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2008 Election

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2008 Election

Now that the 2004 presidential election is over, what are your thoughts about the wide-open 2008 election? How unusual is that in U.S. history? Are you predicting who the Democratic and Republican nominees might be?

The 2008 election is going to be interesting. As you note, it will be an open presidential election since President George W. Bush cannot run for re-election, and Vice President Dick Cheney will not run for election.

OPEN ELECTIONS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20th CENTURY

In American history, the wide-open presidential race has become uncommon; it is unusual for neither the sitting president nor vice president to be on the ballot. In fact, it has been more than a half century since the last open race for president. The last open race occurred in 1952, when President Harry S. Truman, discouraged by depressingly low approval ratings because of the Korean War, declined to run for re-election; nor did his vice president, Alben Barkley, run. (Perhaps the most memorable thing Barkley ever said was, "The best audience is one that is intelligent, well-educated -- and a little drunk.") In 1952 Republicans Dwight Eisenhower and running mate Richard Nixon won.



Open elections used to be more common. During the first half of the twentieth century, there were four (of 14 elections held during that period). The 1928 election was an open presidential contest. Calvin Coolidge did not seek re-election, nor did Charles Dawes. Republicans Herbert Hoover and running mate Charles Curtis succeeded them.

Prior to that, the 1920 election was an open contest. Woodrow Wilson was too sick to run, and Thomas Marshall did not run either. Republicans Warren Harding and running mate Calvin Coolidge succeeded the Democrats.

The 1908 election was another open contest. Theodore Roosevelt and Charles Fairbanks were not on the ballot. Republicans William Howard Taft and James Sherman succeeded that duo.

Note that in each of the four open elections in the twentieth century, the Republican ticket won.

OPEN ELECTIONS IN THE 19th CENTURY

The first presidential race in U.S. history was technically open, but it was a foregone conclusion that George Washington, the hero of the War for Independence and president of the Constitutional Convention, was a shoo-in. So the 1789 election doesn't really count, nor does the 1792 election in which Washington was unanimously re-elected.

Historically, the first open presidential election occurred in 1808, when the Democratic-Republican James Madison was elected to succeed Thomas Jefferson. Madison had served as Jefferson's secretary of state. But even in this instance a qualification is in order, since Jefferson's vice president, George Clinton, was re-elected to serve as Madison's vice president. (It has happened only twice in U.S. history that a new president would be elected when the vice president would be the same. See yesterday's Ask Gleaves answer to find out which other vice president shares this distinction.)

Now, the first election in U.S. history in which both the office of president and vice president were wide open was 1816. That's when Democratic-Republicans James Monroe and Daniel Tompkins were voted into office.

The next time an open election took place was in the bizarre election of 1824, which saw John Quincy Adams win the White House even though initially he received enough votes neither in the Electoral College nor in the popular vote.

Other open elections in the 19th century occurred in the years before and after the Lincoln administration: in 1844, 1848, 1852, and 1856; and in 1868, 1876, 1884, and 1896. In the nineteenth-century, all told, there were 11 open presidential elections (out of 25 elections) -- in other words, almost half of all elections during the first century of our nation's existence were wide open.

ASSESSMENT

Wide-open elections for president used to be fairly common. The diminution of a once-strong pattern is striking:

- in the 19th century, 11 of 25 presidential elections were wide open;
- in the first half of the 20th century, 4 of 14 presidential elections were wide open;
- in the second half of the 20 century, 0 of 11 presidential elections were wide open.

Obviously the trend over the past half century has been for the party in office to encourage the president to run again or to groom the vice president to run for the top spot. Gone are the days, it seems, when a Polk (1845-1849) or a Coolidge (1923-1929), having achieved all their major goals, would be content to serve as president only one term.

Another trend emerges when one inquires which party tends to do better in open elections (counting from 1856, when Republicans first appeared on the national scene to compete against Democrats). In sum:

- In the second half of the 19th century, the Republican ticket won three of five open elections.
- In the first half of the 20th century, the Republican ticket won four of four open elections.
- In all, since 1856, Republicans have won seven of nine open presidential contests against Democrats.

Regarding who might run in 2008, I'd humbly submit that it's a bit early to be making predictions -- I am going to stick to history, not prophesy. But watch to see if 2008 will be the first time since 1976 that a person named Bush or Dole will not be on the Republican ticket.

Regarding the Democrats in 2008, see if they don't look south of the Mason-Dixon line for their candidate. As presidential scholar Mark Rozell observes, "In the past 40 years, the Democrats have won the White House only with a Southern Baptist at the head of the ticket.... For 2008, the lesson for the Democrats seems clear: In seeking a party nominee, go south. Even more so, go south to a candidate with credibility and appeal among the region's heavy doses of evangelical and pro-military voters."^[1]

Stay tuned.
(Question from Larry G. of Las Vegas, Nevada)

[1] Mark J. Rozell, "Look to the South for a Nominee," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2004, p. A8.