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***[Virginia Prescott] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101 the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today, the role of the vice president inspired from this question from a listener named Ivy.***

*[Ivy] I'm calling with a question about the vice president. I've been seeing Vice President Pence in the news for casting tie breaking votes when it’s divided. And I didn't even know the vice president could do that until recently. And it made me realize I don't really know a lot of other things that the vice president does. So, if you help clear that up, that would be awesome.*

***[VP] Here to talk with us is the man who finds himself in the spotlight every four years. Vice presidential scholar Joel Goldstein. He's law professor at St. Louis University and author of the White House vice presidency. Hello Joel and welcome.***

[Joel Goldstein] Well it's good to be with you Virginia. Thanks for having me.

***[VP] So this is the job that they say is a heartbeat away from the president. What is the job of the vice president?***

[JG] The job has really evolved over the years from a constitutional standpoint. The vice president has two duties. One, to preside over the Senate and the other is as you say, to be a heartbeat away from the president, to step in if something happens to the president. In actuality the vice president almost never presides over the Senate anymore. And although on nine occasions vice presidents have succeeded to the presidency, that doesn't happen that often either. In recent years though the office has become a very important part of the executive branch and really part of the president's inner circle. And so the vice president functions as sort of a across the board adviser for the president and a troubleshooter for him.

***[VP] This is constitutionally handed down that the vice president is the president of the Senate. So that has always been so since the beginning of the republic.***

[JG] That's right. The Constitution provides that the vice president is the president of the Senate and that he or she can cast a vote to break any tie.

***[VP] Does the vice president vote in every bill or just when there is a tie vice president only to vote when there's a tie?***

[JG] Usually the vice president doesn't preside over the Senate he or she will only show up to preside over the Senate for ceremonial occasions or when they think that there might be a tie. Based on projections that they have. So for instance vice president Pence casts the tie breaking vote to confirm secretary of divorce is the secretary of education John Adams our first vice president cast nearly 30 tiebreaking votes. Joe Biden spent eight years as vice president and didn't get to cast a single tie breaking vote.

***[VP] When did they start televising or even holding vice presidential candidate debates during presidential elections?***

[JG] The first vice presidential debate was in 1976 between Senators Walter Mondale and Bob Dole. And really since then every presidential election except for 1980 has included a vice presidential debate which generally been a 90 minute debate. And oftentimes the vice presidential debates have really been a part of the focus of the presidential campaign the Biden Palin debate actually had a higher viewing age than any of the presidential debates in 2008. Probably the most memorable moment for many of the presidential or vice presidential debates was the exchange between Senator Bentsen and Senator Quayle when Senator Bentsen chastised Senator Quayle for comparing himself to John Kennedy.

***[VP] Let's share that because it's so memorable. Lloyd Bentsen was the running mate for Michael Dukakis and Dan Quayle was vice presidential candidate for George H.W. Bush.***

*[Dan Quayle] I have as much spirit in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency. I will be prepared to deal with the people in the Bush administration if that unfortunate event ever occur.*

*[Lloyd Bentsen] Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.*

[JG] That moment is one that is played every four years before the vice presidential debate is sort of the most memorable moment I think of any of the debates presidential campaigns and the long primary season that all about the candidate.

***[VP] But come convention time suddenly it's about the running mate. What do candidates today look for when choosing a running mate.***

[JG] The vice presidential selection process has really changed a lot so that once the presidential nomination is wrapped up which tends to be anywhere from five or six weeks before the convention till maybe five or six months before the convention the focus becomes who's going to be the running mate the presidential candidates embark on an elaborate vetting process where they obtain information about the vice presidential candidate about everything in their life their health history their income taxes their financial history anything that they or any member of their family might have done that could cause embarrassment to the ticket. Sometimes presidential candidates will campaign with the possible vice presidential candidates to sort of audition them to see how they do. Sometimes they've done interviews. Ultimately in most cases I think they're looking for somebody who will be a plausible president who will do well during the campaign who will add some strength to the ticket and at least won't hurt the ticket. Sometimes when a presidential candidate is facing long odds. I think Senator McCain thought that he was in 2008 they may take a bit of a risk in their choice of a running mate. But generally speaking when the campaign is perceived as being close they tend to look for somebody who will be perceived as presidential and who will add some strength to the ticket.

***[VP] How influential is that choice in determining success or failure of the campaign?***

[JG] Well it varies. The vice presidential selection is not going to swing 10 or 20 points. It may make a difference in some cases where an election is close. It may make a difference at the margins and it can make a difference in a couple of different ways. One thing that the vice presidential choice does is it sends messages about the presidential candidate what he or she values how they go about making decisions. So if a presidential candidate chooses well, it can send messages that are helpful. When Bill Clinton chose Al Gore it really reinforced aspects of Clinton's identity the fact that he was a young baby boomer a Southern centrist from the center of the Democratic Party and that Gore really was very similar. That choice tended to emphasize aspects of Clinton's personality and character that they were trying to emphasize.

***[VP] Similar to your own star Professor Goldstein. This is a choice that shines brightest once every four years but not so long ago. It used to be the parties and the conventioneers that pretty much chose the vice president. How did that process change?***

[JG] You're absolutely right. Up until about 1940 the party leaders not the presidential candidate chose the running mate. And so this had the consequence that oftentimes there was little relationship between the presidential candidate and the vice presidential candidate. Oftentimes the vice presidential candidate was somebody who was chosen to balance the ticket to bring geographic balance or ideological balance. Some tickets had presidential and vice presidential candidates that disagreed violently on the major issues. Oftentimes the presidential candidate and vice presidential candidate didn't know each other. The system changed really in 1940 when Franklin Roosevelt made it a condition of running for a third term that the Democratic convention select Henry Wallace as his running mate. There was so much pushback against Wallace that although he was present at the Democratic convention he wasn't allowed to speak. The reaction would be too negative. Ever since then the presidential candidate has had a major role in the selection.

***[VP] There's speculation that the current vice president Mike Pence is quietly assembling a shadow campaign for 2020. Has the role of vice president traditionally been a springboard for the presidency?***

[JG] Increasingly it has been in the early days the vice president was the runner up in the presidential election so that whoever got the second most electoral votes became vice president. That's how John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr really became vice president. The Constitution was changed in 18 0 to provide for a separate vote among the electors for president and for vice president. Really for many years the vice president then came sort of a political dead end. When Daniel Webster was offered the vice presidential spot on the 1848 ticket he refused saying I don't propose to be buried until I'm dead. But really beginning with Richard Nixon's vice presidency in 1953 Nixon became the Republican nominee in 1960. And from then on the vice president has become either certainly one of the leading presidential candidates whenever the president decides to end or whenever he's term limited.

***[VP] That has been a running gag and a multiple Emmy Award winning HBO comedy. You know the vice president is always asking, “has the President called?” You know it's sort of she's assigned to low profile photo ops. Is there any truth to that?***

That's certainly how it used to be done. I mean really up until Nixon the vice president spent most of his time presiding over the Senate Nixon was the first vice president 1953 to spend relatively little time presiding over the Senate and spend most of his time in the executive branch. But even the vice presidents beginning with Nixon till Nelson Rockefeller often were kept out of the major meetings when Lyndon Johnson would have his meetings to decide strategy on the war in Vietnam. He rarely invited Vice President Hubert Humphrey to attend those meetings. Johnson often wasn't included in the in President Kennedy's inner circle. So it really has just been with the Mondale vice presidency that vice presidents have routinely been included in the president's inner circle and that's a practice that has been followed for more than 40 years. Three Democratic administrations and four Republican administrations. And so it seems to be enduring quite different than what we see in Veep or in some of the other shows like West Wing for instance the vice president was always treated sort of very marginally.

***[VP] Well given the evolution of the role of the vice president, what do you think it is going to be going forward?***

[JG] I think that the model that was created by Carter and Mondale and now has been followed on a bipartisan basis I think is likely to endure the practices that they began which have been repeated has had sort of a sticky quality and the fact that other administrations have followed this idea of the vice president is part of the inner circle in the White House. I think in part has been because the model works and it particularly works where the vice president is an able person who develops and sustains a strong relationship with the president and the other people around him or her. So I think that as long as we continue to have able vice presidents as long as they are attentive to the relationship I think that this model is likely to continue to be followed. And it really I think offers some advantages to the president to have the advice of an experienced politician who can look at the entire field much like a president does and give the president advice based on that perspective. Also a second high level official who couldn't meet with foreign leaders who can deal with leaders in Congress who can handle political and governmental matters that need to be handled at a high level. It allows the president to expand his or her capacity and better pursue their agenda.

***[VP] Joel Goldstein, you're known as an authority the authority in the country on the vice presidency which is kind of an interesting role is that you get called on every four years for your opinion. Obviously we're talking to you in between that what is that like?***

[JG] One of the things that I think has been so interesting to me is that the vice presidency has grown dramatically. It's no longer the disparaged office that it once was but its growth has taken place not by any changes in constitutional amendment or statute. Primarily the growth has been by practices that have been initiated by for instance Carter and Mondale and then have been followed by other administrations. It's a good example of how often times political institutions can evolve and progress by the repetition of good ideas. And so it's been an interesting experience for me. I enjoy talking about it and it's really been a great learning experience for me.

***[VP] Well I'm really glad we get to speak to you before 2020. Thank you so much for speaking with us.***

[JG] Thanks for having me, Virginia, I enjoyed speaking with you.

***[VP] Joel Goldstein, professor at the St. Louis University School of Law and author of the White House Vice Presidency the Path to Significance: Mondale to Biden.***