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Bi-Partisan Ticket?

How often does a presidential candidate choose a running mate from a different party?*

You tap into a topic with a colorful history. In our early elections, candidates for president and vice president did not run separately but competed with each other on the same ballot. The president was the candidate with the most votes in the electoral college, the vice president the candidate with the second most votes. Theoretically this arrangement would work best in a republic without parties.

The development of political parties made the same-ballot system unwieldy. Problems were already apparent by the nation's third presidential election in 1796, when the great unifier, George Washington, was no longer in the picture. As spelled out in Amendment II, electors in 1796 were presented with a single ballot. John Adams received the most votes and became president; he was a Federalist. Thomas Jefferson received the second most votes and became Adams's vice president; he was a Democratic-Republican. Adams and Jefferson at that point were not friends -- they were rivals who did not work well together.



It gets worse. Four years later, in the election of 1800, something happened in U.S. history that has not happened since: the sitting vice president - Jefferson -- challenged the sitting president -- Adams. It was the most dramatic showdown between the first two parties in American history. It got even messier because Aaron Burr was also on the ballot. Before the election, Burr had agreed to be Jefferson's vice president. But when the electoral college votes were counted, it turned out that Burr and Jefferson were tied for first place. (Adams trailed both.) Burr changed his mind and decided not to withdraw from the race. His intransigence forced the election into the House of Representatives and, 36 ballots later, Jefferson was selected to be the nation's third president.

That's when the founding fathers began thinking seriously about amending Article II of the Constitution, which governed how presidents and vice presidents were chosen. The Twelfth Amendment was proposed and ratified before the next election in 1804 to change the way Americans select their two highest elected officials. Henceforward electors would vote for presidents and vice presidents on separate ballots.

Once parties evolved and started channeling the ambitions of politicians, the president and vice president logically came from the same party. But there are two notable exceptions -- notable because in each case, when the president died, the vice president who succeeded him had a spectacularly unhappy presidency.

In 1840, when the Whig candidate William Henry Harrison ran for president, he enticed a Democrat, John Tyler, to join the ticket. Their campaign slogan was one of the most memorable in American history: "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." Tyler technically switched parties and became a Whig to run on the ticket. But when Harrison died a month after his inauguration, Tyler had no friends. The Democrats didn't trust him because he was a turncoat. The Whigs didn't trust him because he had been with them for too short a time. Tyler was a man without a party. There were the makings of a constitutional crisis because the Whigs tried to keep him from assuming the presidency. The Whigs' fallback position was that if he assumed the presidency, he was not to be recognized as having the authority to do anything significant. So Tyler was regarded as the accidental president. At one point the hapless chief executive was besieged in the White House by a mob that threatened to lynch him. Tyler had to arm White House servants for protection.

In 1864 the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, dumped his first-term vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, and asked the Democrat Andrew Johnson to be his running mate. The Rail Splitter had been deeply impressed with Johnson's efforts to keep Tennessee from seceding prior to the Civil War, often at great risk of life because of the hostile crowds Johnson had faced. Johnson carried a pistol and used it more than once. Johnson assumed the presidency only 5 weeks after Lincoln's second inauguration. He was disliked by Radical Republicans in Congress and would be the first president in U.S. history to be impeached.

So it is not unheard of for a presidential candidate to look outside his party for a running mate who can help bag electoral votes in November. It happened in 1840 when William Henry Harrison ran with John Tyler, and in 1864 when Lincoln ran with Andrew Johnson. But it is rare -- maybe because the historical record is not encouraging. Perhaps Senator McCain was aware of 1840 and 1864 when he asked not to be considered as a vice presidential running mate on the Kerry ticket.

One final consideration may help explain why the Kerry campaign would consider Senator McCain. Many vice presidents had prior experience in the U.S. Senate or House before being tapped to be the running mate. It makes sense to seek a vice presidential nominee who has served on Capitol Hill since the constitutional duties of the VP are to preside over the Senate and to cast tie-breaking votes.

Here, according to www.vicepresidents.com, are more details about the congressional background of vice presidential nominees in the twentieth century:

- From 1928 to the present, (73 years and 18 elections), only two Democratic Vice Presidential nominees did not serve in Congress at any point in his or her career. (Henry Wallace, 1940, and Sargent Shriver, 1972.) All other nominees once served in either the U.S. Senate or House.

- From 1940 to the present, (61 years and 15 elections), only two Republican Vice Presidential nominees did not serve in Congress at any point in his or her career. (Earl Warren, 1948, and Spiro Agnew, 1968 and 1972.) All other nominees once served in either the U.S. Senate or House.

- From 1944 to the present, (56 years and 14 elections) only one Democratic Vice Presidential nominee did not serve in Congress at any point in his or her career. (Sargent Shriver, 1972, a replacement Vice President for Thomas Eagleton.) All other nominees once served in either the U.S. Senate or House.

(Question from Gina S. of Albuquerque, New Mexico)

* Full question: When newspapers recently reported that the Kerry campaign was considering Sen. John McCain as a vice presidential running mate, I was surprised. How often does a presidential candidate choose a running mate from a different party?