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# Why the Kaine vs. Pence Vice Presidential Debate Matters

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## THE CONVERSATION

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### Why the Kaine vs. Pence vice presidential debate matters

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Preparations are underway for the vice presidential debate at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. REUTERS/Rick Wilking

Tim Kaine and Mike Pence both have been described as boring.

Many Americans still don't know who they are, and they share their parties' tickets with two of the most controversial and unpopular presidential candidates in modern political history. So, it's a safe bet that their first and only debate on Tuesday night will not draw the record-setting ratings of last week's first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – or even come close.

With the possible exception of 2008, when Joe Biden and Sarah Palin were vice presidential candidates, running mates simply are not the focal point of presidential elections. Their effect on vote choice is minimal. Research in our recently published book, "The VP Advantage: How Running Mates Influence Home State Voting in Presidential Elections," shows that running mates generally do not influence voting in their home state, let alone at the national level. Even in the short term, Gallup polling data suggest that vice presidential debates rarely change voters' opinions.

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So, why take these candidates seriously?

## **Vice presidents matter**

First, consider the vice president's constitutional role. In the event of a president's impeachment, resignation, death or incapacitation, the Constitution – under **Article I, Section 3**, and the **25th Amendment** – stipulates that the vice president shall assume the role of president. In U.S. history, the vice president has ascended to the presidency **nine times** – eight times due to the death of the president, and once due to resignation. That's one out of every five vice presidents.

And let's not forget that the 25th Amendment allows the vice president to temporarily assume the power of the presidency in cases of presidential incapacitation. This provision has been invoked on three occasions: **George H.W. Bush** served as acting president once, and **Dick Cheney** twice, for mere hours while presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, respectively, underwent medical procedures. The possibility of presidential succession may weigh more heavily on some voters in 2016, given the relatively advanced **age** of the two major party candidates in this election, and the fact that their **health** has been a prominent issue in the campaign.

Second, modern vice presidents exercise a great deal of informal power. Until relatively recently, vice presidents often assumed a symbolic role with little formal power. As Franklin Roosevelt's first vice president, John Nance Garner, famously **remarked**, the vice presidency wasn't "worth a bucket of warm spit." But as detailed in **Joel K. Goldstein's "The White House Vice Presidency,"** vice presidents since **Walter Mondale**, under President Jimmy Carter, have been intimately involved in the inner workings of the White House.

By serving as senior advisers to the president and troubleshooting on major domestic and foreign policy issues, vice presidents have come to wield significant influence within contemporary Democratic and Republican administrations. The two most recent vice presidents, **Dick Cheney** and **Joe Biden**, exemplify this new reality.



Vice President Joe Biden during Obama's final State of the Union address. REUTERS

Cheney played a key role in shaping Bush administration policy on matters ranging from energy to terrorism and the Iraq War. Biden was a key adviser on foreign policy matters including the war in Afghanistan and the Osama bin Laden raid. He served as the administration's liaison to Congress on domestic matters including health care, the "fiscal cliff" negotiations, gun control and the cancer cure "moonshot." It is very likely that Kaine or Pence will exercise similar influence as vice president.

Third, the selection of a running mate tells voters a great deal about the presidential candidate's political values and judgment. As Karl Rove, a leading participant in George W. Bush's vice presidential selection process in 2000, noted, it is the "first presidential decision" that a candidate makes. Presidential candidates must recognize that they are choosing a key partner in government for the next four or eight years – not merely a running mate who can purportedly "deliver" votes in an election.

If either vice presidential candidate is unqualified or ill-suited to serve, it will reflect poorly on the presidential candidate who chose him. And, if elected, these deficiencies could deprive the president of a valuable partner in governance. For that matter, a competent and appealing vice president may help to carry on a president's legacy after leaving office by winning a "third term" and building upon the administration's achievements.

For these reasons, vice presidential candidates should matter a great deal – to the presidential candidate, and to voters.

## The debate

Of course, when Tim Kaine and Mike Pence take the stage at Longwood University on Tuesday evening, it's unlikely that viewers will see the type of rhetorical fireworks that were on display at the

first presidential debate. But, more importantly, viewers will see two seasoned candidates with long records of public service who will provide valuable insights into what we might expect from a Clinton or Trump administration.

And that's important. After all, when voters go to the polls on Election Day, they're casting a vote for a presidential ticket – not just a presidential candidate. Why not judge the presidential candidates, in part, based upon their running mates?

Recent history suggests that whoever is elected, Kaine or Pence will play a major role in the next presidential administration. Given this reality, voters would be wise to tune in and carefully evaluate the running mates. Sure, it's the “undercard” rather than the “main event.” But these aren't lightweights – one of them is your next vice president, and that matters.



US presidents

Mike Pence

2016 US Presidential Election

Tim Kaine