

How to Pick a Veep: Eight Historical Criteria

By Carl M. Cannon - May 30, 2012

When Mitt Romney chooses a running mate, it will be the first significant command decision the U.S. electorate sees him make. While few Americans will base their vote on it, the process of choosing a running mate is an act that helps define a candidate, stamps an administration, and often leaves its mark on history.

Fourteen vice presidents have eventually become president, including eight who assumed office after the death of a chief executive, and a ninth -- Gerald Ford -- who assumed office after the resignation of a president. Four won election in their own right while serving as vice president, four others won their party's nomination but did not make it to the White House. (Four vice presidents have won Nobel Prizes.) So who should Mitt Romney choose?

In an era in which Republican politicians are obliged to show fealty to the Framers, the latter are precious little help to Romney. The Constitution is utterly silent on the qualifications for vice president. It took the 12th Amendment to figure out how they should be chosen, but even there, the only duties delineated involve presiding over the Senate.

The last two "veep" choices show the pitfalls of selecting someone for this undefined post. Sarah Palin ignited passions at the 2008 GOP convention in Minnesota and saved John McCain from following his gut feeling and picking Joe Lieberman, who is neither a conservative nor a Republican. But McCain barely knew Palin, let alone her proclivity for "going rogue." Then again, perhaps he should have suspected: Her main appeal to McCain was that she was a fellow maverick -- and mavericks are, by definition, difficult to control.

Speaking of which, Joe Biden had established a reputation for loose talk -- and a lot of it -- long before Barack Obama was in public life. Obama knew this, as he spent the better part of a year competing with Biden on the 2008 campaign trail. In the end, he picked someone with whom he felt personally comfortable, although we will have to wait for the written histories of this presidency to know how Obama reacted when Biden dropped the f-bomb at a press conference, mangled a Supreme Court justice's name, proclaimed "jobs" a three-letter word -- and took the lead on gay marriage.

Speaking of marriage, in effect that's what a presidential nominee and vice-presidential running mate have (although there have been divorces). Historical precedent suggests that there are eight different reasons Number Twos are chosen. These reasons can be competing, and are often overlapping. And everyone of them might come into consideration in 2012.

GEOGRAPHY: Balancing the ticket regionally is the oldest of considerations. Originally, that meant balance between North and South, and it's why James Madison of Virginia ran with George Clinton of New York.

Democrats, Whigs, and Federalists practiced this kind of balancing until the Civil War. So did the nascent Republican Party when it burst on the scene in 1856. That year, the Republican ticket was comprised of California's John Fremont and William Dayton of New Jersey. Because they had no presence in the South, Republicans were careful four years later to pair up Illinois' Abraham Lincoln with Hannibal Hamlin of Maine.

One hundred years later, although slavery was no longer the issue, Richard Nixon (California) chose Henry Cabot Lodge (Massachusetts) as his running mate. Massachusetts is often in the geographical balance mix: Bay State Democrats John F. Kennedy and Michael Dukakis chose Texans as running mates in 1960 and 1988, respectively, albeit with different results, and in 2004 John Kerry chose a North Carolinian.

Who would fit the geographic bill for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney? Gov. Bob McDonnell of Virginia, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, and perhaps two Floridians: Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush.

IDEOLOGICAL BALANCE: Geography often has implied ideology as well; certainly this was true in pre-Civil War times, the Jim Crow years, and the civil rights era.

In 1932, the liberal and patrician Franklin Roosevelt chose House Speaker John Nance Garner, a rural conservative lawmaker from Red River County, Texas. "Cactus Jack" is immortalized for describing the vice presidency as "not worth a warm bucket of piss."

Twenty years later, Illinois liberal Democrat Adlai Stevenson chose Alabama conservative (and segregationist) John Sparkman. In the post-civil rights era, this has been a more subtle exercise for both major political parties.

In 1976, Ronald Reagan sought to reassure moderate Republicans that he wasn't some fire-breathing John Bircher by announcing that, if nominated, he'd run with Pennsylvania's Richard Schweiker, who had compiled a liberal-to-moderate voting record in the Senate. The same year, Jimmy Carter tapped Minnesota Democrat Walter Mondale, a liberal force in the Senate, for similar reasons.

After besting "Mr. Republican" (Ohio's Robert Taft), Dwight Eisenhower allowed party leaders to foist the more conservative Richard Nixon on him in 1952. And it's why Bob Dole, who had helped ameliorate some of the effects of the Reagan tax cuts while in the Senate, chose supply-side economics evangelist Jack Kemp in 1996.

In an era of highly polarized and politically pure parties, this is harder. The trick is to pair -- in no particular order -- a fire-breather who will excite the base with a centrist-sounding candidate who has potential appeal to independents. It's harder still for Romney, whose stances on issues have morphed into staunchly right-leaning policy positions, but whom movement conservatives suspect of being a closet moderate.

To "balance" a ticket, he might have to find someone with long-standing conservative cred.

Any number of potential candidates fit this bill, starting with Huckabee and Rick Santorum, the man who finished second to Romney this year. The list includes Rubio and McDonnell, along with New Hampshire Sen. Kelly Ayotte, the Palin-endorsed "Granite Grizzly" of 2010, Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, and Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin.

Under this rubric, Romney probably cannot choose from among an attractive roster of pro-choice Republicans ranging from Condoleezza Rice to Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval.

DOUBLING-DOWN: Sometimes, presidential nominees and their parties want to send the opposition a message: We really mean it. This was the case with Barry Goldwater in 1964, when he chose obscure New York Rep. William E. Miller as his running mate. Bill Miller was a U.S. Army prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, but his main qualifications were that he was one of the few members of Congress as conservative as Goldwater -- and he personally annoyed Lyndon Johnson.

Doubling-down choices are not usually that prosaic. Bill Clinton pledged to be a "different kind of Democrat," and his choice of Al Gore underscored this undertaking. He picked a candidate of his own age, from a neighboring Southern state, and fellow member of the centrist-leaning Democratic Leadership Council. In other words, he chose someone who would most likely carry on his policies if it came to that. Privately, Clinton discussed his feelings of mortality with confidants, feelings he came by honestly because his own father died before he was born.

For Romney, truly doubling down might involve picking former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman, a fellow Mormon and longtime rival considered a "good government" type in the mold of Romney circa 2002. That is unlikely -- the two men don't even like each other -- and it would put religion on the front burner. But Indiana's Mitch Daniels, an uncharismatic, but highly competent governor, might fit this bill nicely.

COMPLEMENTARY CHOICE: Most recent presidential tickets feature an inside-Washington and outside-Washington component. A governor and a senator; a Washington insider and someone with outside-the-Beltway bona fides.

More than that, recent political history contains several examples of nominees tapping someone who filled out perceived gaps in their own résumés: Ronald Reagan lacked foreign policy experience, but George H.W. Bush had been ambassador to China and ran the CIA. Bill Clinton lacked a war record, but Al Gore had been to Vietnam. Barack Obama had only been a U.S. senator for 3½ years when he secured the presidential nomination; Joe Biden had been a senator for 3½ decades.

This was another argument for Richard Nixon in 1952. Although Eisenhower's biography was so sterling he probably could have secured the nomination of either political party, he was utterly new to elective politics. Nixon was the consummate political insider.

So who complements Romney's résumé?

If the concern is that he can be an awkward campaigner, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is as big a people-person as the Republicans have this side of the Mississippi River. So is the affable and capable Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour. Christie also mitigates against the rich-guy rap, as do several others, including Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Marco Rubio. The potential veep who best fits the bill in this regard may be former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a working-class conservative who actually quit the race in August 2011, in part because he didn't want to mortgage his family's future.

There is some evidence that the personal wealth angle matters to Romney. In 2002, the Republican seemingly in line to be the GOP's candidate for lieutenant governor was wealthy Boston businessman Jim Rappaport. Democrats could hardly contain themselves at the prospect and were talking about the "Rolls-Royce" ticket. So Romney turned to state party chairwoman Kerry Healey, a self-starter who'd put herself through Harvard on scholarships and money she earned selling souvenirs on Daytona Beach.

Healey, by the way, is available.

DIVERSITY: In 1968, ethnic diversity meant going beyond the WASP gene pool. Nixon wanted a big-city ethnic and tapped Spiro Agnew, who was of Greek descent. On the Democratic side, Hubert Humphrey liked the idea of a Roman Catholic and chose Edmund Muskie.

That wouldn't cut it today in the pluralism department.

Only two women have been nominated as major party vice presidential candidates in the history of the Republic: Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and Sarah Palin in 2008. No Asians or Latinos. The rest were white males. One African-American has been nominated, and he's the current president, which raises the question of whether the days of a white-male ticket are passé.

True, we've not had a Mormon president, but that probably doesn't cut it, either. In 2008, Obama won among women, young people, blacks, and Latinos. If he does it again, by the same margins, the same result will occur.

So far, when asked about the changing demographics of the electorate, the Romney campaign insists that among all these communities, the real hunger is for a better economy and more job opportunities. That may be true, but appearance and atmospherics count, too, and the Republican Party actually has an array of qualified female and minority office-holders who might fit the bill:

Luis Fortuño, the charismatic governor of Puerto Rico, is quite popular in the island territory -- and he helped Romney win the primary there. New Mexico Gov. Susana Martínez could counter Romney's weakness with

Mexican-Americans, although there would have to be a meeting of the minds on illegal immigration first. ("Self-deport? What the heck does that mean?" Martinez said after Romney asserted in a GOP debate that "self-deportation" was the way to solve the problem of 10 million people living in the United States without papers. "I have no doubt," she added, "[that] Hispanics have been alienated during this campaign.")

Cuban-American Rubio doesn't disagree with Romney's policy positions directly, but he has stressed the need for Republicans to speak to Latino concerns with much more sensitivity. And the mere presence on the ticket of Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire or Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin would force Democrats to modulate their rhetoric about the GOP's supposed "war on women."

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal or South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, both of Indian descent, would be the first Asians on anybody's national ticket.

DOING THE HEAVY LIFTING: Until George W. Bush chose Dick Cheney as his running mate, few presidential scholars conceived of a presidential nominee who would name someone to actually help him govern.

In both 1976 and 1980, Gerald Ford and then Ronald Reagan noodled around with the idea of a Dream Ticket (Ford-Reagan in '76 and Reagan-Ford in '80), but the idea ran aground on the shoals of discussion of a co-presidency, which seemed anathema to the way the White House works.

George W. Bush didn't look at it that way, either before or after taking office. The Bush-Cheney model was the culmination of a trend that started when Harry Truman took over for Franklin Roosevelt -- and was utterly unprepared because FDR hadn't briefed him or allowed him to attend meetings. The modern vice presidency is a powerful office. Walter Mondale, George H.W. Bush, and Al Gore, in particular, had primary responsibility in specific policy areas.

If Romney were to consider this factor, who might he choose?

Mitch Daniels and Chris Christie are popular governors who've wrestled with profound budget shortfalls -- and done so successfully. So did Jeb Bush, who helped begin the process of improving Florida's public schools. Rob Portman is a seasoned Washington hand who ran the White House Office of Management and Budget. Speaking of the federal budget, Paul Ryan has ideas on how to tame it, and would command the respect of Congress -- the Republican side of the aisle, anyway.

RUNNING ALONE: If you slipped sodium pentothal into Mitt Romney's Sanka, he might tell you -- as Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan, Dwight Eisenhower and either of the Roosevelts would have if given truth serum -- that he'd just as soon run alone. A running mate means time and trouble and the potential for mistakes.

Some candidates don't share the spotlight easily. In 1976, Carter pollster Pat Caddell noticed that when Mondale's name was added to the question, Carter picked up two or three percentage points. The candidate was instructed to mention Mondale's name prominently. He agreed -- but could barely bring himself to do it. In a major speech in San Francisco two days before the election, Carter never mentioned Mondale once.

Most presidential nominees think they can do it on their own, and they are usually right. Gerry Ferraro was supposed to help Democrats ride a huge "gender gap" to victory in 1984. She couldn't deliver her own congressional district. Dan Quayle was envisioned as the bridge across a generation gap. He was bogged down by questions about a National Guard billet he secured during the Vietnam War and the perception that he was too callow to be president.

So for some nominees the next best thing to running alone is running with someone bland, seasoned, and safe. Who would that be in 2012? Tim Pawlenty is the name that springs to mind. Pawlenty wouldn't even criticize Romneycare when he was running against the guy. Also, Daniels chose not to run at all, apparently out of concern for his family. Portman certainly knows how to avoid unwanted attention.

HAIL MARY: George Condon of National Journal recently alluded to this category, in the sense of a desperate heave at the end of a football game. It rarely produces a touchdown. It might be called Hail Gerry (or Hail Sarah). It's also what Reagan was trying to do with his clunky Richard Schweiker gambit in '76. It almost never works -- if it's perceived this way.

But one person's "Hail Mary heave" is another's confident downfield touchdown pass.

Is Rubio a stretch after two years in the Senate -- or is he the running mate who gets the Republicans right with Latinos? Ditto for Susana Martínez and Luis Fortuño. What if Portman is chosen to help Republicans carry Ohio, but they don't? Is that a sign of a Hail Mary that failed -- or a weak nominee?

Ron Paul would be a Hail Mary, but if Romney decides to shore up the GOP base with Rick Santorum or Newt Gingrich, would that qualify? Gingrich, who does not lack for confidence, exhibited refreshing candor when asked about his chances of being chosen recently. "Inconceivable," he replied. "Would you pick me as a vice presidential nominee?"

As for the last Republican to take this step, he's never publicly admitted that Sarah Palin was in any way a desperate decision. Leaving that aside, what does he think Romney's criterion should be?

"The absolute most important aspect is if something happened to him, would that person be well qualified to take that place?" John McCain told ABC's Jake Tapper. Asked for his "best advice" on what to look for, McCain added, "I think it's a person that he knows that he could trust."

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