Here’s why Biden really shouldn't name his VP before winning nomination
by JOSHUA SPIVAK

With such a large collection of candidates in the Democratic primary race, each contender is looking for the right gimmick to gain a decisive edge for success. There are reports that former vice president Joe Biden is considering naming former Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams as his running mate once he announces his own bid. Though Abrams was perceived to throw cold water on the idea by saying “you don’t run for second place,” that is a far cry in politics from a categorical rejection. If Biden or others choose to make an early pick for VP, it would have some precedent. But, perhaps more importantly, it has never worked as planned.

There are two noteworthy examples of a relatively early choice for the VP. In 2016, Senator Ted Cruz, running second to Donald Trump, hoped that an early announcement of Carly Fiorina as his VP choice would move the needle in his favor. Within a week, Cruz lost the Indiana primary and suspended his campaign.

In his insurgent campaign against President Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan did the same. Right before the convention, but after all the primaries and caucuses had their say, Reagan announced that his running mate would be Senator Richard Schweiker from Pennsylvania. Reagan’s move was an attempt to assuage the concerns of the more liberal parts of the GOP. The move received a mixed reception and did not push the needle enough for Reagan to get the nomination.

A choice by Biden would be very different—as opposed to Cruz and Reagan, his selection would not be a last-minute, desperate lurch, but rather an attempt to grab attention and support early in the process, in an already overcrowded field. While this might seem like a purely tactical—if not cynical—move, there is a real benefit for voters.

The decision on a vice president is not just an important choice in the election fight: It is the only decision that the candidate makes that really counts. The president can switch any policies, fire any advisors and even divorce a spouse and disown children— a president is not bound by anything that happened in the campaign. The one exception is the VP. Once a VP is in office, the president must live with that person for four years. This choice, above all others, actually gives a window into what the president thinks of the office and how a president will rule.

A VP may once have been seen as an unwanted appendage—not worth so much, as VP John Nance Garner’s famously put it, as a “warm bucket of spit”—but that has radically changed over the years. VPs have become critical players in politics, and seven of the last 12 have gone on to capture the presidential nomination. Since WWII, five vice presidents have become president.

Nevertheless, an early decision on a running mate is a potential minefield for Biden. In the general election, it is not clear that a vice presidential pick ever helps or even hurts the candidate.
Studies have found that voters do not take running mates into account. Richard Nixon, who was on the Republican national ticket five times, believed that the vice presidential choice could serve only to damage the president. While the VP has occasionally seemed to provide momentum to the ticket, there is no evidence of a VP making a different in the race—with the possible exception of Lyndon Johnson in 1960.

In the primaries, an early running mate choice could have a major impact—but chances are it’ll be a negative one. The problem for Biden, or anyone else who tries such a tactic, is that they will own all of the past missteps of their running mate. As we’ve repeatedly seen, the vetting process for elected officials is poor. Even politicians who have spent decades in the public spotlight may have serious skeletons in their closet. They also may have made upset critical constituencies in the past, facts that are likely to come out in the heat of an election. Suddenly, instead of running a race based on your personal strengths and defending only your own weaknesses, you must also defend someone else’s.

We’ve seen this happen in the past. George McGovern’s first vice presidential choice, Senator Thomas Eagleton, bowed out after it was revealed that he had undergone electroshock therapy. The lightweight reputation of George H.W. Bush’s pick, Senator Dan Quayle, led to questions about Bush’s judgment, though not enough to effect his winning race in 1988. And Senator John McCain seemed to ultimately regret the choice of Governor Sarah Palin in 2008. They may not have impacted the final result, but in a primary fight, all this could change.

*Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in N.Y., and writes The Recall Elections Blog.*