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The Historical Experience of Experience: How and When Experience in a President Counts

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Experience has become a dominant issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. Initially thought to be an open contest, the range and types of candidate experience have varied substantially: sitting nd former senators, representatives nd governors, and a former mayor nd first lady. At this writing the mpaign has narrowed to three ndidates: Barack Obama and illary Clinton in a tight race for the emocratic nomination; John cCain having secured the epublican nomination.

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The contrast in Washington-based perience among these three is striking. cCain leads in elective service with four years in the House of Representatives and just over 20 years in the Senate. Clinton is in her eighth year in the Senate; Obama in his third year.

Experience prior to elective government service in Washington has also been identified as relevant for accrediting candidacies. McCain's military background, including his time as a prisoner of war, is judged to be authentication for serving as commander in chief. Obama announced his opposition to the Iraq war while serving in the Illinois State Senate, arguably demonstrating his judgment even before election to the U. S. Senate. And Clinton's time as first lady, from 1993-2001, is relied on as providing superior preparation on Day One to be chief executive and essentially a heir apparent.

Each of these rationales for candidacy and election has strengths and

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weaknesses. McCain has length of service but has never held a major executive position and would be 72 years old when sworn in as president. Obama has the freshness of youth but, equally, limited time as a U. S. senator and no elective executive background. Clinton's reliance on heir apparentness intimates familiarity with White House operations but raises questions about a first lady's role and accountability in making decisions.

Stress on experience justifies a review of the historical record. This paper will treat the following questions: Is the 2008 presidential election an open contest? How common are open contests? When have they occurred? What are the types of heirs apparent as candidates? Which presidencies have been successful? How might the *historical experience of experience* apply to 2008?

Suffice to say in this preview that Mt. Rushmore's faces include but one president with significant White House experience before serving. That would be the likeness of Thomas Jefferson who ran in 1800 against the president with whom he was serving as vice president—a case of doubtful precedence.

Historical Record of Heirs

One must drop back to 1952 for a race lacking either an incumbent president seeking reelection or a sitting vice president as an heir apparent candidate. The 2008 presidential election has been labeled an open contest but Hillary Clinton's version of *heir apparentness* suggests otherwise. Her time as first lady is said to validate her candidacy to an extent equal to, perhaps even greater than, what has traditionally been set forth by a vice president. For in the Clinton case, the endorsement of and active campaigning by her ex-president husband bolster her candidacy.

Two historical facets are of interest: (1) the frequency of open contests, and (2) the types of heirs apparent.

First a definition: As understood here, an open contest is one lacking a president seeking reelection, a sitting vice president as candidate, a candidate having been endorsed as a successor--such as Theodore Roosevelt's endorsement of William Howard Taft in 1908—or a self-declared heir apparent based on prior White House experience—as with Nixon in 1968.

Open contests by these criteria are relatively rare. Just 11, or one-fifth, of the 55 elections since 1789 lacked an heir apparent, discounting the first election when Washington was the presumptive candidate. Nine of these 11 open contests occurred in the 19th century, primarily because of the lesser role of the vice president. The only sitting vice presidents to run for president in the 19th century were Thomas Jefferson, in 1800, and Martin Van Buren, in 1836. Not even vice presidents who assumed the presidency upon the death of the incumbent—Tyler, Fillmore, A. Johnson and Arthur--succeeded themselves. Fillmore in 1852 and Arthur in 1884 sought and were denied the nomination.

By contrast, the relatively large number of vice presidents as presidential candidates explains the few open contests, occurring in 1920 and 1952, in the 20th century. Four

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sitting vice presidents ran in the latter half of the century: Nixon in 1960; Humphrey in 1968; G. H. W. Bush in 1988; and Gore in 2000. Nixon ran again in 1968 and Mondale ran in 1984, four years subsequent to his vice presidency. Further in comparison with the 19th century, the five vice presidents assuming the presidency—T. Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, L. Johnson and Ford— ran for full terms with only Ford losing.

Next is the matter of the types of heirs apparent. As Table 1 illustrates, first and by far the most numerous are sitting presidents seeking *affirmation* by running either for a second term—with 10 losing, 17 winning and one, FDR, awarded third and fourth terms--or takeover presidents seeking a full term—with four winning and three losing.

Table 1
Types of Heirs Apparent

Affirmation: Second Term
(Winning—17)

Year	President	Year	President
1792	Washington	1804	Jefferson
1812	Madison	1820	Monroe
1832	Jackson	1864	Lincoln
1872	Grant	1900	McKinley
1916	Wilson	1936	F. Roosevelt
1940	F. Roosevelt	1944	F. Roosevelt
1956	Eisenhower	1972	Nixon
1984	Reagan	1996	W. Clinton
2004	G. W. Bush		

Affirmation: Second Term
(Losing—10)

Year	President	Year	President
1800	J. Adams	1828	J. Q. Adams
1840	Van Buren	1856	Pierce (for the nomination)
1888	Cleveland	1892	B. Harrison
1912	Taft	1932	Hoover
1980	Carter	1992	G. H. W. Bush

Affirmation: First Full Term
(Winning—4)

Year	President	Year	President
1904	T. Roosevelt	1924	Coolidge
1948	Truman	1964	L. Johnson

Affirmation: First Full Term
(Losing—3)

Year	President	Year	President
1852	Fillmore (for the nomination)	1884	Arthur (for the nomination)
1976	Ford		

Inheritance
(Winning—3)

Year	President	Year	President
1796	J. Adams	1836	Van Buren
1988	G. H. W. Bush		

Inheritance
(Losing—3)

Year	President	Year	President
1960	Nixon	1968	Humphrey
2000	Gore		

Endorsement
(Winning—7)

Year	President	Year	President
1796	J. Adams*	1808	Madison**
1816	Monroe**	1836	Van Buren*
1908	Taft**	1928	Hoover**
1988	G. H. W. Bush*		

***Vice presidents endorsed by president.**
****Cabinet secretaries endorsed by presidents or party leaders (Hoover).**

Endorsement
(Losing—2)

Year	President	Year	President
1960	Nixon*	2000	Gore*

***Vice presidents endorsed by president.**

Self-Declared
(Winning—2)

Year	President	Year	President
1800	Jefferson	1968	Nixon

Self-Declared (Losing or Pending—2)			
Year	**President**	**Year**	**President**
1984	**Mondale (losing)**	**2008**	**H. Clinton (pending)**

Source: Compiled by the author.

NOTE: Presidents not included: Those dying in the first term (W. H. Harrison, Taylor, Garfield, Harding, Kennedy), those not seeking a second term (Polk, Buchanan, Hayes), and those not seeking a first full term (Tyler, A. Johnson).

Heir apparentness is no guarantee of victory even for sitting presidents.

Second are those six vice presidents running essentially as an inheritance for having served in the White House. As shown in Table 1, these inheritors' batting average is an unimpressive 50 percent: three won; three lost. Note also that the three winners were one-term presidents.

The third set overlaps the previous group. These are heirs apparent as a consequence of position and *endorsement* by their predecessor or prominent party leaders. In some cases the inheritor had the support of the outgoing president, as with Washington's backing of Adams. In other cases a president backed a prominent member of the cabinet, as with Jefferson's endorsement of Madison or Roosevelt's of Taft. Seven of these endorsees won and two lost. Just two of the seven winners—Madison and Monroe early in the 19th century—were reelected to second terms.

The fourth category is that of a *self-declared* heir apparent. These are special cases. Jefferson had a strong rationale, serving as Adams' vice president and earlier as the first secretary of state. But Adams was himself running in 1800 for a second term. This is the only case in American history of the sitting vice president running against the sitting president.

The other three self-declared heirs have one feature in common. Each heir's validating experience came years earlier: four years for Mondale in 1984 serving as Carter's vice president from 1977-81; eight years for Nixon in 1968 serving as Eisenhower's vice president from 1953-61; and eight years for Hillary Clinton in 2008 serving as first lady from 1993-2001.

In brief, the historical record reveals the following: heir apparentness is no guarantee of victory even for sitting presidents; the role of the vice president as an heir apparent is more a 20th than a 19th century phenomenon; vice-presidential inheritors have had an uncertain record of success, with half losing and winners failing to be reelected; takeover presidents in the 20th century have mostly won election to a full term; endorsements have been mostly effective for a first term; and the three contemporary self-declared heirs apparent invite special attention.

Success of Heirs

How successful are heirs apparent in presidential service? That question is not easily

answered given the different issues and political contexts through historical eras. However, two measures provide general impressions. First is the short-term gauge of election and reelection. The most important endorsement comes from the voters, especially when a president asks them to support continued service. Second is the much longer-term assessment of ranking the presidents by presidential scholars.

In regard to the first test, the record shows 15 presidents winning a second term, with FDR having won two more. Margins of victory ranged from the narrowest possible wins—Wilson in 1916 and Bush in 2004—to landslides—FDR in 1936, Nixon, in 1972 and Reagan in 1984.

Of the 10 presidents defeated for a second term, five carried endorsements into their first term. Three were vice presidents—Adams, Van Buren and G. H. W. Bush—and two cabinet secretaries—Taft and Hoover. However their first term records did not merit reelection.

Takeover presidents in the 20th century fared well in their efforts to win a full term—four winning, one losing narrowly. Two 19th century takeover presidents—Fillmore and Arthur—lost in their bids to be nominated.

The second test, presidential rankings, requires more explanation. These rankings represent judgment calls by scholars, mostly historians, that essentially prevent caveats on their part regarding the dramatically different eras, issues and contexts within which presidents serve. Scholars are simply called on to provide a ranking—a number. The rankings are, at best, reflections of informed but impressionistic comparisons. That said, there appears to be substantial agreement on groupings—for example, the best, the worst and the in-between.

Table 2 shows the results of two recent rankings, one by C-SPAN, the other by the Federalist Society and the *Wall Street Journal.* The data displayed are the means of rankings for those types of heirs apparent who actually served a first or partial term. Also omitted are those in the "self-declared" category as they require special discussion.

Table 2
Rankings of Heir Apparent Presidents, by Type

Type	C-SPAN Survey	WSJ Survey	No. in Top 10		No. in Bottom 10	
No.	(Mean)	(Mean)	C-SPAN	WSJ	C-SPAN	WSJ
			Affirmation			
2nd term win (14)*	12.7	12.7	7	7	1	2
2nd term loss (10)	23.4	22.9	0	0	1	2
Full term win (4)	11.5	13.5	3	2	0	0
Full term loss (3)	30.0	29.7	0	0	2	1

Inheritance						
Win (3)	**22.0**	**19.0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Endorsement						
Win (7)	**22.3**	**19.4**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**0**

Source: Compiled by the author from C-SPAN Historical Survey of Presidential Leadership, 2004 (http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians/overall.asp) and Federalist Society-Wall Street Journal Survey on Presidents, 2000 (http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/rankings.html).

***Three entries in this category from Table 2 are omitted: FDR's second and third reelection wins and George W. Bush (premature to rank).**

The experience that really counts for heirs apparent is service not just near or around the Oval Office *but as its occupant*.

These data show the clear winners in the rankings sweepstakes to be the *affirmation* heirs: those reelected for a second term and those takeover presidents elected for a full term. It is possible, of course, that scholars are merely following the election returns in making their judgments. Also perfectly reasonable is that the voting public rewards merit so the rankings are merely punctuation marks to the composite voting decisions. Still, Grant, Nixon and Clinton were reelected by increased margins in each case and Coolidge handily won a full term without scholars being fooled by these results into believing these presidents were above average.

The *affirmation* heirs also have by far the most presidents in the top 10—10 total of those reelected and elected to a full term in the C-SPAN survey and nine total in the *WSJ* survey. Only Grant fell into the bottom 10 in the C-SPAN survey, joined by Nixon in the *WSJ* survey.

Second and full term losers fared poorly among the *affirmation* heirs, with average rankings substantially below those of the winners. Several of these losers also show up in the bottom 10—four in the C-SPAN survey and three in the *WSJ* survey. Half of those losing reelection show up among the *endorsement* heirs.

The *inheritance* and *endorsement* heirs have similar mid-range rankings. The inheritors were all vice presidents seeking to capitalize on their experience and status in the previous administration. Adams has the highest ranking and Van Buren the lowest. Among the endorsees, the highest rankings were awarded once again to Adams and to two cabinet secretaries—Madison and Monroe. Drop those three and the average ranking for the rest falls to 27.0 and 23.0 in the two surveys.

Seemingly the experience that really counts for heirs apparent is service not just near or around the Oval Office *but as its occupant*. To emphasize this point further, of the top 10 presidents ranked in the C-SPAN survey, *nine had no previous service in either the White House or the cabinet* when they first ran for president or vice president, in the case of the takeover presidents. Of the 11 presidents in the WSJ survey designated "great" or "near great," *10 had no previous White House or cabinet service* when they first ran. Jefferson was the exception in each case. Put otherwise, claims of White House experience may be

useful as credit taking during a campaign but history teaches that these entitlements are of limited demonstrable value in winning reelection or in scoring well later in presidential rankings.

Self-Declared Heirs

Little attention has been paid so far to the fourth type of heir apparent in Table 1, that of the "self-declared" heir. Most common among those listed is a background said to validate candidacy in the face of doubts due either to unusual circumstances, a time lapse or the nature of the experience.

The Jefferson case is fascinating. Defeated by Adams in 1796, he was elected vice president by virtue of receiving the second most electoral votes—the election having occurred prior to the 12th Amendment. It would be as if Al Gore were to have served as George W. Bush's vice president in 2001.

In 1800, Vice President Jefferson ran against the president with whom he was serving and won. Jefferson was certainly not an inheritor as Adams was in 1796, nor was he likely to be endorsed by President Adams, who was, after all, seeking a second term. He was *self-declared*, justifying his candidacy by his experience and prominence in national politics.

The other three cases involve time lapses that vitiate inheritance and in two cases render *endorsement* of less value. Nixon was eight years beyond his service as vice president and his very narrow defeat as an inheritor in 1960 when he carried a mild endorsement from President Eisenhower. Relying on his previous experience in the White House and his vast foreign policy background honed in the intervening years, Nixon sold himself as a leading candidate for the Republican nomination in 1967-68.

He won as narrowly in 1968 as he had lost in 1960. His opponent, Hubert Humphrey, was an inheritor of a seriously fractured party and with little more than a grudging endorsement from President Johnson. In 1972, Nixon was reelected in one of the largest landslides in American history, then to resign in disgrace over the Watergate scandal.

Walter Mondale declared his candidacy in 1984, four years beyond his service as vice president. He had impressive domestic policy credentials, having been given important agenda management responsibilities by President Carter. But he could not claim *inheritance* and the value of a Carter *endorsement* was worth little following the landslide loss to Reagan in 1980. Mondale won only his home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

The final case is that pending in 2008. Hillary Clinton is a *self-declared* heir who, like Nixon, has an eight-year time lapse in her validating White House experience. Also like Nixon, she has spent the interim period enhancing her resume, in her case by being elected twice to the Senate from a large and important state. Whereas the Senate experience has provided a base for her national campaign, the primary claim to be ready on "Day One" appears to be White House service as first lady and confidant to her ex-

president husband.

It is difficult by historical standards to consider this a case of *inheritance*. It is true that she had a more active policy role in her husband's presidency than other first ladies, none of whom was placed in control of a major initiative like national health care or traveled abroad as extensively as an emissary. However, the position of first lady is not elective; rather it is the consequence of personal association. Nor is there a constitutional role for the first lady, though the position has been increasingly institutionalized in recent years within the White House Office of the Executive Office of the President.

The matter of *endorsement* is of a different order. As shown in Table 1, presidents and ex-presidents can, but rarely do, identify a preferred candidate during the nominating process. However, her case is, once again, extraordinary. The president with whom she served is her husband. Not only has he endorsed her, but he has actively campaigned, played a major role in designing strategy and organization, and will follow her to the White House residence if she wins. In this case, the heir and her bestower return to the White House, having traded roles eight years hence.

New and interesting institutional issues arise in an administration with a president and an ex-president—a condition proposed but rejected in 1980 when Reagan considered running with Gerald Ford. It introduces new dimensions to heir apparentness. For example, the role of the vice president has increased steadily in the past three decades. What would be the effect on vice presidential duties of having an ex-president in residence? Similarly, how might the various staffs interact, notably those assigned to the ex-president as first spouse with those formerly in his White House who now serve the new president? To what extent would the ex-president have power, if not formal authority, to represent the president in foreign and domestic policy negotiations? And what might be the nature and accountability of policy commitments developed thereby? How may power-holders on Capitol Hill or foreign leaders be expected to interpret who is in charge of what in a potentially two-headed White House? To what extent would reforms of Bill Clinton-era programs be constrained by the ex-president's presence? How might the 22nd Amendment apply, if at all? Should there be clarifications regarding the exercise of power or authority by an ex-president in residence?

These are but a few of the more obvious points to consider in a Hillary Clinton presidency. A Hillary Clinton vice presidency raises a related, yet variant, set of questions. These issues may well be resolvable. But such a presidency, or vice presidency, is unprecedented and therefore deserving of attention in advance of the general election.

Conclusion

Open contests for the presidency are rare, naught but two in the 20th century. The 2008 election may have counted as the first in the 21st century had it not been for Hillary Clinton's validation of her candidacy with a claim of vital White House experience as first lady and the endorsement and active participation by her husband. Save for that

White House experience may not be a detriment for serving as president. But it does not appear to guarantee success either.

claim, Clinton would rely on her Senate record to compare with the performance of Obama for the nomination and that of McCain in the general election.

A review of heir apparent contests reveals four types: *affirmation* by which an incumbent president seeks a return to office; *inheritance* by which a sitting vice president assumes the role of the heir apparent; *endorsement* by which an incumbent president designates his successor—historically the sitting vice president or a cabinet secretary; and *self-declared* by which candidates cite a background of White House experience, some years in the past in the cases of Nixon, Mondale and Clinton, immediate in the case of Jefferson.

The record shows that *affirmation* heirs win most often—either for a second term or a first full term. *Inheritance* heirs have won half the time but to date have failed in their bids for a second term. *Endorsement* heirs include inheritors as well as cabinet secretaries who have received presidential backing. More endorsees win than lose but most do not win a second term. And *self-declared* heirs have won twice—both also winning second terms —and lost once, with the Clinton case pending for the nomination at this writing.

One interesting result is the relatively low scholarly rankings of all but the winning *affirmation* heirs. Inheritors and endorsees do not typically receive high rankings. Seemingly the experience touted as meriting inheritance, endorsement or self-declaration does not then produce outstanding presidencies as tested by a return to office or as evaluated later by scholars.

This point is bolstered by the fact that no inheritor or endorsee appears in the top 10 of either of the rankings relied on here. White House experience may not be a detriment for serving as president. But it does not appear to guarantee success either. The immediate prior service of the combined top 10 rankings of the two surveys (13 presidents in all) includes two generals (Washington and Eisenhower), five governors (Polk, the two Roosevelts, Wilson and Reagan), four senators (Jackson, Truman, Kennedy and L. Johnson; Truman and Johnson then serving as take over presidents), one sitting vice president (Jefferson), and a lawyer from Illinois (Lincoln).

Perhaps the overriding lesson from this review is that we learn more about what does not ensure success than what does. Political experience alone is an uncertain predictor of the quality of presidential service. Other aspects play a significant role, to include character, vision, goals, self-confidence, communication, public regard and, above all, leadership. Years of public service no doubt hone these attributes but their possession may be explained as well by personal, not public, circumstances.

Finally, this uncertainty is a troubling aspect of our political system. Whether we inaugurate Clinton, Obama or McCain on January 20, 2009, we will know little in advance of voting as to the make-up of the 44th presidency. Concentration in a campaign is on the president as a person, not on a presidency as an administration. That, however, is a topic separately to be considered.

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