, it prohibits this only when the elector comes from the same state as both candidates.
- 9 See: [www.csmonitor.com/2004/0621/p01s01-uspo.html/\(page\)/3](http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0621/p01s01-uspo.html/(page)/3). Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 10 See: www.economist.com/node/2900114. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 11 See: <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/30/nation/na-veepstakes30>. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 12 See: www.businessweek.com/stories/2000-05-21/despite-all-the-name-dropping-the-veep-short-list-is-short-indeed. Accessed February 23, 2015.

- 13 See: www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/1999/9907.starr.campaign.html. Accessed February 23, 2013.
- 14 See: www.politico.com/news/stories/0811/61616_Page3.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 15 Vice President Joe Biden would become the second example since 1968 if he does not seek or win his party's nomination in 2016, as appears likely at the time of this writing.
- 16 University of Virginia's Miller Center, "American President: A reference resource." See: <http://millercenter.org/president/carter/essays/vicepresident/1829>. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 17 For insight into Biden's role in the former, see Bob Woodward's *The Price of Politics* (2012); for his role in the latter, see Woodward's *Obama's Wars* (2010).
- 18 See: www.businessweek.com/stories/2004-03-03/the-strategy-behind-kerrys-veepstakes. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 19 The last pair of running mates to come from bordering states prior to 1992 was Harry Truman (Missouri) and Alben Barkley (Kentucky), in 1948. Theirs was the first such pairing since 1868, when Ulysses Grant (Ohio) ran with Schuyler Colfax (Indiana).
- 20 Although Cheney mostly grew up in Wyoming and represented that state in the US House of Representatives, by 2000 he was living in Texas and serving as CEO of the Halliburton corporation. The day before he was announced as Bush's running mate, Cheney flew to Wyoming to change his voter registration, thus avoiding a constitutional obstacle that would have prevented Texas electors from voting for both candidates in the Electoral College. An enterprising reporter caught wind of the residency change and broke the news, thus spoiling what Bush had intended to be a surprise announcement.
- 21 See: www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/01/11/mitt-romney-s-dilemma-picking-a-running-mate-if-he-s-the-gop-nominee.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 22 See: www.politico.com/news/stories/0508/10652_Page2.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 23 See: <http://rothenbergpoliticalreport.com/news/article/truth-about-mitt-romneys-running-mate-choice>. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 24 See: <http://rothenbergpoliticalreport.com/news/article/who-else-for-vice-president-but-marco-rubio>. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 25 See: www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/30/dem.veepstakes/. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 26 See: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/the-vice-presidential-pick-is-overrated-heres-why/2012/08/09/ac6942b8-e23d-11e1-a25e-15067bb31849_blog.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 27 See: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/the-vice-presidential-pick-is-overrated-heres-why/2012/08/09/ac6942b8-e23d-11e1-a25e-15067bb31849_blog.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 28 See: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/veepstakes-2012-the-inaugural-edition/2012/03/22/gIQAAbKUS_blog.html. Accessed February 23, 2015.
- 29 See: <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/thefix/the-line/the-friday-line-veepstakes-1.html>. Accessed February 23, 2015.