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Electing Incumbent VPs

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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Electing Incumbent VPs

How often has the incumbent vice president been elected president?*

It has been said that the greatest measure of a president's success is his ability to get his successor elected. By that standard, there have not been many successful presidents. Only four times in American history has a sitting vice president won a presidential election. That means only 1 in 10 has come into office that way. The last to try, in 2000, was Al Gore, and he narrowly lost to George W. Bush in the Electoral College. Generally, incumbent VPs have been elected after serving with strong, popular predecessors. George H. W. Bush fits the rule. He headed the Republican ticket in 1988 after two terms with Ronald Reagan, and he defeated Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. George H. W. Bush was the only incumbent vice president to move directly into the Oval Office in more than 150 years.



Before Bush the 41st, only three incumbent vice presidents won the presidency. In 1796 John Adams, the first vice president of the United States, was elected after serving two terms under George Washington. Four years later, Thomas Jefferson won after serving as Adams's vice president for a term. Then in 1836 Martin Van Buren, Andrew Jackson's vice president, was elected the 8th president of the United States.

Richard Nixon, by the way, was a vice president who was elected president -- but after an interval of eight years in private life. In 1960, when he was the incumbent VP under Dwight D. Eisenhower, he ran for president against Senator John F. Kennedy and narrowly lost. He ran again in 1968 against Hubert Humphrey and this time won.

The lesson, ironically, is that serving as vice president is usually not the best way to achieve the highest office in the land.

(Question from Cory C. of Minnetonka, Minnesota)

* Full question: In contrast to Dick Cheney, whose age will likely prevent him from ever campaigning for the presidency, if Kerry and Edwards win in 2004 and again in 2008, Edwards will still be young enough -- in his late fifties -- to run in 2012. How often has the incumbent vice president been elected president?