

Isn't there a better way to pick a vice president?

By [Michael Leahy](#), Published: October 14

When the Republican presidential candidates were asked in a recent debate whom among the group they might pick as a vice presidential running mate, most of them responded with generalities, jokes and even criticism of the question.

“Picking a vice president would be something you give a lot of thought to,” intoned former Massachusetts governor [Mitt Romney](#).

“If you could take [Herman Cain](#) and mate him up with [Newt Gingrich](#), I think you would have a couple of really interesting guys to work with,” deadpanned Texas Gov. [Rick Perry](#).

Both Cain and Gingrich dismissed the query — the last one in the two-hour debate — as a mere “game.”

Far from it. Rather, it's one of the most consequential questions a presidential contender can entertain. For all the debates and primaries we hold while selecting a presidential nominee, it is remarkable how comparatively little time is devoted to vetting the bottom of the ticket. Yet eight sitting vice presidents have risen to the Oval Office after the deaths of presidents, and a ninth did so after Richard Nixon's resignation. And since 1945, eight vice presidents have gone on to become their party's nominee for president. A vice president is essentially a president-in-waiting, but Americans use greater scrutiny in selecting federal judges and Cabinet department undersecretaries — all subject to rigorous confirmation processes — than in picking a veep.

Instead, we engage in an odd ritual, a sort of Soviet Party Congress meets the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes: A presidential nominee alone makes the selection, assisted by a few advisers and subject to the festive rubber-stamping of ardent supporters. The gratitude of a newly handpicked veep candidate resembles that of a starry-eyed lottery winner — the selection cloaked in mystery, good fortune and a touch of randomness. The announcement, on the eve of the convention, neatly precludes prolonged deliberation.

There must be a better way.

Americans are ill-served by this closed-door, autocratic custom — arguably the most anti-democratic aberration in an otherwise sound electoral system. Given the clout of the modern vice president, and with the 2012 Republican National Convention still more than 10 months away, perhaps now is the time to reexamine how America's major parties choose a vice presidential nominee, that No. 2 who is always but a tragedy away from being the One.

No drumbeat has accompanied a vice presidential nominee's selection for several generations now. The groundswell for Dick Cheney began and ended with George W. Bush. [The recent tape-recorded disclosures](#) from Jacqueline Kennedy about her assassinated husband's scorn for Lyndon Johnson have renewed old questions about why JFK selected LBJ as his running mate in the first place. Naturally, the answer had its roots in political expediency — and a rushed decision. John Kennedy's need to safeguard Southern votes made the Texan Johnson useful, a view the Kennedy forces pressed in veiled fashion on disgruntled supporters. In the end, the acquiescence of the delegates reflected no real enthusiasm for Johnson, merely

their fealty to the presidential nominee. Three years later, Johnson was president, his ascension owed to an assassin's bullets and to one man's hurried choice.

As traditions go, the current veep selection process is a relatively young one. Franklin Roosevelt (who was a losing veep candidate in 1920) appears to have been the first presidential nominee to seize the power from convention delegates. In 1932, he cut a deal with Democratic rival John Nance Garner, making him the No. 2 (yes, the same Garner who would later describe the office of vice president as "not worth a bucket of warm piss"). Eight years later, en route to his third term, Roosevelt tapped Henry Wallace to replace Garner, and later Harry Truman to succeed Wallace. In only one national convention since has a party chosen a veep without feeling the pressure of a presidential nominee's "recommendation."

The controversy surrounding Arizona Sen. John McCain's selection in 2008 of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate — much of it coming from conservative pundits who questioned her qualifications, in spite of admiration for her among others in the GOP base — was just the latest example of the internal consternation that at times has plagued both parties. The source of such tensions is always the same: a presidential nominee whose choice of a running mate lacks the consent of his party's rank and file.

Nowadays at a convention, no party luminary dares to speak out against the presidential nominee's vice presidential pick. Modern nominees are as omnipotent as Caesars during their coronations ("my vice president" is how Barack Obama frequently referred to his No. 2, before and after selecting Joe Biden).

The last time a veep pick was truly left to delegates in either party was in 1956, when Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson (whose grandfather had been a vice president under Grover Cleveland) stayed out of the fray. At the end of the second ballot, the delegates chose Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee over a rising star, a 39-year-old Massachusetts senator named John Kennedy.

With a little tinkering, the Stevenson model is worth considering today. A presidential nominee wouldn't need to remain neutral. The process could benefit from his or her endorsement of someone, with an understanding that delegates would be free to explore alternatives. What would change is a collective mind-set: In choosing a veep, democracy would be back in fashion.

It stands to reason that, given the trust already invested in the presidential nominee, his or her preferred choice for the No. 2 slot would generally be approved. But at the least, reasonable changes in the process would compel nominees to sell convention delegates on their vice presidential picks. Over time, as the new approach became tradition, even the nominee's supporters wouldn't bother waiting for his or her recommendation. Before the convention began, they would tout the vice president of their dreams while stressing to the convention that their choice did not represent a repudiation of the presidential nominee.

The ensuing veep contest might range from a one-ballot ratification of the presidential nominee's recommendation to a multiple-ballot battle that introduced the nation to a dazzling outsider. But whatever happened, the contest, as in 1956, would be real. This system would increase the chances of obviously unqualified or uninspiring candidates being rejected, without inflicting a fatal wound to the top of the ticket. The defeated would have their moment. The presidential nominee would have a more unified party. And the vice presidential nominee would acquire a new allure, having much the same moral claim to his or her candidacy as the party's standard-bearer.

Of course, leaving the veep choice to the delegates wouldn't guarantee an outstanding candidate. Doubtless, there would be the occasional dud. The list of vice presidents — men freely or nominally chosen by delegates in other eras after boosts from political bosses and presidential nominees — is dotted with undistinguished and forgettable names. And certainly, raw politics might intervene to place a presidential nominee's chief rival on the ticket (politics certainly greased the skids for Ronald Reagan's choice of his

principal primary opponent, George H.W. Bush, in 1980), just as it might propel a magnetic figure soaring out of nowhere.

But, in embracing our democratic values, each party would have a chance to debate a possible veep before allowing the majority to work its will, occasionally over the preference of a presidential nominee.

A democratic process would also invest the vice presidency with greater heft and legitimacy. In the country's earliest days, before the advent of convention-style politics, rivals to presidents often got the No. 2 job, with the office sometimes occupied by giants as a result. About a century later, at the 1900 Republican convention, the camp of incumbent President William McKinley, looking toward a second term, did not want as a running mate a young, insurgent New York governor named Theodore Roosevelt, favored by an unlikely amalgam of Eastern political bosses and reformers. But Roosevelt became the choice and, in little more than a year, the president, after McKinley's assassination.

In modern politics, the alternative to careful deliberation over a veep is a massive post-convention headache. Two of these migraines were Thomas Eagleton and Dan Quayle, a pair of lightly regarded senators who benefited from the belief that a nominee's choice is fiat. With Eagleton, the pressure of time proved ruinous for the man who chose him. In 1972, serious discussions about George McGovern's vice presidential pick didn't begin for his team until 8:30 a.m. on the day of the nominations, according to [Theodore H. White's "The Making of the President 1972."](#)

The McGovern crew, facing a 4 p.m. deadline and receiving a series of private rejections throughout the day from their preferred choices, finally settled on Eagleton, knowing nothing about his bouts with depression that would soon force him off the ticket. In the zoo that was the Democratic National Convention that year, a few gadfly candidates jumped into the vice presidential contest in the final hours, but their bids were never regarded as serious threats.

Just 18 days later, with Democrats reeling and McGovern's advisers furious that Eagleton didn't disclose his medical history, he stepped aside in favor of Sargent Shriver. Already trailing in the race, McGovern never recovered from the fiasco, with many observers regarding the Eagleton pick as a mark of his team's ineptitude. But the greatest shame of 1972 is that the system permitted a presidential nominee to choose a veep candidate alone, and in a matter of hours, without genuine democratic consensus.

In the modern era, a veep pick has been less about the popular will of a party and more about the presumed compatibility with the nominee. In 1988, this ensured convention approval of the little-known Quayle, the surprise choice of George H.W. Bush, who had consulted few Republicans beyond his band of intimates. Despite being skewered by Lloyd Bentsen's "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy" riposte, Quayle inflicted no fatal damage to the Republican ticket, and Bush won easily that November.

But Quayle, having been introduced to the country at the convention as a blank slate, never recovered from America's initial impression of him as a lightweight undeserving of his title. In part, it was the cost of not having a genuine veep contest. By 1992, a segment of Republicans urged his removal from the ticket. Politically, Quayle was already finished, but, the selection process being what it is, Bush got his wish and Quayle stayed on.

By 2008, tradition virtually guaranteed that McCain's veep choice would be affirmed by his convention loyalists. So it mattered not at all that, prior to the eve of Palin's selection, his only contact with her had been at a Republican Governors Association meeting earlier that year. Nor did it seem to alarm his supporters that the McCain team had invested little time vetting her.

It did alarm a pack of conservative pundits who made their disappointment widely known — a reflection

of the unease with Palin among some party stalwarts and among independents who saw her as a barrier to supporting the GOP ticket. The whole controversy might have been avoided had the McCain team been compelled to make a case for her on the convention floor. Perhaps they could have persuasively argued that she was a sublime choice — a charismatic maverick with good instincts and a common touch. The discussion might have made the ticket stronger. And if the convention hadn't bought McCain's argument, it could have settled on a new veep with a greater chance of unifying Republicans.

But ultimately, those are political considerations. It is the national interest that most strongly argues for rethinking the veep nomination process. As the vice presidencies of Al Gore and Cheney keenly demonstrated, America's No. 2 is more powerful than ever, with an independent power base and agenda. We're past the point where we can be complacent with a selection process as lax as it is monarchical, a system dangerously vulnerable to saddling us with the unwanted or the unqualified.

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