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Review: 'The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden'

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The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden. By Joel K. Goldstein. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. 440p. \$34.95.

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Joel K. Goldstein's *The White House Vice Presidency* is an ambitious attempt to explain "the most impressive development in American political institutions during the past four decades" (301): the creation of the "White House vice presidency." The essential features of this newly-invigorated institution – historically hobbled by its limited constitutional role and divided institutional identity – entail serving as a senior adviser to, and troubleshooter for, the president, with the support of necessary resources. Key among those resources are: regular access to the president and his staff; access to intelligence briefings and Oval Office paper flow; and integration of vice presidential staff within White House operations.

The vice presidency's "path to significance," Goldstein argues, is not a narrow research interest; rather, this evolution has broad implications for scholars' understanding of processes of institutional change. As vice presidential power has expanded since the 1970s, new patterns also have emerged with respect to vice presidential selection, vice presidential campaigning, and the vice president-elect's role in presidential transitions. It is a central insight of this book that "None of these practices are legally mandated" (10); instead, they gain force from the "repetition of accumulated precedents" (310) that have "been developed and refined over time in a phenomenon resembling a nonjudicial version of the common-law process" (308-09). This is hardly an institutional deficiency, according to Goldstein. In rejecting many existing proposals for legally-codified changes to the vice presidency as counterproductive, he cites the development of "informal institutions" – particularly ones promoting the selection of highly-qualified running mates and exposing them to public scrutiny – as the most likely sources of "[m]eaningful reform" (300). Locating this analysis of the vice presidency within a larger institutional context helps to focus the work, as a whole, and to clarify its intended contributions. It succeeds in doing so, to the extent that it makes a compelling case for the value of informal institutional changes to the vice presidency. However, such processes' applicability to other challenged institutions, executive or otherwise, is generally asserted and thus essentially implicit. A detailed discussion of where such change is needed, and where formal institutional change has proved deficient, beyond the vice presidency would help to generalize Goldstein's impressive case for the value of informal institutional change.

Goldstein also makes a distinctive contribution, in comparison to other recent studies of the vice presidency such as *The American Vice Presidency* (Jody Baumgartner with Thomas Crumblin, 2015), with his rigorous treatment of Jimmy Carter's and Walter Mondale's roles in crafting, implementing, and helping to institutionalize the White House vice presidency. Indeed, following an introduction of the text in Chapter 1 and an engrossing account of the vice presidency's constitutional design and pre-Carter/Mondale institutional development in Chapter 2, Goldstein devotes four chapters to an extensive analysis of the "Mondale model" – specifically, Mondale's 1976 selection and campaign role (Chapter 3); the envisioning of a new role for the vice president during Carter's presidential transition (Chapter 4); the implementation of that role during the Carter Administration (Chapter 5); and the factors that facilitated successful implementation of the Mondale model (Chapter 6). While recognizing the trend toward expanded vice presidential power prior to Mondale – primarily due to the office's (functional and physical) relocation to the executive branch and several succession-related events in the preceding decades – Goldstein clearly stipulates Carter's and Mondale's unique contributions to the process of institutional development. Perhaps most important was Mondale's

insight that rejecting “line assignments” would free him to advise and assist the president on general matters of significance without being seen by Carter or other administration officials as beholden to particular bureaucratic interests. Carter, for his part, executed a deliberative and transparent search process that clearly communicated to potential running mates, advisers, and the public his commitment to vice presidential empowerment.

In Chapters 7-9, Goldstein traces the development of the White House vice presidency from Mondale’s successor, George H.W. Bush, to Joe Biden. In doing so, he is careful not to treat the institution as fixed – explicitly noting at one point that the White House vice presidency is not synonymous with the Mondale model (4) – by identifying its central features (see above) while allowing for deviations particular to a given president’s or vice president’s personal characteristics and political context. Most significantly, subsequent vice presidents have deviated from Mondale’s model by selectively accepting line assignments. However, in most cases these assignments have involved substantial policy initiatives that worked to enhance the vice president’s prestige without significantly undercutting his status as a “generalist” within the administration.

Chapters 10-12 analyze the institutionalization of vice presidential selection and campaigning since 1976. These chapters advance the theme of institutionalization by documenting the persistence of major innovations in vice presidential selection (e.g., structured, lengthy, and invasive vetting procedures) and campaigning (e.g., rollouts, convention speeches, and debates), and explaining their relevance to the White House vice presidency in terms of enhancing visibility and incentivizing the selection of qualified running mates. Here, Goldstein draws empirical conclusions about vice presidential selection patterns and electoral effects that, in some cases, would benefit from more systematic analysis. For instance, he does not systematically compare selections before and after 1976 to substantiate claims that geographic (211) and ideological (214) ticket balancing have decreased over time; furthermore, most recent tickets (eleven and nine of fourteen, respectively) exhibit such balance. Home state considerations also are discounted, with the exception of Lloyd Bentsen, primarily based on electoral vote counts (Table 11-2). Yet competitiveness is a better measure of a state’s electoral appeal, given the modesty of vice presidential home state advantages, and other evidence would suggest home state influences on recent selections including John Edwards and Paul Ryan (see Christopher Devine and Kyle Kopko, *The VP Advantage*, 2016). In summary or in individual cases (e.g., George H.W. Bush, 211), Goldstein sometimes attributes selection to a given factor and rejects others; yet if selection criteria have weighted – rather than discrete – influence, then, to quote his astute observation of a different decision-making process, one factor’s influence only demonstrates that another “was not decisive, not that it was irrelevant” (247). Multivariate analyses, whether original or cited from existing empirical research (e.g., Jody Baumgartner, “The Veepstakes: Forecasting Vice Presidential Selection in 2008”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41 [October 2008]: 765-772) would more effectively characterize the weight of relevant selection criteria, particularly when drawing comparisons to previous eras.

Notwithstanding such relatively minor concerns, in general Goldstein’s analysis is remarkably insightful, exhaustively researched, and substantively persuasive. Its overarching conclusions are supported and enlivened by genuinely perceptive treatments of such diverse matters as Dick Cheney’s diminished second term influence, in relation to his rejection of the White House vice presidency’s generalist model (166); the virtues of vice presidential ambition (286-288); flawed charges of an “imperial” (289-292) or anti-democratic (294-300) White House vice presidency;

the process by which invocations of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment's (temporary) succession provisions have become institutionalized, and the White House vice presidency's value in preparing for such events (248-264). For scholars and others seeking to understand the vice presidency, this book is an indispensable resource – and, for that matter, a captivating read. In fact, it is not going too far to say that if you have one book about the vice presidency on your bookshelf, this should be it.