



With Covid-19 dominating the news, it is almost easy to overlook the fact that this is an election year. While there is still much to be determined as far as how voters will safely cast ballots during a pandemic, it appears we do know who the presidential candidates will be: Donald Trump and Joe Biden. What is not yet clear is who the two running mates will be. In one of his debate remarks, Biden indicated that he will choose a woman to run as his vice president. If elected, this would be the first woman to serve as vice president. Political scientists argue that vice presidential candidates rarely swing elections, but that unlike in most of the nation's first two centuries when vice presidents filled few official roles, vice presidents today play critical advisory roles that can greatly enhance the effectiveness of an administration.

Biden recently convened a vice president selection committee to vet the possible running mates for this November's election. [Multiple](#) sites have created [lists](#) of the [women](#) they feel are the most likely nominees. California Senator Kamala Harris, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar all consistently rank high on these lists. If Biden becomes president, his advanced age of 78, as well as the current pandemic, mean that his vice presidential pick may be particularly important. There are several factors that Biden has to consider when choosing a running mate: is this person well qualified to help lead the nation, should the two of them be elected? What is her public service experience? Will this vice president pick complement his own experience (Biden was an attorney before becoming a U.S.

Senator and then vice president to President Barack Obama). Perhaps someone with foreign-service experience, a military background, or local government experience (state governor or legislator, or mayor) would provide Biden with a new and valuable perspective. Will she be more progressive, or more conservative, in her politics than Biden, and therefore appeal in a different way to some voters? Finally, will she, beyond being a woman, add diversity to the Democratic ticket in a way that better mirrors the country's population? Biden, like President Trump, is an older, white, heterosexual man.

Meanwhile, though it is likely that Vice President Mike Pence will be listed on the Republican ticket yet again, it is possible that Trump will choose a different running mate for his second election. As a former U.S. Congressman, Pence brought federal government experience to the 2016 ticket that Trump himself did not possess. Pence's Indiana background meant that he could also help draw midwestern voters for a presidential candidate who hailed from New York. Fewer than ten times in U.S. history has a sitting president replaced his vice president for a second term bid. Some of these had to do with a death or a scandal, but some were calculations to broaden the ticket's voting appeal. In 2020, President Trump may decide he needs to seek a running mate who is a woman and/or a person of color in order to balance Biden's choice and to better represent the diversity of the U.S. population. With party conventions scheduled for late summer, voters should know who tops each ticket's list by then, if not sooner.

The Role of the VP in U.S. History

During the first four elections in the United States, the vice president (VP) was the candidate who won the second highest number of votes. This voting system preceded clear political parties, and resulted in the pairing of President John Adams with Thomas Jefferson as his VP in 1796, despite their considerably different governing philosophies. Adams rarely consulted Jefferson during their four year term. The 12th Amendment, passed in 1804, addressed the fact that distinct political parties had developed and were shaping elections and presidential decision-making. Per the 12th Amendment, the electoral college must vote separately for the president and VP.

The Constitution on the whole has little to say about the duties of the vice president, and many of the jobs the VP has taken on have evolved over time. Initially, the role of the VP was to be a stand-in in case of the death or incapacity of the president, though the Constitution did not originally state whether the VP would actually become president in this case, or simply have the authority to fill-in for the president. The Constitution gives an additional duty to the VP, which is to serve as the tie-breaking vote in the U.S. Senate. (Prior to the mid twentieth century the vice president's office was in the U.S. Capitol alongside the legislative branch, not the White House). With so few

official functions, the office of vice president long had the reputation as being trivial or unimportant, and a frustrating place to be for those who seek influence. John Adams, the first VP, remarked of the office: "My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived...I can do neither good nor evil." A much later vice president likened himself to "standby equipment."**

Shortly after WWII (and at the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union), Congress passed the National Security Act to coordinate government responses to the diplomatic crisis. The National Security Council emerged from this act, with the vice president serving as one of several permanent members alongside the president. The work of the vice president was shifting more toward the executive branch at this point. It became increasingly common for the VP to travel the world and country to represent the president's administration and his policies and agenda. Richard Nixon, while serving as VP to President Dwight Eisenhower, traveled to the Soviet Union in 1959 to meet with that nation's leader. The result was the famous "[kitchen debate](#)" in which Nixon and Khrushchev toured an American kitchen model at a cultural exposition in Moscow and debated the merits of capitalism versus communism. A year earlier, during his visits to Peru and Venezuela, loud and



Soviet Premier Khrushchev and Vice-President Nixon at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959. [Wikimedia](#)

** Joel Goldstein, "The Rising Power of the Modern Vice Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no 3 (2008).

violent protests against him and U.S. Latin American policy, showed the extent to which people around the world accepted the VP as a surrogate for the U.S.

A second constitutional amendment pertaining to the vice president passed in 1965, after the assassination of President John Kennedy. The 25th Amendment clarified that the vice president becomes the actual president in the case of the president's death or inability to serve. The 25th Amendment also allows for the VP and the president's cabinet members to remove the president from office if the president is found to be "unable to discharge the powers and duties" of office. The stipulations in this amendment have yet to be used. Clearly the Constitution gives the VP the potential for considerable power, but it wasn't until the late twentieth century that the office of the VP became more critical to the operations of an administration.



President Jimmy Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale in front of a crowd at the White House, 1979. Library of Congress [image](#).

Political scientists point to President Jimmy Carter's presidency as an important turning point in the role of the vice president. Carter gave his VP, Walter Mondale, an office in the White House, scheduled regular consultation times, and provided ongoing access to the information and files Carter himself used to make policy decisions. President Carter, arguably more than any previous president, treated his VP as a key partner in fulfilling the duties of the executive branch.

Later administrations have followed the Carter-Mondale model. Often, a vice president will take up important issues related to his own interests or expertise, or to lighten the load for the president. Under President George W. Bush, Dick Cheney possessed an unprecedented amount of broad policy-making authority while serving from 2001-2009. Bush and Cheney authorized United States military action in Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Vice President Cheney played such a significant role in shaping the course of U.S. foreign policy that a political scientist likened the Bush white house to a business in which Bush was the chairman of the board while Cheney acted as the chief operating officer. Bush acknowledged Cheney's importance when he announced: "When you're talking to Dick Cheney, you're talking to me. When Dick Cheney's talking, it's me talking." Cheney's authority may be an anomaly, as the two vice presidents since 2009 have taken a more subordinate role to the president. While still lacking much in terms of constitutional powers, the VP is an important figure both domestically and internationally who helps set the tone for an administration. In the past few generations, the extent to which the VP has exhibited competence, integrity, and dedication to the job and country has benefitted or handicapped many a president.

Did you know?

- It was rare until well into the twentieth century for the presidential nominee to choose his running mate. Most often, party leaders chose who they believed to be the most electable, or most politically viable, running mate. Presidents Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt stand out in this era for insisting on particular running mates for at least one of their terms.
- More often than not throughout the [country's history](#), a VP who later becomes president has done so because of the death of the president rather than from an actual nomination and election.

Vice Presidents: In Their Own Words

Classroom activity with Primary Sources

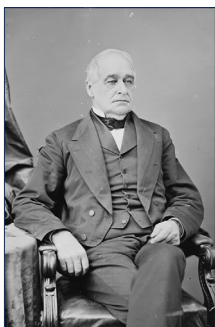
Read through the following quotes from former vice presidents. Choose one vice president on which to do additional in-depth research. Learn about the era in which this vice president lived, where he was from, what prior experience he had before taking office, at least three important historical events that occurred while he was in office, and any notable contributions he made as VP. You will gather this information in preparation for playing the role of this VP during a discussion among multiple VPs. The moderator will ask the questions listed below.

Moderator questions:

- How do you, as a former vice president, view the purpose of your job?
- What were the possibilities and limitations of your job?
- How did your prior experience prepare you for being vice president?
- What did you accomplish, or help the president accomplish, while in office?
- If you could have served in a different era, which would it be, and why?
- Would you recommend this job to others? Why or why not?

Finally, as a class: Reflect on how the role of the vice president has changed over time, taking into account what factors may have caused this change.

Vice Presidents: In Their Own Words



Hannibal Hamlin

Vice President Hannibal Hamlin (1862)

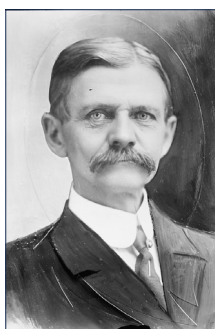
"What can I do? The slow and unsatisfactory movements of the Government do not meet with my approbation, and that is known, and of course I am not consulted at all, nor do I think there is much disposition in any quarter to regard any counsel I may give much if at all."



Theodore Roosevelt

Vice President Theodore Roosevelt (1901)

"I would a great deal rather be anything, say professor of history, than Vice-President."



Thomas Marshall

Vice President Thomas Marshall (1913)

"[I]t has not been the practice for Presidents to throw any of the burdens of their office upon the Vice President. He rules the dignified and at times irascible Senate and reflects upon the inactive character of his job...He has an automobile provided for him...but he has to buy his own tires, gasoline and supplies."



Charles Dawes

Vice President Charles Dawes (date unspecified; served from 1925-1929)

"I should hate to think that the Senate was as tired of me at the beginning of my service as I am of the Senate at the end."

Vice Presidents: In Their Own Words



Spiro Agnew

Vice President Spiro Agnew (date unspecified; served from 1969-1973)

"A little over a week ago, I took a rather unusual step for a Vice President ... I said something."



Walter Mondale

Vice President Walter Mondale (date unspecified; served from 1977-1981)

"We (President Carter and I) understood each other's needs. We respected each other's opinions. We kept each other's confidence. Our relationship in the White House held up under the searing pressure of that place because we entered our offices understanding - perhaps for the first time in the history of those offices - that each of us could do a better job if we maintained the trust of the other."



Al Gore

Vice President Al Gore (1999)

"I've defined my job in exactly the same way for six years now: to do everything I can to help [Bill Clinton] be the best president possible."



Dick Cheney

President George W. Bush on VP Dick Cheney
(date unspecified; served from 2001-2009)

"When you're talking to Dick Cheney, you're talking to me. When Dick Cheney's talking, it's me talking."

Notes on your vice president

Vice Presidents: In Their Own Words ([use this google doc for a fillable form](#))

Vice President:			
Stats	Dates served	President served under	Place of origin
Prior experience			
Important Historical Events			
Contributions as Vice President			

About

About *Teach the Election*


Teach the Election puts the 2020 Election in its historical context with classroom-ready explanations of the electoral process, relevant issues, and suggestions to incorporate the election cycle into the regular curriculum. *Teach the Election* also helps students engage with informational text and primary sources to help them make the evidence-based arguments required by California's Standards.

Teach the Election is a publication of the [California History-Social Science Project](#), a statewide network, headquartered at the University of California, Davis, and dedicated to improving student literacy and learning. Copyright © 2020, Regents of the University of California, Davis campus. All rights reserved.


For more information, visit <http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/programs/election>, or contact the CHSSP Statewide Office.


Contact


The California History-Social Science Project

University of California, Davis 
162 Kerr Hall
One Shields Avenue
Davis, CA 95616


<http://chssp.ucdavis.edu> 

chssp@ucdavis.edu 

530.752.0572 

fax: 530.752.8202 

[www.facebook.com/
californiahistorysocialscienceproject](https://www.facebook.com/californiahistorysocialscienceproject) 

[#tchelect](https://twitter.com/CHSSP_SO) 

www.pinterest.com/CHSSP_SO 