

Romney's Running Mate Dilemma

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During the lull between the conclusion of the Republican nominating process and the late summer political conventions, the story which is certain to generate a lot of speculation and attention will be the question of who Mitt Romney will choose as his running mate. For any presidential nominee vice-presidential selection is important because it is the first major decision made as nominee and occurs under an enormous amount of scrutiny. Moreover, if the nominee goes on to become president, that running mate generally goes on to play a significant role in the new administration.

In 2008 Republican nominee John McCain's choice of running mate was the biggest, most memorable, and probably worst, event of his entire campaign. While losing running mates are usually quickly forgotten -- not many people remember who ran with Bob Dole in 1996 or Al Gore in 2000 -- it is likely that a trivia question for the year 2020 will be "who was Sarah Palin's running mate." Romney, therefore, is in a comfortable position as he would have to work hard to make a worse running mate choice than McCain in 2008.

One of Palin's most significant contributions to the Republican Party was making ignorance a point of pride. There have been other Republican candidates for national office, for example Dan Quayle or George W. Bush, who were widely viewed as being intellectual lightweights, but these candidates, and their party, sought to combat this perception. Palin, on the other hand, almost seemed to boast about her lack of knowledge regarding most major issues. This attitude has permeated much of the Obama era GOP as prominent Republican politicians such as Allen West, Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain or Rick Perry have not allowed themselves to be burdened by much knowledge of anything. This approach helped mobilize a radical and angry base in the first years of the Obama presidency, but once the presidential race began those candidates who boasted a Palin-type ignorance quickly fell behind in the Republican nominating process.

Romney is, in this regard, different than Palin. Romney makes an impression of being competent and intelligent, although usually not sensitive, caring or able to relate to ordinary Americans. In this respect the Republican nominee represents a departure for the Republican trend of the last few years. It is a sad reflection on the state of the Republican Party, but nonetheless true, that nominating somebody with a basic knowledge of the economy, foreign policy and history was not a given. Romney's knowledge and intelligence is probably one of the reasons he is still in a close race with President Obama.

Romney, however, can squander all that with the wrong vice-presidential choice. Nominees often look for running mates whose presence on the ticket ameliorates one of their electoral shortcomings. Barack Obama chose Joseph Biden because of Biden's ample experience, particularly on foreign policy issues. John Kerry chose John Edwards to create geographical

balance on the ticket. McCain chose Palin presumably because he wanted a young candidate who, unlike McCain, was not a Washington insider. Romney will probably need to balance the ticket as well by nominating somebody who enjoys more trust and confidence than Romney does from the Party's conservative base.

While there are numerous potential running mates who can provide ideological balance to the ticket, Romney cannot make the same mistake McCain did and choose somebody who will alienate swing voters, not because of his or her ideology, but because of his or her ignorance. The first question Romney should ask about any potential running mate is whether or not that candidate is able to speak intelligently and fluently about the major issues. This should not be a difficult standard, but at least three of the party's major candidates for the nomination, Cain, Bachmann and Perry did not meet this standard. This will be a difficult needle to thread for Romney because a large proportion of his party, appears to view ignorance as an important and desirable trait in a politician, often mistaking ignorance for toughness. Romney will have to find a way to win these voters through finding a running mate who appeals to their conservatism, but not their ignorance.

By moving his party further away from the celebration of ignorance which has been a significant part of the gestalt of the Republican Party in the last few years, Romney would not only increase his chance of winning, but perhaps even elevate the political debate. However, if Romney gives in to the temptation to choose a running mate whose right wing politics are buttressed by ignorance and the inability to speak about the issues in a serious way, he will undermine his biggest strength.