

Running Mates and the New Electoral Map

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Speculation about potential running mates is one of the more entertaining and benign rituals in American presidential campaigns. There is something intriguing and entertaining about the process during which a nominee weighs various strategic, political and personal considerations before choosing a running mate. Names are floated, candidates are interviewed and vetted, a short list is often made public, and all the while the pundits, politicians and kibitzers have a great time discussing possibilities, arguing for a candidate, and imagining possible tickets.

We are in the midst of this process now, but 2008 is a little different and a little more exciting than most years because for each candidate, the choice of a running mate will, at least, partially signal their vision for their party. This year, vice-presidential nominations are part of a broader endeavor by each candidate to frame the electoral map and even to change the direction of their party.

The campaigns have an unusual opportunity to define the playing field on which they will play because there are a higher number of potential battleground states, spread over more parts of the country than in recent elections. For example, a campaign between an Obama-Strickland ticket and a McCain-Jindal ticket would be decided in the rust belt, but an Obama-Kaine ticket against a McCain-Whitman ticket might make the Republicans competitive in important parts of the Northeast which had previously been Democratic strongholds while making the Democrats competitive in southeastern states that were never in doubt for George W. Bush in his last two elections. An Obama-Salazar ticket would give the Democrats a chance to make real gains in the west.

The multitude of possibilities are a striking contrast to the last two presidential elections, 2000 and 2004, which were more similar than any two elections in American history. Not only did the overall vote percentages barely change between the two elections, as Bush got an increase in the proportion of votes of about 3% between 2000 and 2004 while Kerry got .09% less in 2004 than Gore did in 2000, but 48 out of 51 states, including DC, voted for the same party in 2004 as they had in 2000. In 2004, John Kerry knew many months before the election what states would be the key battlegrounds and had to choose a running mate accordingly. There was almost nothing Kerry could have done, or any running mate he could have chosen which would have changed the identities of the key swing states in 2004.

This election is different as both parties are at something of crossroads. Obama and McCain's choice of running mates, while unlikely to be the decisive factor in this election, may begin to tell us something more important about the future of both the Democratic and Republican parties. The formulas that both parties have relied upon in recent years, for the Republicans a coalition of wealthy voters concerned about low taxes and opposed to social support programs, military hawks and less affluent social conservatives; and for the Democrats, African Americans, white

liberals, including Jews and gays and lesbians, and a slice of the blue collar white ethnic vote and Latinos, are no longer driving presidential politics.

It will be difficult for either party to put their usual coalition together. Moreover, it could be much more for each party fruitful to rethink their approach. John McCain, in addition to starting in a difficult position due to the unpopularity of President Bush, would benefit from recognizing that social conservatives and Christian evangelicals who are suffering, even more than usual, economically and are increasingly upset with the war in Iraq and McCain's plans for remaining there, as well as McCain's lukewarm support for issues close to their hearts, are no longer a lock for the Republican Party. Similarly, there are many fiscal conservatives who may be concerned about the spending policies of the current administration and less certain to vote for the Republican candidate. For McCain, the brighter side of the picture is that he is not viewed as socially conservative, intolerant or mean; and this may bring northerners who are social liberals, but conservative on foreign policy, for example, into the Republican Party.

For Obama, at least now, the picture is much brighter. Public perceptions of Bush's mishandling of both domestic and foreign policy would make 2008 a good year for any Democrat, but because of his political and communication skills Obama has an opportunity to remake the Democratic presidential coalition for at least a few elections to come. Obama is not only strong among the two most important parts of the Democratic base, African Americans and white liberals, but he has demonstrated an ability to appeal to groups that are not usually part of the Democratic coalition such as libertarian minded westerners, southern knowledge workers, as well as to weaker Democratic constituencies such as, according to recent polls Latinos. Additionally, reports of Obama's poor standing among white women who supported Clinton in the primary seem to be somewhat exaggerated. The bad news for Obama is that he seems to continue to have trouble among working class white voters, a key swing constituency. 2008 may be the year when the Democrats recognize this and stop making efforts to win back the Reagan Democrats, a group that has not supported the party consistently since before Reagan became governor of California, a central part of their strategy.

Because of the state of flux with regards to both party's coalitions, the unpopularity of the current administration and the breadth of potential growth areas for each candidate, both parties have an unusual opportunity to develop strategies for reaching 270 electoral votes. The decisions made in this regard will have longer term influences on presidential politics as well as on governance. The candidate who figures this out first and stakes out the territory for himself and his party will have an advantage, the party that tries to rerun the 2000 or 2004 election will find that they are running in a very different electoral context now, and will lose.