

Vice Presidents are a heartbeat from the Oval Office, but matter very little.

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Last night Virginia Senator Tim Kaine and Indiana Governor Mike Pence met in the only vice-presidential debate of the 2016 election. But how important are vice-presidents and vice-presidential debates? [Thomas Leeper](#) argues that neither are of much consequence during elections and as part of presidential administrations. While the position can often be a stepping stone to the presidency, he writes, it has little budget and no formal powers – an irrelevance that is baked into how the office was defined by the Constitution.

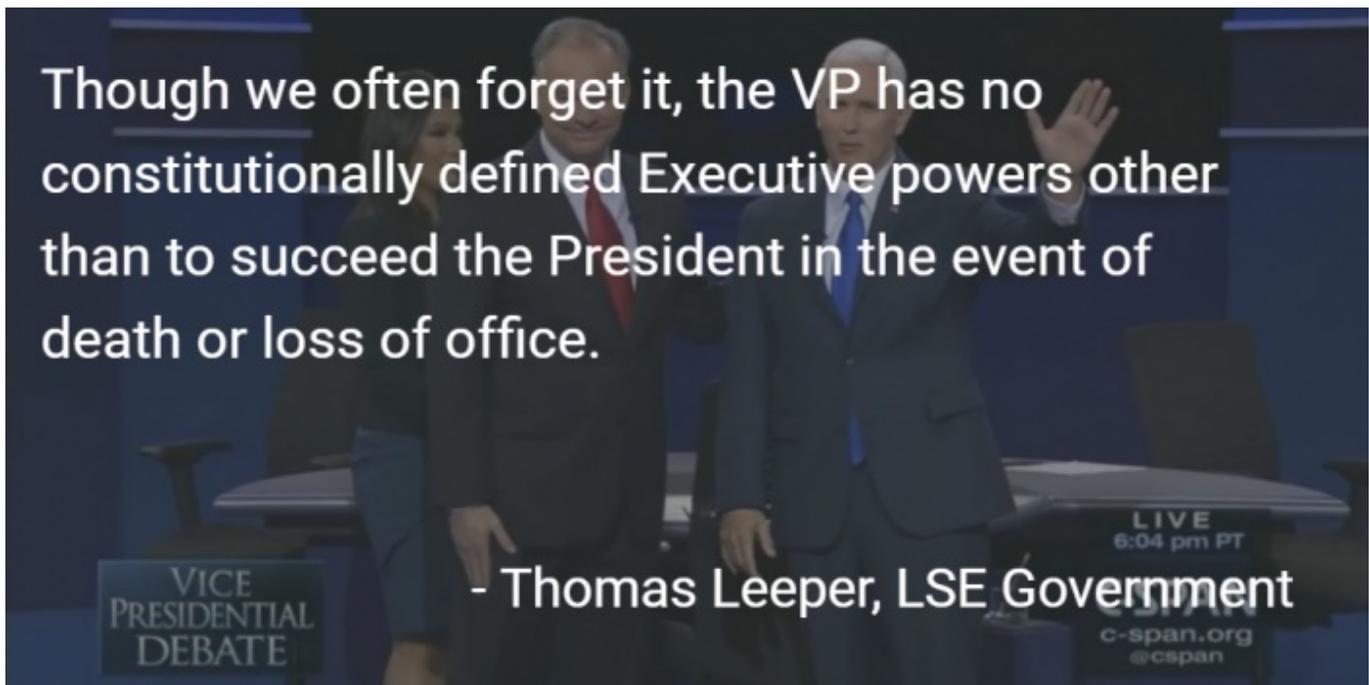


“Who am I? Why am I here?” asked retired Vice Admiral James Stockton during opening remarks at [the 1992 Vice Presidential debate](#). The questions continue to draw laughs. But they were also an unintentionally apt description of both the office of the Vice Presidency and the role of Vice Presidential candidate.

Stockton, independent candidate Ross Perot’s running mate that year, impressed few with his cold open or with the rest of his performance during that debate. But, fortunately for him and for Perot, it likely mattered very little; Perot would have lost regardless of Stockton’s debate performance. Indeed, Vice Presidents as running mates and as elected officials, are generally unimportant.

On the campaign trail, VP candidates may play a surrogacy role appearing on behalf of the presidential candidate and clarifying the campaign’s agenda and key talking points. These appearances can help connect with the party base and VP skills and experience can be pointed to as balancing factors on a presidential ticket. Hillary Clinton’s running mate, Virginia Senator Tim Kaine has executive experience, speaks Spanish, and is an outspoken Catholic. Trump’s VP candidate, Indiana Governor Mike Pence has varied political experience, is from a heartland state, and is an outspoken social conservative. These factors contrast well or otherwise enhance areas of potential weakness on their respective campaigns.

This effort to “balance a ticket” frequently involves painstaking vetting of potential VP candidates. Yet in terms of electoral value, VPs offer little. A [new book](#) by Christopher Devine and Kyle Kopko suggests that [while Presidents typically benefit from a home-state advantage, VP candidates do not](#). For all the effort in choosing a running mate, the return on that investment is slim. Worse, if the VP candidate becomes a distraction – think Sarah Palin in 2008 – they fail their primary function.



Credit: CSPAN via [YouTube](#)

Yet by and large these qualifications – or lack thereof – matter little unless the VP candidate can help sell the Presidential candidate’s message and qualifications. The VP debate is one place where this matters. A worst case scenario is if soundbites from the debate emerge that a campaign has to later defend or backtrack on. We didn’t see much of that this year. The 2016 VP debate last night was a fairly raucous affair. [The transcript](#) descends into unintelligible crosstalk thirty-seven times. Despite the commotion, the candidates largely stuck to major campaign themes – Trump’s tax records, foreign policy differences, plans for immigration. There are likely few GIF-able moments.

That’s a good thing for both campaigns. Most Americans will only hear about the debates secondhand, from friends or through news media. We do not yet know viewership numbers for this year, but if the last two elections are any guidance, we might expect about 60 million viewers. Even generously assuming all of those viewers are eligible to vote, that’s about one-quarter of the American electorate. By election day most Americans will not even know who the VP candidates are; [only about 70 percent can even name the current Vice President](#).

The VP is often a presumed future candidate for President; the office is something of a stepping stone but not much more than that. In rare instances, VPs have played important policy roles. For example, Dick Cheney’s influence on the George W. Bush presidency likely helped increase the Executive Branch’s authority to [make war](#), [suspend habeas corpus](#), and [adjudicate constitutional debates](#). But with a limited budget and no formal powers, even institutional entrepreneurs like Cheney have limited formal influence. Their policy views thus do not matter independently of their running mate’s.

This irrelevance is deeply rooted in the institutional design of the office. The role of VP is mentioned eight times in [the US Constitution](#): twice in Article I, defining the role as non-voting President of the Senate, and six times in Article II, where election, succession of office, and impeachment procedures are described. Though we often forget it, the VP has no constitutionally defined Executive powers other than to succeed the President in the event of death or loss of office. The VP’s principal office is [not even in the White House](#) and the salary is about half of the President’s. Perhaps even more forgotten, the original procedure for choosing the VP (replaced by [the 12th Amendment](#)) was that the second-place finisher in the Presidential election should be VP. Imagine, for example, President Clinton and Vice President Trump.

The choice of VP, of course, matters if the President does leave office. The first two VPs (John Adams and Thomas Jefferson) were later elected President after their Presidents (Washington and Adams, respectively) concluded two terms. The third – Aaron Burr – might have as well had he not murdered Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Eight other *elected* VPs have fulfilled their sole duty to become President upon the President's death. (A ninth, Gerald Ford, was appointed.) Many of these – Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, to name a few – have then subsequently won the office in their own right. But if we believe, as we should, the evidence offered by Devine and Kopko, as VP candidates these future Presidents did little to help the elections of William McKinley, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy, respectively.

Elections in the United States are ultimately driven by an interaction between a contrived and disproportionate electoral college procedure, economic performance of the incumbent President, and voters' longstanding ties to particular parties. The VP is one variable that political scientists are reasonably sure does not matter much at all.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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