

# A McCain win means 50-50 odds of a Palin presidency

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left, Donna Grethen/Tribune Media; right, William Brown/Tribune Media

*An admirer, to Adlai Stevenson, Democratic candidate for president in 1952: "Governor, you will receive the vote of every thinking person in America."*

*Stevenson: "Thank you, but I need a majority."*

I thought that surely the Gazette would send me to Denver and Minneapolis, all expenses paid, to cover the presidential nominating conventions. Didn't happen. So I had to watch each one from afar, mostly on cable because so little of each was shown on the network channels.

In Denver, I was disappointed in the keynote speech of Mark Warner of Virginia, a former governor who surprised me by not running for president this year. Joe Biden spoke well, but his son, Beau Biden, the attorney general of Delaware, spoke even better and, not surprisingly, more succinctly. Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton were excellent but, appropriately, the main event was Sen. Obama's speech to 85,000 screaming partisans in a football stadium. Surely you watched.

In Minneapolis, the only notable speeches were those of Gov. Sarah Palin and Sen. John McCain. Palin's was so forceful and well delivered that it was inevitable that the senator would deliver soporific syllables that would suffer by comparison, and in that sense he didn't disappoint.

Sen. Obama, already ahead by a couple of polling points at convention time, gained about four, but then Gov. Palin gained them back and more to put her ticket up by one or two depending on which poll you believe. But as Adlai Stevenson noted, one needs a majority of all people, not just the thinking ones, and what one actually needs is a majority of Electoral College votes. As I write, the two senators are about tied in the college bowl, both below the magic 270. This could be the first year where a Democrat wins with less than a popular majority; all four times that this has happened in our history, the Republican was declared the victor.

Clearly, the previously unknown and exciting candidate, Sarah Palin, has brought back to her ticket the evangelistic base that probably would not have bothered to vote for the man whom Rush Limbaugh spent day after day disparaging a scant seven months ago. But will John McCain, who said that he would always put his country first and implied that Barack Obama would not, now be rewarded for selecting a running mate with so little experience and one who, if she were to win, would have a 33 percent chance of following him as president?

What, one chance in three that Sarah Palin will be our first female president, before Hillary does? Yes, and sooner or later the Hillary holdouts will realize that and, as the politicians like to say, “come home.” And they will do so for the more substantive reason that, on issue after issue, Gov. Palin holds a view diametrically opposite to that of Sen. Clinton.

And from whence do I derive those odds that every vice president has a one in three chance of attaining the presidency? Let’s look at history.

## **Moving up**

Fourteen of our 43 vice presidents, very close to one third, eventually became president, some very quickly. Five were elected in their own right, four immediately following the completed term of their predecessor — John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Van Buren and George H.W. Bush. The fifth, Richard Nixon, won election in 1968, eight years after the two terms of my own commander in chief, Dwight David Eisenhower.

One vice president, Gerald Ford, became president because of the resignation of the man who appointed him vice president, Richard Nixon. Ford, whom we all liked, is the only person who served as both vice president and president without having been elected to either.

Sadly, four of our vice presidents became president because of the assassination of a sitting president. Andrew Johnson succeeded Abraham Lincoln a mere month after Lincoln’s second inauguration; Chester Arthur, a Union College alumnus, became president four months after the first and only inauguration of the murdered James Garfield; Theodore Roosevelt became president just six months after William McKinley was sworn in to his second term; and Lyndon Johnson became president after just those “Thousand Days” of the JFK presidency.

Four vice presidents inherited the presidency after the natural death of the incumbent: John Tyler for William Henry Harrison, who died in 1841 at age 68, having served one month in office; Millard Fillmore for Zachary Taylor, 66 when he died in 1850; Calvin Coolidge for Warren Harding, just 58 when he surprised everybody by dying in 1923; and Harry Truman for Franklin Roosevelt in 1945, one month after the FDR’s fourth inauguration at age 63.

## **Sense and accountability**

John McCain is 72 now (four years younger than I am). Thus the combination of actuarial statistics and American history to date raises a Vice President Palin’s chance to be president some day to about 50 percent. That should not be of concern unless you fear that a person who does not favor the ban of AK-47s and who wants creationism taught in schools might succeed to the presidency. (I anxiously await the day when a brave reporter asks her how old she thinks Earth is.)

I write on a day when the Dow has tumbled 504 points, unemployment has gone over 6 percent, George W. Bush has taken us from an inherited surplus to a half trillion dollar deficit, has come close to doubling the national debt, and invaded a country that, despite Gov. Palin’s belief, did not attack us. And the McCain-Palin ticket claims that the editorial “we” are the party of change, Republicans who want to clean up a Republican mess.

If they win, then there is just no sense of accountability left in the country.

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