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The Contemporary American Vice Presidency: A School for the Presidency?

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The Contemporary American Vice Presidency: A School for the Presidency?

Karine Prémont

Abstract

The vice presidency is probably the most unappreciated and underestimated institution of American democracy. Often the target of gibes, it has nevertheless undergone a radical transformation over time. Vice presidents are now almost always considered for the presidency. Moreover, since World War II, most of them have had presidential ambitions. What factors account for the fact that the vice-presidency has become a potential breeding ground for future presidents? To answer this question, I initially examine the external changes that have affected the vice-presidential functions. Secondly, I compare four contemporary vice presidents (Nixon, Ford, Mondale and Bush) to determine whether their management style is linked to their presidential prospects. Finally, I discuss other considerations that could explain why the vice presidency is a significant asset for those who seek the presidency.

KEYWORDS: vice presidency, United States, management style, presidency, presidential elections

The Vice Presidency is sort of like the last cookie on the table. Everybody insists he won't take it, but somebody always does (Bill Vaughan).

Introduction

Traditionally viewed as "the most insignificant office ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived" (Walch, 1997: 1), the American vice presidency has come to enjoy greater credibility in the eyes of public and government institutions. However, the importance and influence of the vice president are a recent phenomenon. It was not until Richard Nixon's vice presidency under Dwight Eisenhower that the office stopped being viewed as the end of a career and became a springboard to the presidency (Walch, 1997: 4).

Joel K. Goldstein notes that several socio-political changes since the New Deal have led to a reinvigoration of the vice presidency and to an increase in the roles assumed by its occupant, in particular an increase in the population's expectations of the government and the United States' new international role (Goldstein, 1982: 13). Alvin S. Felzenberg adds other explanatory factors, such as the power of television and the many unforeseen events that can endanger the presidency (assassination attempts, illness, scandals, impeachment) (Felzenberg, 2001). These changes, coupled with important constitutional amendments,¹ have circumscribed the activity spheres of the contemporary vice presidency. These activities fall into three categories: ceremonial duties, which include chairing committees and representing the White House abroad; partisan functions, which encompass acting as liaison between the president and the Congress, engaging in party politics, acting as a spokesperson for the administration, and lobbying; government functions, which basically involve providing administrative support and advice to the president. However, since it is the president who decides the main activities of the vice president, the latter's contribution to American politics is largely dependent on the wishes of the chief executive. As such, the vice presidency "becomes whatever the President wants it to be" (Medina, 1990: 96). In these circumstances, it is understandable that of the seven vice presidents since 1960, only three have reached the country's highest office.²

The few recent analyses of the vice presidency tend to reveal that the occupants of this office have little chance of becoming president. The conclusions of the most important studies can be grouped into four categories. The first category includes authors who argue that it is the actions and words of the exiting

¹ In particular, the 25th amendment (1967), which formalized the replacement of the president by the vice president in the event of death, destitution or incapacity.

² Richard Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert H. Humphrey, Gerald Ford, Walter Mondale, George H. Bush and Al Gore. Nixon, Johnson and Bush were elected to the presidency.

president that influence the vice president's campaign (Murphy and Stuckey, 2002). This approach is not conclusive, however, since the ascendancy of the president is difficult to isolate and quantify. The second category includes authors who argue that it is almost impossible for vice presidents to set themselves apart from their boss and to forge their own political identity (Nelson, 1988). However, this has not prevented some vice presidents from winning presidential elections even though they were criticized for their lack of political personality (George H. Bush, for example). In the third category, we find studies that argue that vice presidents are not chosen for their qualities but for their ability to rally the voters that the president cannot reach, which means that the vice president is not necessarily apt to assume the presidency (Sigelman and Wahlbeck, 1997). Since 1967, however, this argument is less and less applicable given that the vice president is first in line to succeed the president. The fourth category includes studies that argue that the little influence the vice president has on the presidential vote does not encourage the president to give the occupant a significant degree of autonomy or responsibility within the administration (Romero, 2001). Since Nixon, however, there has been a substantial increase in the duties assigned to the vice president. Moreover, a presidential promise of interesting duties and responsibilities appears to have made it easier to recruit competent individuals for this office.

As such, the theories and models underlying these conclusions are not very helpful in helping us understand how and why certain vice presidents go on to become president. Indeed, they occlude the increased importance of the position since the Second World War and the fact that since the 1960s, nine of the eleven vice presidents have attempted to obtain the nomination of their political party for the presidential elections.³ In this light, this article takes a different approach by focusing on the vice president's management style.

Claude Corbo argues that the emergence of a partisan vice presidency and a governmental vice presidency—to the detriment of a ceremonial vice presidency—accounts for the fact that contemporary vice presidents are more likely to accede to the presidency (Corbo, 2004: 247-248). The most recent vice presidents have favored a governmental style and have become candidates for election to the presidency in greater numbers. Is this phenomenon due to the fact that this kind of vice presidency prepares them better to govern than partisan vice presidencies? Governmental vice presidents appear to have a greater advantage over partisan vice presidents. Firstly, their greater political detachment enables them to develop a more specific identity. Secondly, their greater familiarity with the mechanisms of government enables concrete accomplishments on their part. Lastly, having greater autonomy provides them with more occasions to become known, both inside and outside the White House.

³ Only Spiro T. Agnew and Richard Cheney made the effort.

In support of this hypothesis, I compare the work of four contemporary vice presidents and the results of their presidential campaigns. Specifically, I have chosen two partisan vice presidents⁴—Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford—and two governmental vice presidents—Walter Mondale and George H. Bush.⁵ The comparison criteria used were initially suggested by Richard Neustadt in his study of presidential power (Neustadt, 1990) and subsequently by Paul C. Light to study the leadership and influence of vice presidents (Light, 1982). These criteria include: vice-presidential advantages (the relative share of their ceremonial, partisan and governmental activities), public prestige, reputation in government circles, and power of persuasion in dealings with the president. An additional criterion pertaining to the results of presidential election in which the vice president participated helps to draw out the role the vice president played in the campaign's outcome.

While the evidence appears to suggest that governmental vice presidents are closer to the presidency than partisan vice presidents, the analysis and comparison of Nixon, Ford, Mondale and Bush contradicts this hypothesis, inasmuch as only one governmental vice president (Bush) and only one partisan vice president (Nixon) went on to become elected presidents. This observation seems to suggest that there is a greater likelihood for governmental vice presidents to reach the higher office. In fact, management style does not appear to be a clear indicator of the link between good vice-presidential work and access to the presidency. In what follows, I first present a review of my results, which are divided into three main elements: vice-presidential visibility, influence in decisions made by the administration, and particularities of their presidential campaign. Secondly, I examine in greater detail other factors that might help in providing a better assessment of the chances vice presidents have of becoming president.

⁴ Only Nixon and Ford could be studied because neither Agnew nor Dan Quayle ever represented their political party during a presidential election.

⁵ Nelson Rockefeller never received his party's nomination while Cheney has no political ambitions. As for Al Gore, the controversy surrounding his defeat in 2000 still makes it impossible to draw any conclusions about the reasons for this defeat and its relationship to his work as vice president. Lyndon Johnson is the most problematic case. Although Paul C. Light classifies him as a ceremonial vice president, he could also be viewed as a governmental vice president. However, I left him aside because, with the exception of his work on the American space program, his duties were largely those of a ceremonial vice president. Moreover, he was excluded from Kennedy's inner circle. A similar argument applies to Humphrey, whose vice presidency was largely ceremonial in nature.

1. Vice-presidential visibility

Although vice-presidential duties and responsibilities have increased since Mondale, this has not translated into greater public visibility or into increased chances of subsequent election as president. However, we can note that the nature of the vice president's principal duties—partisan or governmental—give different advantages which could just as easily be beneficial as detrimental to a future presidential campaign. Moreover, partisan vice presidents are much more advantageously positioned to obtain real support in the field—which often means a potential electoral base for their own campaign—because of the very nature of their duties. The latter consist mainly in maintaining links with members of Congress, interest groups, and both the grassroots and the leadership of the party.

Partisan vice presidents: Nixon and Ford

It was his partisan activities that made Richard Nixon an important vice president: “Nixon was in a position to command attention as few vice presidents before or since” (Smith, 1997: 83). Nixon illustrated himself the most through his activism for his party, especially during the 1954 mid-term elections. Eisenhower had clearly indicated that he would not participate in his party's election campaign because as the president of all the people “it would be unseemly for him to inject himself into local and state politics and he did not intend to make of the presidency an agency to use in partisan election” (Witcover, 1992: 127). Nixon thus took on this role. His electioneering efforts permitted the Republican Party to do better than had been predicted. Whereas the average mid-term loss for the party in power was 40 seats in the House of Representatives and 4 in the Senate, the Republicans lost only 16 representatives and 2 senators in 1954 (Nixon, 1978: 141). The results of the 1958 mid-term elections, however, were much less stellar: “as the heir apparent...he sought to help his party but not at the expense of his own ambitions. The election was disastrous for Republicans but the campaign helped Nixon consolidate his hold on the party” (Goldwater, 1982: 185).

Nixon's party activism provided him with considerable visibility among voters. Indeed, 82% of American voters could identify him at the end of his first term, and 96% in 1960 (Goldstein, 1982: 258). The number of surveys that gave him the lead for his party's nomination as president testifies to his visibility and his image in the public eye and among Republicans. Between 1957 and 1960, the 19 surveys conducted in this regard put him in first place (Goldstein, 1982: 251). Viewed much more as a politician than a statesman, Nixon won the respect of voters because of his combativeness. Although this behavior made him one of the most controversial Republicans, it also contributed to making him known to the public. It is interesting to note in this regard that since the Nixon vice presidency,

all the holders of this office have been de facto acknowledged as future presidents (Smith, 1997: 85).

Gerald Ford, Nixon's second vice president, was also a partisan vice president. He spent the lion's share of his time defending the integrity of Nixon and his administration during the Watergate period. As vice president, Ford displayed unequivocal loyalty towards Nixon in supporting him against incessant criticism by journalists and Democrats (Cannon, 1997: 135). Accusing Congress of being "and a band of misguided liberals, Ford quickly established himself as a prime defender of Watergate" (Light, 1982: 36). He went so far as to claim in a July 1974 speech: "I can say, from the bottom of my heart, that the president of the United States is innocent" (Light, 1982: 270).

Actually, Ford did not enjoy any particular public recognition during his vice presidency. Firstly, his stubborn defense of Richard Nixon, even in light of the proof of his guilt, prevented him developing a large base of support, all the more so given the fact that he had not been appointed to the office on the basis of precise geographic and demographic considerations (Witcover, 1992: 265). Secondly, Ford only held the office from December 1973 to August 1974, which left him very little time to make a good impression on the public, especially in light of his close involvement in a besieged administration. He had little time to make effective and concrete use of his real qualities, namely, his great familiarity with legislative mechanisms, his good relations with members of Congress, and his immense confidence in the American political system. It could be argued that it was his partisanship, in addition to the exceptional circumstances surrounding his vice presidency, that prevented his vice presidency from becoming known and respected by the voting public. As such, the partisan duties which served as a springboard for Nixon had a catastrophic effect on Ford, who did not have the advantage of serving a president as popular as Eisenhower.

Governmental vice presidents: Mondale and Bush

Governmental vice presidents work more out of the public eye than partisan vice presidents. Their main duties involve policy development or chairmanship of reform committees. It was precisely these governmental duties that made Mondale's vice presidency unique. He enjoyed the unconditional support of his boss and succeeded in bringing the vice presidency out of the shadows. To improve his capacity to act as an advisor and to head off the curtailing of his influence by Carter's staff, Mondale asked for and received permission to place certain of his team members in key positions in the executive (Gillon, 1997: 147). Prior to their inauguration, Carter asked for Mondale's advice regarding the composition of his Cabinet and White House staff, and from time to time "rel[ie]d on him to conduct the final interviews and to confer on final choices" (Witcover,

1992: 299). Mondale was subsequently responsible for planning the White House agenda and supervising the selection of issues to be discussed in Cabinet meetings (Light, 1982: 45). However, activities of this kind do little to contribute to making vice presidents known to the public or party members in terms of their prospects for a future presidential election.

Indeed, even though, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan noted, “Mondale is worth 10 votes to the President in the Senate” (Goldstein, 1982: 180), his public reputation was not particularly interesting despite the fact that he brought about some fundamental changes to the office of the vice presidency. According to a survey by *CBS News* and the *New York Times* in the fall of 1979, 38% of people surveyed had a favorable opinion of Mondale, 19% had an unfavorable opinion, and the balance did not know him well enough to judge his performance (Toner, 2004: 18). Even though Mondale was responsible for creating “a more influential and effective vice presidency, he could not escape its curse” (Gillon, 1997: 152): defending someone else’s policies without losing one’s own political identity, especially when one has presidential ambitions. Although Mondale had a larger national base than Carter at the time he was nominated for the vice presidency, (Cronin and Genovese, 2004: 302) and therefore greater visibility and a certain public recognition, the fact that his work was largely composed of governmental duties (far from the public eye) did not provide him with the votes necessary to win the 1984 presidential election. As such, Mondale’s exceptional vice presidency went unnoticed by the public.

For his part, George H. Bush was probably the governmental vice president who devoted the most time to the partisan duties associated with the vice presidency. Since Bush felt that his personal relationship with Reagan was the predominant consideration for his function, he “did not believe it was the vice president’s role to express differences with the president publicly or for that matter before other members of the administration” (Witcover, 1992: 319). His loyalty was so great that many of his supporters were concerned that he might wind up paying a political price. As well, Bush was viewed as being “uninspiring” by other members of the Republican Party and by election candidates (Toner, 2004: 48).

It was Bush’s governmental accomplishments that had the most significant impact on the Reagan presidency and on the reputation of the vice presidency within the White House. Beyond its walls, however, few people were aware of Bush’s accomplishments. Generally speaking, however, he had a good reputation during his first term among those who knew him, even though many felt that he “would do anything to please his superior” (Witcover, 1992: 319). In late 1982, he came a close second to Reagan as the presidential candidate most preferred by Republicans (Toner, 2004: 49). However, two events undermined his credibility: firstly, his unfortunate comments following his 1994 debate with vice presidential

candidate Geraldine Ferraro to the effect that he had “tried to kick a little ass last night”; and secondly, the Iran-contra affair, which at best left him perceived by the public as guilty by association despite his claims to innocence. Indeed, “for a vice president known to be a major player in international affairs, who daily received the same if not greater intelligence briefings as did Reagan, the scandal made Bush seem an old-style vice president, one who was, to use his own phrase, kept ‘out of the loop’” (Untermeyer, 1997: 165). Nevertheless, even after these two events, his popularity ratings remained interesting. Although only 35% of people had a favorable opinion of Bush at the end of his second term, 59% felt that he was honest, and 42% had faith in his ability to handle problems (Cronin and Genovese, 2004: 306).

The Bush vice presidency was faced with the same problem that confronted Nixon under Eisenhower: he served an extremely popular president, which by reflection gave him good satisfaction ratings, but which made him appear pale and without a political identity in comparison to his boss. Both men went on to become president all the same. Nixon, however, had to wait until 1968—two terms after his vice presidency—while Bush only remained in office for a single term.

We can see that partisan vice presidents have certain advantages enabling them to develop relationships throughout the country, as much with local party leaders as with members of the legislature and lobby groups. They are also able to have regular contact with the public. However, their role as defender of the administration’s policies makes them vulnerable and often obliges them to justify contested policy decisions. While partisan vice presidents are more visible than governmental vice presidents, because of this role, they often incarnate, rightly or wrongly, the weaknesses and problems besetting the administration and the president they serve.

Be it good or bad, vice-presidential reputation appears to favor partisan vice presidents because they are easily identified by the public, which, in turn, results in their election or defeat on their own merits rather than because of their former boss. But does this reputation translate into greater influence over the president and the decision-making process in the White House?

2. Vice-presidential influence

Whereas vice-presidential visibility emerges out of their work in the field—thereby favoring partisan vice presidents—the sway office holders have over their president is directly proportionate to the will of the president. Moreover, it is hard to measure the real weight of vice presidents in the decision-making process. As a Humphrey aide noted, “...you have to distinguish input and influence. Input is the opportunity to have your say. It’s now a basic right in the Vice-Presidency,

thanks to Rockefeller and Mondale. Influence is the ability to sway the President, to affect specific decisions” (Light, 1983-1984: 619). Typically more significant among governmental vice presidents, this influence does not necessarily translate into better presidential election prospects.

Partisan vice presidents: Nixon and Ford

Despite the importance of Nixon’s role in the Eisenhower administration, his power of persuasion and influence over the president was uneven at the best of times. Nixon’s ability to influence was limited: “he did not have an office in the White House, a situation that forced him to make special visits in order to talk with Eisenhower or anyone else based there” (Toner, 2004: 71). Moreover, the tense relations between the two men led to mutual suspicion and mistrust. Indeed, private conversations between Eisenhower and Nixon were rare occurrences (Goldstein, 1982: 168), not to mention generally cold and impersonal (Genovese, 2004: 297). Eisenhower did not hide his disappointment with Nixon’s lack of political maturity (Smith, 1997: 84), and, for his part, Nixon wanted to be more involved and have more responsibilities.

By the end of his second term, it was clear that Nixon’s power of influence was at its lowest ebb. In 1960, Nixon “tried unsuccessfully to persuade administration figures to design more liberal programs regarding civil rights, aid to education, and medical care for the elderly” (Goldstein, 1982: 262). When we examine the Nixon’s political accomplishments and his sway over the president, we can see that he made few decisions. Eisenhower had quickly let it be known that Nixon “would have to take a backseat to other advisors especially to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles” (Toner, 2004: 73).

Given the circumstances of his vice presidency, Ford’s influence over Nixon was completely nonexistent. During his vice presidency, the administration was unproductive because its time was devoted to dealing with the Watergate scandal. Moreover, Nixon reproduced the model he had once served under Eisenhower. As such, the Nixon-Ford relationship was circumstantial: Nixon needed Ford to block impeachment procedures and to calm the public storm. Given these circumstance, Ford had few genuine occasions to influence decision making, all the more so in light of his limited interest in the vice presidency (Light, 1982: 113).

Governmental vice presidents

Goldstein notes that no vice president before Mondale has had as much importance as a presidential advisor. In this regard, all of Mondale’s staff and 80% of Carter’s personnel confirm that the presidential agenda was often influenced by

the vice president (Light, 1983-1984: 621). Carter himself noted his close ties with his vice president and the esteem he felt for him: "I see Fritz [Mondale] 4 or 5 hours a day. There is not a single aspect of my own responsibilities in which Fritz is not intimately associated. He is the only person that I have, with both the substantive knowledge and political stature to whom I can turn over a major assignment" (Goldstein, 1982: 172). This unprecedented advisory role for a vice president, coupled with Carter's vast agenda, enabled Mondale to use his influence to articulate several government policies (Light, 1982: 220). There are many examples of Mondale's influence over Carter. In addition to helping Carter choose some of the Cabinet members (including Joseph Califano, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Bob Bergland, Secretary of Agriculture, Shirley M. Hufstedler, Secretary of Education, Neil E. Goldschmidt, Secretary of Transportation, and Charles Schultze, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors) (Light, 1982: 173), Mondale "was a driving force in the decisions to cancel production of the B-1 bomber, to revise the government brief in the Bakke case and to slow the schedule for submitting tax revision message" (Goldstein, 1982: 173).⁶ Moreover, Mondale pushed Carter to veto a nuclear armament bill in 1978, a veto which was subsequently maintained (Light, 1982: 42). Mondale's influence enabled the Carter administration to save between three and five billion dollars (Toner, 2004: 36).

Whatever influence Mondale had over Carter was due largely to his privileged relationship with him. The closeness of their respective offices, their daily meetings, their weekly lunches, and the integration of their teams and entourages are all factors that contributed to make Mondale "the first [vice president] who regularly exercised substantive policy influence rather than merely an occasional input of ideas. Aides say he moderated certain extreme policies that might otherwise have been announced by the White House" (Cronin and Genovese, 2004: 303). However, Carter and Mondale's relationship was the cause of deep differences in the White House, which often prevented the executive from articulating clear and unified messages (Gillon, 1997: 148). As well, there were several occasions in which Mondale could not influence a decision by Carter, the most striking example of which was with regard to the embargo on wheat from the USSR. Although Mondale had spoken out against this measure, not only did he fail in his attempt to reverse the decision, but he also had to defend it in public. As such, Mondale's influence could be limited both by Carter himself and by the less obvious, but no less real weight of other members of the administration.

⁶ Allan Bakke was a white student who was twice denied admission to the faculty of medicine of a California university in favor of African-American students on the heels of a positive discrimination law and despite the fact that he had better academic grades. Bakke claimed that he was the victim of reverse discrimination.

Because his electoral base was larger and more diversified than Reagan's and because he was devoted and loyal, Bush "enjoyed almost as much influence and probably as good a relationship with Ronald Reagan as Walter Mondale enjoyed with Jimmy Carter" (Cronin and Genovese, 2004: 305). However, his power of persuasion was limited by his inability to express his disagreement with Reagan, by his devotion to the president, by the strong personalities surrounding Reagan, and by Reagan's refusal to see Bush as his rightful successor. For example, Bush was unable to change Reagan's favorable attitude towards enormous income tax reductions (Toner, 2004: 47). In reality, the major obstacle to Bush's power of persuasion lay in the very way the Reagan administration functioned. It "did not really seek input from 'outsiders' who had not been long-time Reagan supporters, especially when it came to economic issues" (Toner, 2004: 73). In this regard, members of Reagan's entourage had doubts about Bush's presence in the White House: not only had he run against Reagan for the Republican nomination, he had also decried Reagan's growth policy as "voodoo economics." As such, his influence was also limited by his opponents in the White House.

It is understandable that a vice president's influence depends on his or her relationship with the president. If it is based on a number of personal and professional affinities with the president and regularly nourished by meetings and discussions, the vice president will be better positioned to influence the president. This capacity for influence appears to be characteristic above all of governmental vice presidents because of the very nature of their attendant duties. The fact that governmental vice presidents directly participate in policy making provides them with greater credibility not only in the eyes of their president, but also in those of the other advisors.

3. Presidential elections

The fortunes of vice presidents who have campaigned for the presidency have been somewhat mixed notwithstanding the fact that their experience, their visibility and their political accomplishments should have given them an advantage over their competitors. In this respect, governmental vice presidents do not appear to have any particular advantage over partisan vice presidents. The reverse is also true, although they receive the nomination of their political party more often.

Partisan vice presidents

In 1960, everything seemed to indicate that Nixon would become president. To begin with, the voting public knew him well and felt that he had the qualities

necessary to govern. Secondly, he was able to begin his campaign without devoting himself to long, costly primaries. Indeed, during his years in the vice presidency, he “had accumulated so many debts from leading Republicans as to make any challenge for the nomination futile” (Goldstein, 1982: 262). However, while 49.5% of American voters voted for Nixon, he was only able to garner 219 Electoral College votes versus 303 for John F. Kennedy (Bernier, 2001: 183). Although Nixon relied on his vice presidential experience throughout the election campaign, several specialists argue that he lost because of three major mistakes and an important unforeseen occurrence. According to Julius Witcover, the first mistake consisted in his attempt to reconcile his defense of Eisenhower’s policies and his promise to bring about change (Witcover, 1992: 86). Nixon’s second error was his choice of Henry Cabot Lodge as running mate. Although he chose Lodge to satisfy Eisenhower, “Lodge turned out to be a political bumbler who cost the Republican ticket more votes than he gained” (Witcover, 1992: 86). Nixon’s third fundamental mistake was to underestimate his opponent John F. Kennedy. In the view of many observers, the famous televised debate on September 26, 1960, in which Nixon appeared to be destabilized, aggressive and poorly prepared, was the turning point in the election campaign. Lastly, his eight years of work as vice president, which had considerably enhanced the image of this office and its holder, was demolished by a spontaneous remark made by Dwight Eisenhower in August of that same year. When asked to give an example of an important initiative by Nixon, Eisenhower replied: “If you give me a week, I might think of one” (Murray and Stuckey, 2002: 46). As a result, Nixon had to wait until 1968 to become president, an office he held until 1974 when he had to resign because of the Watergate scandal. In 1972, Nixon was elected by 60.7% of the voting public, which earned him 520 Electoral College votes, an summit surpassed only by Reagan’s 525 votes in 1984 (Bernier, 2001: 183).

Ford was president for two years before having to deal with the vicissitudes of a presidential election campaign that came on the heels of difficult primaries against Ronald Reagan. Ford’s loss to Jimmy Carter in 1976 has been attributed to three factors. Firstly, his pardon of Richard Nixon only one month following his resignation and Ford’s appointment as president was very poorly viewed by the population. Secondly, “his weak performance in dealing with the economy” (Patrick et al., 2000: 197) sapped his credibility in the eyes of voters. His credibility was fatally weakened by the third element. During a televised debate with Carter, Ford claimed that there was no Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. This monumental gaffe led people to believe that he did not have the intellectual capacity necessary for the presidency of the United States. However, Ford’ defeat was not as catastrophic as had been predicted. Carter won the election with 51% of the popular vote and 297 Electoral College votes versus

48% of the vote and 240 Electoral College votes for Ford (Bernier, 2001: 183). In many respects, this defeat confirmed the accidental nature of the Ford presidency.

Governmental vice presidents: Mondale and Bush

The 1980 election was a disaster for Carter and Mondale. They won only six states and the District of Columbia while the balance went to Reagan. However, this defeat gave Mondale time to prepare for the following election. In 1984, the results were even more disastrous than in 1980. Reagan took the most Electoral College votes in history, that is, 525 versus 13 for Mondale (Bernier, 2001: 183). This resounding defeat has a simple explanation. The former vice president was still associated with an unpopular administration (even four years after he had left the White House) while Reagan was very appreciated after his first term. Steven M. Gillon argues that “a vice president is forced to lose his political identity, to defend policies and programs that are contrary to his own ideology and past positions” (Gillon, 1997: 154). Mondale paid the price for being a second in command under a president who had failed to win a second term.

George H. Bush became the president of the United States in 1988. He won 426 Electoral College votes and 53% of the popular vote versus 111 Electoral College votes and 46% of the popular vote for George Dukakis, his Democratic opponent (Bernier, 2001: 183). Chase Untermeyer argues that the American people elected him not only because they appreciated the accomplishments of the Reagan administration, but also because they felt that his experience as vice president had prepared him well to assume the country’s highest office (1997: 167-68).

The results of the present study do not warrant the isolation of a governmental or a partisan vice presidency as a central and determining factor in making a presidential vice president. Moreover, it would appear that the vice presidency in itself is not sufficient for anyone wanting to become president. A survey of the American population conducted in July 1987 by the *New York Times* and *CBS News* showed that 47% of respondents did not believe that the vice presidency was a good training ground for the presidency (44% believed the opposite). Other factors, such as prior political experience of vice presidents, the president’s popularity, and identification with the political party appear to be more conclusive with regard to explaining how certain vice presidents reach the presidency while other, equally promising ones fail to do so.

4. Other factors influencing vice-presidential prospects

Vice-presidential management style, public visibility, recognition by members of the administration and vice-presidential power of persuasion do not appear to

guarantee the success of presidential ambitions. Moreover, studies of the role of the words and actions of presidents during their former running mate's election campaign, of the difficulties experienced by vice presidents in establishing their own political identity, of the electoral criteria used in choosing a vice president, and identification with the political party appear to be more conclusive with regard to explaining how some vice presidents go on to become president while for others the office appears to be inaccessible.

In this connection, what factors can contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon?

Table 4.1

Partisan and governmental influence factors

| Influence factors | Richard Nixon | Gerald Ford | Walter Mondale | George H. Bush |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Partisan influence factors | | | | |
| Liaison agent | average | great | great | average |
| Spokesperson | average | great | weak | weak |
| Party activist | great | weak | average | average |
| Public recognition | average | weak | average | average |
| Popularity relative to that of the president | weak | n/d | great | average |
| Global portrait | average | average | average | average |
| Governmental influence factors | | | | |
| Relationship with president | weak | weak | great | average |
| Vice president's personnel | weak | weak | great | great |
| Loyalty | weak | great | great | great |
| Visible results | weak | weak | great | average |
| Global portrait | weak | weak | great | average |

The data for Vice Presidents Nixon, Mondale and Bush are from Toner, Brendan (2004). *Trusted Assistants: A look at the Governing and Reelection Roles of the Vice President*, Master's thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, June, [<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-07072004-103231/unrestricted/Thesis.pdf>], p. 76. The data for Vice president Ford are from the author's conclusions.

Prior political experience

Pre-nomination political experience plays an important role in the management style adopted by vice presidents. Indeed, with the exception of Gerald Ford,⁷ the majority of vice presidents with greater political experience (such as Mondale and Bush) adopt the governmental style. This tendency is also observed for all governmental vice presidents. On average they had 21 years of federal or state political experience before becoming vice president.

Of the five governmental vice presidents, only George Bush was subsequently elected to the presidency, although three of them were their party's candidate for the office. Although they are most often chosen by their party, they do not necessarily win the election more often. For their part, partisan vice presidents have an average of six years of experience (if we exclude Ford, and 11 years if he is included).

In light of their prior political experience, it would appear that it is largely the vice presidents, partisan and governmental alike, with the most experience who have the best chance of representing their party in a presidential election. In this regard, their management style during their term(s) as vice president appears to have a negligible impact on the outcome of the election.

Although it does not guaranty vice-presidential success, experience does appear to be an important factor in the choice of management style and how vice presidents are viewed by party members when the time comes to choose a presidential candidate. However, more exhaustive studies of the links between political experience, the vice presidency and presidential election victory are needed before establishing more direct causal links.

Popularity of the vice president's administration

Since the profound changes brought about in the role of the vice president, thanks in particular to the efforts of Nixon and Mondale, it would appear that vice presidents who are part of a popular presidential administration stand a better chance of reaching the presidency. This potential is due to the fact that they were in some ways offering a third term for this same administration. Above and beyond partisan and governmental styles, the question of whether a given vice president will become president is due largely to the image and popularity of his or her boss rather than his or her own competence.

Nixon both benefited from and was disadvantaged by the immense popularity enjoyed by Eisenhower, who was viewed as the hero of a non-partisan

⁷ It needs to be recalled that the choice of Ford to replace Agnew during the Watergate scandal was much more of a strategic and media strategy than one based on political, personal or even electoral grounds.

war (Toner 2004: 76). On the one hand, he benefited from Eisenhower's very high popularity ratings "without many of the normal fluctuations in popularity that are associated with most other presidents" (Toner, 2004: 22). On the other hand, Nixon popularity ratings were much lower. The perception of Nixon's stature had nothing in common with how Eisenhower was viewed.

Ford's 1976 defeat at the hands of Jimmy Carter should not obscure the fact that Ford was abruptly thrust into office without the benefit of a period of time to prepare himself or the traditional, symbolic and ritual transition between two presidents (Abbot, 2005: 629-630). Moreover, Ford inherited the worst possible conditions for a presidential election—the burden of being associated with an administration viewed as corrupt, little ambition for the office, and a decidedly uninspiring image.

Mondale's resounding loss to Reagan in the 1984 elections was a predictable disaster. It was initially foreshadowed by the *Minnesota Massacre* in 1978, during which the Democratic Party lost both Senate seats, the governorship and control of the legislature in Mondale's home state of Minnesota. This mid-term election result was followed by the disastrous defeat of the Carter-Mondale ticket in 1980. Incapable of using his considerable accomplishments as vice president to go on to become president, Mondale is a good example of a vice president's loss of political identity.

Bush's election to the presidency was historic since it was only the second time that an outgoing vice president had been elected to the presidency—the first was Martin Van Buren in 1836 (Untermeyer, 1997: 167). Although Reagan may have felt that Bush did not possess the wherewithal to assume the responsibilities of the presidency, the American people elected him as an expression, among other things, of their satisfaction with the Reagan administration (Untermeyer, 1997: 167-68).

The popularity of the administrations in which both partisan and governmental vice presidents serve is a considerable advantage for those who wish to accede to the country's highest elected office. The comparative analysis of the Nixon, Ford, Mondale and Bush vice presidencies reveals that this aspect is more important than the vice president's management style. However, the vice president's partisan affiliation also needs to be taken into account. In addition to his or her work, visibility and influence and the image of his or her administration, the fact of being a Democrat or a Republican weighs heavily in the balance when voters cast their ballots.

Lastly, the fact that a vice president enjoys as much, if not more, popularity as his or her president, does not systematically constitute an advantage when it comes to running for president. Indeed, although he was much less popular than Eisenhower, Nixon still managed to become president. In contrast,

Mondale, though much more popular than Carter, unequivocally failed in his bid for the presidency.

Identification with the vice president's political party

A 1994 study by Franco Mattei and Herbert F. Weisberg argues that identification with the political party is the most important factor in the success or failure of a vice president's bid for the presidency. The authors observed a very strong correlation in this regard in Humphrey's 1968 defeat and in Bush's 1988 victory (Mattei and Weisberg, 1994). This factor was more important than the former vice president's performance during the election campaign and the popularity enjoyed by his president. As such, voters were guided above all more by their values and ideological orientation during the election than by their satisfaction with the outgoing administration. Moreover, this latter was even less relevant than the candidate's performance during the campaign for all the cases studied here (Humphrey, Ford, Mondale and Bush) (Mattei and Weisberg, 1994: 513).

Overall politico-economic context

Work by Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Tom Rice in the 1980s demonstrated the importance of the American economy, a presidential candidate's political experience, and the popularity of the outgoing president in predicting the outcome of presidential elections (Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1982). Following the development of a model that factored in a candidate's popularity rating six months prior to an election and GDP growth rate by inhabitant, the authors maintained that they could successfully predict final election results (Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1984). A few years later, Lewis-Beck and Richard Nadeau refined this model by including factors making it possible to measure voter beliefs about the state of the economy with the help of the *National Business Index*. The authors argued that the NBI had a clear influence on the election of popular presidential candidates (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001). This research avenue could be developed and adapted to the vice presidency to predict the chances of success of vice presidents who become their political party's candidate for the presidency.

Conclusion: good vice presidents do not make good presidents

In light of the foregoing analysis of vice-presidential management style, we can note that the most radical change in the contemporary vice presidency is fundamentally political in nature. The holders of this office, since Nixon in particular, have given it a largely political function notwithstanding the fact that the Constitution created the vice presidency more to ensure that the electoral

system worked well than for ensuring good government (Goldstein, 1995: 518; Corbo, 2000: A7).⁸ As such, the office of the vice president is neither partisan nor governmental; rather, it is strictly political, inasmuch as its holder is now in a better position to become president, especially if he or she has considerable political experience with Congress, the federal government, or as a state governor. It could be argued that thanks to Nixon, Rockefeller, Mondale, Gore and Cheney, among others, the contemporary American vice presidency amounts to much more in the eyes of the public and even in those of other members of the administration. It is most certainly a springboard to the presidency or at the very least a laboratory for policy making. It remains to be seen how active participation in the executive branch—be it partisan or governmental—can become a surer means of reaching the presidency.

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⁸ Indeed, the vice president's role was essentially to cast the deciding vote in the event of a tie in the Senate.

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