Rhymed and Framed Couplets: The Agenda-Setting Bumper Sticker Effect Prediction Model for Presidential Election Winners, 1840−2024

Thomas C. Terry
Utah State University, United States

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Thomas C. Terry

Abstract

Presidential candidates engage in long deliberations trying to balance the ticket to give them the best chance of winning. This study argues that the choice of a vice-presidential running mate is far simpler and more elegant than any of the complex variables often part of a vice-presidential decision . . . and fits onto a metaphorical bumper sticker. The Bumper Sticker Effect model has predicted the winning candidate in 44 of the last 46 presidential elections (95.60 percent since 1840), based on the differential in letter length between presidential and vice-presidential candidate last names. To win, the presidential winner's name must either exceed the vice president's or be no more than two letters shorter. Voters appear to perceive cognitively that the presidential candidate is overawed when the VP's name dominates. An Amazon Mechanical Turk online survey largely confirmed the theory. The study concluded that Tim Scott, J. D. Vance, or Kristi Noem would be the most numerically advantageous running mates for Donald Trump in the 2024 election, while the Biden-Harris pairing remained a winning combination as did the eventual Harris-Walz ticket.

Keywords: US presidents, elections, rhymed and framed couplets, anthropology, bumper sticker effect, running mates, cognitive linguistics, anthroponymy

Introduction

> *"The man with the best job in the country is the vice president. All he has to do is get up every morning and say, 'How is the president?'"*
> *– Will Rogers*

Vice President John Nance "Cactus Jack" Garner colorfully quipped, "The vice-presidency isn't worth a pitcher of warm piss".[1] *Kansas City Star* columnist Bill Vaughan added, "The Vice-Presidency is sort of like the last cookie on the plate. Everybody insists he won't take it, but somebody always does".[2] Whether urine or baked good, a presidential candidate has to offer the job to someone and that vice-presidential name is printed on a bumper sticker. Picking the right running mate by the length of a name may bring with it the White House.

Background

Since 1856, when the Republican Party first contested a presidential election, down through the 2024 election, almost 2.3 billion votes have been cast for the two parties (2,295,912,747) in 43 elections. During that period, Republicans have an edge of almost 14 million votes (13,952,033), approximately 0.61% of the total (0.0060769%). The total lead favors the GOP by 1,154,932,360 to 1,140,980,327. That works out to a bit over 325,000 votes per election (324,465.88), though this average is skewed by a growing population and the increasing number of states in the Union. Moreover, 12,750,318, or 91.39% of that margin, came from the 2000, 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections, when the Democratic candidate polled more popular votes than the Republican candidate despite losing three of the four. Removing them leaves 39 elections and an extraordinarily narrow 11,667,066 total-votes margin, a razor-thin 299,155.54-vote (0.0017%) per election difference out of 1,757,815,175 cast.

Over the 168 years from 1856 to 2024, Republicans won 25 elections (58.13%), while the Democrats took 18 (41.86%), a seven-election margin (16.27%). In the Electoral College, over those 43 elections, Republicans hold an 11,401–9,170 electoral vote advantage, or 51 per election (51.07). Since 1900, over 12 years and 32 presidential elections, only 618 electoral votes separate the Republican and Democratic candidates out of 16,706 cast for the two major parties. Republicans hold a 17–15 edge in victories and an 8,662 to 8,044 electoral-vote advantage overall. That is just 618 electoral votes, or 19.31 electoral votes per election (3.69 %). The total does not include the 173 electoral votes won by third-party candidates.

Given the slender victory margins of many American presidential elections, any edge could prove crucial. Three months after becoming a state in 1876, for the only time in its history, Colorado selected its three electors by the legislature, rather than by popular vote. Had they voted for Democrat Samuel Tilden, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes would have lost the presidential election. In 1916, Republican Charles Evans Hughes would have been elected president over Democratic incumbent Woodrow Wilson had he earned just 3,800 more votes in California. If Republican Thomas Dewey had received 58,000 more votes nationwide in

1948—18,000 of them in California—he would have beaten Harry Truman in 1948. Just 120,000 votes in 2004 in Ohio, out of 120 million cast nationwide, would have given John Kerry the presidency. Hillary Clinton needed just over 100,868 votes to beat Trump in 2016.

Bumper Sticker Effect

Traditional wisdom demands tapping a vice-presidential running mate to shore up perceived weaknesses of the presidential candidate in foreign affairs, trade, or domestic controversies; balance (or counterbalance) issues of age, religion, or geography; heal intraparty rifts; and/or deliver electoral vote-rich states. In all, 15 of 49 vice presidents, nearly a third (30.61%), have become president. Eight times vice presidents have succeeded to the presidency on the death of the president, and one on the resignation of the chief executive. Four incumbent vice presidents were elected president: John Adams (1796), Thomas Jefferson (1800), Martin Van Buren (1836), and George H. W. Bush (1988). Four incumbent vice presidents lost the presidency: John C. Breckenridge (1860), Richard Nixon (1960), Hubert Humphrey (1968), and Al Gore (2000). Vice president George Dallas angled for the Democratic nomination in 1848, and Charles Fairbanks sought the G.O.P. nomination in 1908; both were unsuccessful. Seven vice presidents died in office, two resigned, and eleven others did not run for president, two of them because of ill health (Charles Curtis and Alben Barkley). Two former vice presidents won the presidency after they left office: Richard Nixon (1968) and Joe Biden (2020).

The term "bumper sticker" is used metaphorically to represent the pairing of presidential and vice-presidential names, one atop the other. Bumper stickers did not appear until there were cars to attach them to, of course, maybe as early as 1912 (Bloch, 2000, 450).[3] The medium of the bumper sticker is, as Marshall McLuhan famously termed it, the message, and its form puts a frame, both figuratively and literally, around the candidates (1964, 9). Voters generate at a glance a spontaneous positive or negative opinion they carry into the voting booth.

Examine the architecture of a bumper sticker. It is all about balance, appearance, advertising, and a possible halo effect created by the person whose vehicle it is affixed to—something that equally applies to a yard or window sign and a campaign button. Presidential and vice-presidential candidates are paired on bumper stickers with the presidential name on top, giving rise to the terms "top and bottom" of the ticket. The effect is essentially the same if the two names appear on the same line with the presidential candidate first. To see what happens cognitively requires a look at Malcolm Gladwell's cognitive "Blink Moment" (2005). There is a sudden intuition and insight at work in a glimpse. A fleeting glance at a bumper sticker. Many experienced drivers can detect—somehow—in the movement of an approaching car whether it is going to stop, run a red light, or fail to turn a corner its turn signal is indicating; those, too, are blink moments. Some inner mechanism is at work, and voters may be making some similar rapid calculations. This Bumper Sticker Effect (B.S.E.) may only affect a vanishingly few voters, but that is enough in a close election.

The B.S.E. is based on the differential in letter length between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates' last names. Historically, on average, the winning presidential candidate boasts 6.67 letters in his name, while the losing candidate has 6.30 letters, a third of a letter difference. Both winning and losing vice-presidential hopefuls are essentially identical at 6.36 letters for the winner and 6.37 letters for the loser (graph 1). The most decisive variable, then, is that the presidential candidate's name must be longer than that of the opponent, making the presidential hopeful's name appear more dominant over the running mate. This gains more authority and some unknowable but real advantage.

To be successful, the presidential winner's name must noticeably exceed that of the running mate (by number of letters or size of letters) or be no more than two letters shorter. Voters cognitively appear to perceive a presidential candidate is somehow diminished in stature when the VP's name dominates or overpowers that of the prospective president. The losing Gore/Lieberman (4 letters vs. 9 letters) and winning Eisenhower/Nixon (10−5) pairings are prominent examples of this phenomenon (table 2). It's all about subconscious cognition and perception in a heartbeat (table 2).

Scholar Grant Smith demonstrated aurally what the B.S.E. does visually. "[M]any, if not most, voters are clearly influenced by a variety of emotive associations, among those are the sounds of candidates' names, especially a clear, predictable rhythm" (2007). Smith's model giving particular weight to "the internal rhythms of surnames and secondary weight to the combination of [particular] vowels and consonants" (2008). Smith asserted that his model accurately predicted the winner of the presidential general election 85.00% of the time (2008).
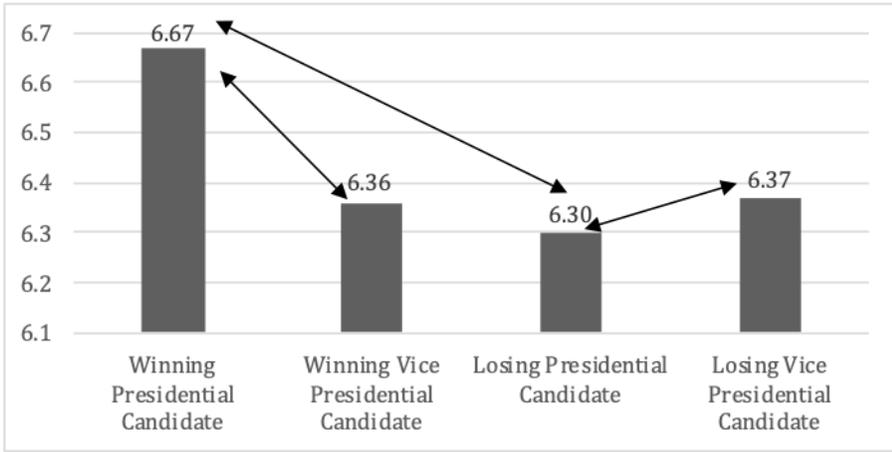
Graph 1: Name Length Comparisons

This uncomplicated method has held true in 95.65% of elections—44 of 46—since 1840, when the modern convention system, roughly, assumed its modern form with the Whigs and Democrats in 1844 and shows no sign of weakening (table 1). A 2022 Amazon Mechanical Turk study demonstrated the substance of this theory (see below).

Table 1: Bumper Sticker Gap—Historical Measures
First number in Winners and Losers categories is letters in presidential candidate's name; second number is letters in vice-presidential candidate's surname.

Year	Winners	Losers	Win Party	Year	Winners	Losers	Win Party
1840	8 – 5	8 – 7	Whig	1932	9 – 6	6 – 6	Dem.
1844	4 – 6	4 – 13	Dem.	1936	9 – 6	6 – 4	Dem.
1848	6 – 8	4 – 6	Whig	1940	9 – 7	7 – 6	Dem.
1852	6 – 4	5 – 6	Dem.	1944	9 – 6	5 – 7	Dem.
1856	8 – 12	7 – 6	Dem.	1948	6 – 7	5 – 6	Dem.
1860	7 – 6	12 – 4	Rep.	1952	10 – 5	9 – 8	Rep.
1864	7 – 7	9 – 9	Rep.	1956	10 – 5	9 – 7	Rep.
1868	5 – 6	7 – 5	Rep.	1960	7 – 7	5 – 5	Dem.
1872	5 – 6	7 – 5	Rep.	1964	7 – 8	9 – 6	Dem.
1876	5 – 7	6 – 9	Rep.	1968	5 – 5	8 – 6	Rep.
1880	8 – 6	7 – 7	Rep.	1972	5 – 5	8 – 7	Rep.
1884	9 – 9	6 – 5	Dem.	1976	6 – 7	4 – 4	Dem.
1888	8 – 6	9 – 7	Rep.	1980	6 – 4	6 – 7	Rep.
1892	9 – 9	8 – 4	Dem.	1984	6 – 4	7 – 7	Rep.
1896	8 – 6	5 – 6	Rep.	1988	4 – 6	7 – 7	Rep.
1900	8 – 9	5 – 9	Rep.	1992	7 – 4	4 – 6	Dem.
1904	9 – 9	6 – 5	Rep.	1996	7 – 4	4 – 4	Dem.
1908	4 – 7	5 – 4	Rep.	2000	4 – 6	4 – 9	Rep.
1912	6 – 8	9 – 7	Dem.	2004	4 – 6	5 – 7	Rep.
1916	6 – 8	6 – 9	Dem.	2008	5 – 5	6 – 5	Dem.
1920	7 – 8	3 – 9	Rep.	2012	5 – 5	6 – 4	Rep.
1924	8 – 5	5 – 5	Rep.	2016	5 – 5	7 – 5	Rep.
1928	6 – 6	5 – 8	Rep.	2020	5 – 6	5 – 5	Dem.
				2024	5 – 5	6 – 4	Rep.

Table 2: Winning And Losing Tickets

Losers			
COX	CLAY	BRYAN	TILDEN
ROOSEVELT	FRELINGHUYSEN	STEVENSON	HENDRICKS
SMITH	HUGHES	GORE	PEROT
ROBINSON	FAIRBANKS	LIEBERMAN	STOCKDALE
Winners			
REAGAN	COOLIDGE	ROOSEVELT	ROOSEVELT
BUSH	DAWES	GARNER	TRUMAN
	EISENHOWER	HARRISON	MCKINLEY
	NIXON	MORTON	HOBART

In all but two presidential elections since 1840, the presidential candidates who won were those whose names appeared perfectly balanced—or nearly so—by no more than two letters fewer than their vice-presidential partners. Buchanan/Breckenridge (8–12) in 1856 and Taft/Sherman (4–7) in 1908 are the exceptions. Candidates whose names have the same number of letters are 2–1 losers, though not as often in recent decades. Having a longer name or falling within the two-letter limit does not, of course, guarantee victory. Otherwise, there would be presidents Parker (1904), Seymour (1868), Frémont (1856), Stevenson (1952 and 1956), and Goldwater (1964). They either faced other candidates with better numerical balance between presidential and vice-presidential names or were swamped by historical events and political misfortunes.

Since 1840, only six presidents have had five letters in their names and none from 1876 until Nixon's victories in 1968 and 1972. In the past four elections, all winning candidates had five-letter names: Obama in 2008 and 2012, Trump in 2016 and 2024, and Biden in 2020. By contrast, seven presidents have had six letters in their name, five since 1912. Three of them have been reelected, although two were defeated for reelection (one by another candidate with six letters, Carter vs. Reagan in 1980). There seems to be a potent historic link, then, between length of letters, authority, and power—or the perception of them: A presidential candidate must select a running mate whose name does not exceed his or hers by more than two letters.

An incumbency advantage interferes with the B.S.E. Since 1840, there have been 27 elections with an incumbent president running. In every election but two, the winning vice-presidential candidate's name did not exceed that of the winning presidential candidate by more than two letters, which at 92.60% is just three percentage points below the 95.60% that includes all winning presidential and vice-presidential candidates. In those two exceptions of 1912 and 1916, both Democratic and Republican vice-presidential candidate names were longer than the presidential candidate: Wilson/Marshall and Taft/Sherman in 1912 (Sherman died six days before the election.) and Wilson/Marshall and Hughes/Fairbanks in 1916. In those 27 elections, the winning presidential candidates had an average of 6.96 letters, while the losing candidates had 6.08 letters, nearly a one-letter difference. Almost three-quarters of a letter separated the winning presidential candidate from the winning vice-president. The losing vice-presidential candidate was still longer, but barely, than the losing presidential candidate by a 6.16–6.08 margin. However, the incumbency advantage is diminished since 1932 with 12 incumbents winning the elections (This counts Trump as being reelected in 2024.).[4]

There were 21 elections from 1840 to 2020 featuring non-incumbent presidential candidates. In 19 of the elections, 90.48% of the winning ticket falls within the two-letter margin, a bit over four percentage points below the 95.60% long-term average. In 10 of the 20 elections, the presidential candidate with the longer name defeated his opponent. There was only one tie, leaving nine elections when the losing candidate's name was longer than that of the winner. All the elections were within the two-letter margin. Among the non-incumbents, the winning vice-presidential name was about a third of a letter longer than the winning president at 6.45 to 6.1. However, the losing vice-presidential candidates' names exceeded that of his presidential running mate by nearly two-thirds of a letter at 6.68 to 6.05. Further, the non-incumbent and winning presidential candidate name is very slightly longer than that of the losing candidate, 6.1 to 6.05. In those five elections featuring non-incumbents with a vice-presidential candidate name exceeding that of the presidential candidate, all lost to candidates within the B.S.E. limit:

- 1844 Polk/Dallas defeated Clay/Frelinghuysen
- 1876 Hayes/Wheeler beat Tilden/Hendricks
- 1928 Hoover/Curtis won over Smith/Robinson
- 2000 Bush/Cheney edged Gore/Lieberman

Why does this matter? From 1840 to 2024—over 184 years and 47 elections—approximately 60.00% of elections have included an incumbent; very roughly, then, the winner is a coin flip. However, the last 24 elections and 92 years from 1932 to 2024, there has been a dramatic change: just over 70.00% of elections have featured at least one incumbent. The margins that the B.S.E. provides can be decisive and is becoming increasingly more so. Again, from 1840 to 2024, winning incumbents had a 7.0 to 6.2 letter advantage over their vice-presidential running mate, while the losing ticket had a spread of 6.4–6.1. Even such a small difference as 0.30 versus 0.80 may spell the difference between winning and losing. This B.S.E. indicator is more dramatic in the non-incumbent elections: The vice-presidential candidate names were actually longer than the presidential candidate by a 6.5–6.2 margin. The pace has quickened over the past 24 elections up to 2024 corresponding with, perhaps not coincidentally, the rise in mass media; first TV, and then online. The only winning ticket outside the B.S.E. limit since 1840 was the first presidential election the Republican Party contested in 1856 when the two-party system was realigning during the Whig Party collapse. Republicans Frémont/Dayton (7–6) and Fillmore/Donelson (8–8) lost to Democrats Buchanan/Breckinridge (8–12).[5]

Seventeen elections since 1932 featured incumbent presidents out of 24 (70.83%). The winning incumbent presidential candidate had 6.76 letters in his last name, while his running mate had 5.59, a 1.17-letter differential. The losing ticket candidates were much closer: 6.0–5.71, a quarter-point spread. B.S.E. or not, incumbents win if there is a bigger gap in letters between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Among non-incumbent winners and losers, the pattern was virtually identical over the seven elections since 1932. The winning tickets were virtually identical: 5.71–5.57 for the winners and 6.57–6.42 for the losers. This works out to a difference on the winning ticket of 0.14 between presidential and vice-presidential winners and 0.15 between the losing candidates. The only possibly material difference was that the presidential winner's name was .86 shorter than the losing candidate, while the winning vice-presidential candidate was 0.85 shorter than his losing counterpart.

Seven incumbent vice presidents ran for the presidency while still in office; five lost and two won: Breckinridge (1860–Lost), Taft (1908–Won), Nixon (1960–L), Humphrey (1968–L), George H. W. Bush (1988–W), Gore (2000–L), and Harris (2024–L). However, as a non-incumbent, Nixon ran a second time in 1968 and was elected, followed in 1984 by another former vice president, Mondale, who lost. Republicans won two and lost one, while Democrats lost four of four. That 2–5 record soundly debunks any vice-presidential incumbency advantage; in fact, it suggests the opposite.

Theory

The Bumper Sticker Effect (graph 2) is nested in agenda setting theory: The media are not particularly influential in telling audiences what to think, whether on a bumper sticker, in a newspaper, or on a news broadcast, as Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw contend (1972). But they are enormously powerful at telling people what to think about and even how. Walter Lippmann entitled a chapter in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads" (1922). The media placed those pictures there by "influencing the salience of attitudes", Shaw and McCombs hypothesized (1972).

Even more to the point, political iconography[6] "deals with the mechanism of visual political efforts at persuasion" (Grave 1994, 444) and its effect on political campaigns (Medrano et al. 2021, 215). Research on the connection between mediated, iconographic imagery, and political iconography has been conducted in Germany (Warnke 1994). According to three scholars, political iconography, metaphorically, "can lead to action [. . .] especially in political campaigns", obviously "something crucial in politics" (1994). More importantly for this current study, they describe visual impact as a "chiasmus", the rhetorical "reversal of the order of words in the second of two parallel phrases", a fair and accurate description of a bumper sticker and the B.S.E. Krogstad concluded that images "are effective tools of political persuasion . . . [and] particularly true during the election period" (2017).
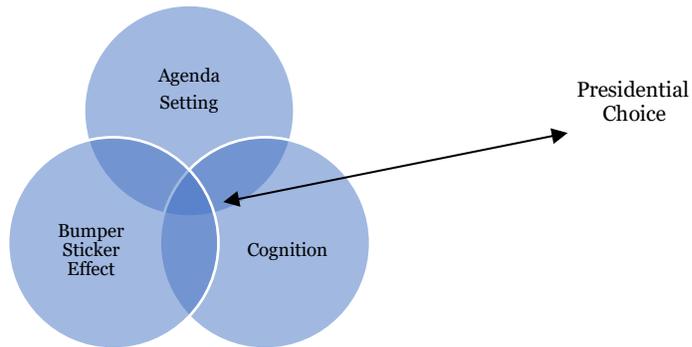
Graph 2: Intersection of Agenda Setting, Cognition, and the Bumper Sticker Effect

Experiment

To test the B.S.E., a simple online flashcard experiment was devised. It utilized name pairings that do not carry any political baggage or bias (no Lincoln, Trump, Roosevelt, Biden, or Kennedy, for instance). Instead, names were composed of random letters and real candidates, who might have run in 2024; the latter one proved the most instructive. The crowdsourced marketplace Amazon MTurk was employed to recruit paid participants for an online convenience survey (Paolacci and Chandler 2014). According to a pair of studies, MTurk is as reliable as offline survey instruments (Shank, 2016) and provides comparable cognitive reaction (Palan and Schitter 2018, 22). Nancy C. Andreasen et al. examined the "effects of variable sample size in a study of Human memory" and settled on an n of 33 as the "assumed [. . .] 'gold standard'" (1966, 804). Woods, Rippeth et al. reviewed 16 articles in the early 21st Century and found an n range as high as 63 with a median of 10 (2006). They further reviewed published studies a decade earlier and found a median of nearly 90. There were 220 unique participants in this current survey.

Scholars Stefan Palan and Christian Schitter, analyzing several studies, found that "such online experiments appear to offer reliability, as researchers have successfully replicated a range of well-known lab experiments from economics and psychology using subjects sourced via MTurk" (Crump et al. 2013). Other studies have found that MTurk workers' answers are fairly consistent across various experiments (Rand 2012), while at the same time providing the requisite accuracy and reliability demanded by researchers (Crump 2013). D. B. Shank concluded that MTurk workers met the same standards as respondents in offline studies (2016). Of equal significance—and value—MTurk workers came within a millisecond in cognitive reaction times of their offline counterparts, providing scholars with confidence in the validity and consistency of the data collected (2016). In this B.S.E. study, a nearly instantaneous response was essential to test the method.

In a survey of the literature, scholar Duncan D. Nulty found that paper-based response rates ranged from 32.60% to 75.00%, both outliers, with most settling into the 55–56% range (2008). Online response rates were between 20.00% and 47.00%, but mainly between 39.00–43.00% (2008); the interviewer effect should be significantly dampened online. Online surveys, it seems, do skew more educated, white, and internet-literate than a randomized, offline survey.

There were three separate sections to the survey. The first consisted of invented names, followed by a short section with random letters. Potential 2024 candidate pairings were tested in the third section of the survey (table 3). Biden and Trump were intentionally excluded to avoid becoming little more than a preferential opinion poll. (The study was conducted well before Biden dropped out.)

MTurk workers were told:

> The following individuals are running for president and vice president in the general election, and this is how their names are paired on a bumper sticker with the presidential candidate on top and the vice-presidential candidate immediately beneath. There are real candidates, random names, and even nonsensical name combinations. We want your "Blink Moment"; your instantaneous reaction. Who would you vote for, knowing nothing other than their names paired together no matter what you consider their race, age, gender, or party? There are no right or wrong answers. You may stop participating at any point for any reason without consequences by closing your web browser.

Each Mechanical Turk worker was allowed a maximum of three seconds to make a "Blink Moment" decision before being automatically advanced to the next question. The average time taken was 2.93 seconds, suggesting that three second was optimal. They were presented with two pairs of presidential/vice-presidential candidates at a time: There were 36 sets of four candidates (two presidential and two vice-presidential pairs) in the overall study for a total of 72 pairs representing two unnamed political parties. There were 220 valid responses with a handful of nonresponses. MTurk participants who completed the survey were paid approximately $3.65.

MTurk workers provided a geographically and age-balanced study population: Survey takers from the District of Columbia and 44 of the American states participated in the study. Only the nation's smallest states, mainly, were unrepresented: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Vermont, and Wyoming. California and New York produced the most responses, 19 and 16, respectively, or 8.63% and 7.27% of the total. Michigan was next with 15 (6.81%), followed by North Carolina and Florida with 12 (5.45%), and Texas, Illinois, and Ohio with 10 apiece (4.54%).

MTurk workers were asked whether they are eligible to vote in U.S. elections, then provided two open-ended questions, and supplied a blank box to fill in age and gender. Of the 220 respondents, 120 self-identified their gender as male and 98 self-identified as female. There was one blank and one answer that was not applicable. The average age of participants was 43.04 with no missing answers. The two youngest respondents were both 24 and the two oldest were 69. The most common ages (mode) were 35 and 36 with 14 each (6.36%). The largest age cohort was 33–39, accounting for 67 of the total workers, nearly a third (30.45%). Age brackets in the study were: 18–24 = 3 (1.36%); 25–44 = 135 (61.36%); 45–64 = 73 (33.18%); 65–74 = 9 (4.09%); and 75–up = 0 (0.00%). Those in the 65–74 age cohort turn out to vote in greater numbers than younger cohorts, and they were significantly underrepresented in this study. In 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 66.80% of those 18 and older voted. Divided by age cohort, turnout was 18–24 = 48.00%; 25–44 = 55.00%; 45–64 = 65.50; 65–75 = 73.00%; and 75–older = 70.20%. The average age of Americans was 38.20. So, the universe of MTurk respondents was more male and older than the nation as a whole.

Results

The most convincing evidence of the B.S.E. was found in the Potential Name category of the MTurk survey. In eight of the 10 pairings (80.00%), the winners were within the +/-2-letter margin (table 3), though nearly 18 percentage points below the historical average (table 3). There was slight evidence of a "first choice" preference: 17 pairs were first, 13 were second, and six were essentially dead heats. There were two races with both sets of running mates with identical number of letters: Buttigieg-Duckworth/Rubio-Haley and Harris-Newsom/Cheney-Pompeo. In both of those, the shorter of the two sets won (both Democratic tickets). Only the Yang-Buttigieg and Booker-Duckworth tickets contradicted the theory, defeating Christie-Cheney and DeSantis-Haley, respectively. Nonetheless, the differences in name-length cannot be entirely explained by partisanship, given that Republicans Abbott-Cotton soundly defeated Democrats Newsom-Klobuchar, while Democrats Duckworth-King roundly beat the Rubio-Hutchinson GOP ticket (Maine senator Angus King is an Independent who caucuses with the Democrats). Klobuchar-Buttigieg and Rubio-Sasse were a toss-up, separated by under half of one percent respectively. Given that all of the past four elections were won by presidential and vice-presidential candidates with five letters in both names, the GOP candidates might win in that race, given whatever unknown margin of error is inherent in the B.S.E. Interestingly, one name leaps out with surpassing strength no matter his pairing: Bernie Sanders, who garnered over 70.00% twice.

Table 3: Plausible 2024 Candidate Pairings
The percentages received by each candidate pairing with the "winner" are listed first and were not how they were presented in the survey.

Candidate Pairs	Percent	Candidate Pairs	Percent
DUCKWORTH KING	62.39	HARRIS NEWSOM	66.82
vs.		**vs.**	
RUBIO HUTCHINSON	37.61	CHENEY POMPEO	33.18%
ABBOTT COTTON	58.10	BLOOMBERG KLOBUCHAR	58.88
vs.		**vs.**	
NEWSOM KLOBUCHAR	41.90	DESANTIS HUTCHINSON	41.12
BUTTIGIEG DUCKWORTH	56.48	SANDERS KLOBUCHAR	72.86
vs.		**vs.**	
RUBIO HALEY	43.52	SUNUNU CHRISTIE	27.14
SANDERS BOOKER	71.76	KLOBUCHAR BUTTIGIEG	50.24
vs.		**vs.**	
HUTCHINSON RUBIO	28.24	RUBIO SASSE	49.76
BOOKER DUCKWORTH	62.21	YANG BUTTIGIEG	54.46
vs.		**vs.**	
DESANTIS HALEY	37.79	CHRISTIE CHENEY	45.54

Table 4: Random Letter Candidate Pairings

Candidate Pairs	Percent	Candidate Pairs	Percent
PKRF MXLCHDWD	70.05	PGKHS FNKPWQM	52.83
vs.		**vs.**	
NBFDVM KVTEDFN	29.95	VRTS SRBZQ	47.17
QFDW DQLOMLOR	56.46	LMRFCDBJU KHCQ	50.52
vs.		**vs.**	
XWIMHFQZ KKPY	43.54	KLGMRE HYFFEVIVYEM	49.48

If the random letter combination is to be believed (table 4), then the Bumper Sticker Effect is a 50–50, coin flip proposition. Of the four pairings, two provided solid evidence of the B.S.E. (50.00%). Only PGKHS-FNKPWQM fell within the +/- 2 range, though narrowly. Consistent with the B.S.E., the LMRFCDBJU-KHCQ (9–4) pairing featured a longer presidential name while KLGMRE-HYFFEVIVYEM (6–11) demonstrated the dominance of a vice-presidential candidate. The other two tickets contradicted the premises of the theory. Obviously, partisanship and candidate preferences are essential to any voter decisions, rendering the results nothing more than "interesting".

Table 5: Invented Candidate Pairings

Candidate Pairs	Percent	Candidate Pairs	Percent
WILLIAMS JAMES	9.64	CLARK ROBINSON	68.97
vs.		vs.	
HERNANDEZ LOPEZ-PEREZ	20.36	PEREZ GUTIERREZ	31.03
FRANKLIN JOHNSON	71.11	ROSS RICHARDSON	66.67
vs.		vs.	
GARCIA GONZALEZ	28.89	RODRIGUEZ MORE	33.33
STONE-COOK KAPLAN	57.00	KIM BARNSTABLE	60.70
vs.		vs.	
LIU MONTGOMERY	43.00	BOUCHARD LeFEBVRE	39.30
RICHARDS HOWARD	66.99	BOYD WILLIAMSON	53.59
vs.		vs.	
HUNT CUMMINGS	33.01	BRYANTS FOX	46.41
MAXWELLS ROY	57.48	REID SULLIVAN	60.95
vs.		vs.	
TOKKO CAMPOBELLO	42.52	LEE VANDERSNICK	39.05
WEIZMANN BILL	64.95	MAY SONNENBERG	63.21
vs.		vs.	
AHMAD ARONOWITZ	35.05	MENENDEZ TODD	36.79
PATEL COOKE	51.63	FRY HOBBES	52.36
vs.		vs.	
PARK RHEE	48.37	HALL GALLEGOS	47.64
MONMOUTH BECKERMAN	63.38	RAO JENSEN	59.52
vs.		vs.	
WATANABE BEAN	36.62	ANANYEV GILL	40.48
POOLE BERENSTEIN	67.45	EARL MAHMOUD	71.23
vs.		vs.	
LEE TABATABAI	32.55	MUSSAIN KHAN	28.77

Table 5 Continued: Invented Candidate Pairings

Candidate Pairs	Percent	Candidate Pairs	Percent
LOCKLEARS HOWE	50.24	ALI DAVIDSON	62.44
vs.		**vs.**	
LOWENTHAL MACINTOSH	49.76	BLUMENSTEIN MALIK	37.56
DAWES HOWE	65.55		
vs.			
IVANENKO BLANCHARD	34.45		

In the Invented Candidates section (table 5), eight of the twenty-one election simulations confirmed the B.S.E. (38.09%), although that is just slightly over a third of the historical average. However, that is deceptive and represents a quirk in the design: In four of the pairings, both sets of candidates exceeded the +/-2 margin. Subtracting that from the total changes the percentage, confirms the B.S.E. at 47.05%, about what the random numbers study found. More troubling, however, is evidence of implicit biases against those with non-Western-sounding names. Multiple research studies have found an implicit bias in treatment by medical professionals, something that these survey takers seemed to demonstrate as well (Banaji & Greenwald, 2017). The name pairings were designed to include names covering the broad diversity of American society and political life and biases were unanticipated and uncompensated for. Of the 54 name pairings in the "invented names" section, 13 (20.07%) seemed to elicit bias against non-Western-sounding names. Two pairings contained Russian-sounding names and lost: (Ananyev-Blanchard and Ivanenko-Gill, though the Rao-Jensen ticket did beat the latter). This could be attributed somewhat to the invasion of Ukraine that was in full swing during the survey period. Of the 13 pairings, eight were presented as the second choice and five as the first choice. Mainly the margins were not even close.

- Hernandez and Lopez-Perez crushed by Williams-James = 20.36−79.64%
- Garcia-Gonzalez lost to Franklin-Johnson = 28.89−71.11%
- Perez-Gutierrez beat by Clark-Robinson = 31.03−68.97%
- Rodriguez-More defeated Ross-Richardson = 33.33−66.67%
- Liu-Montgomery lost to Stone-Cook and Kaplan = 43.0−57.0%
- Bouchard-LeFevbre vanquished by Kim-Barnstable = 39.30−60.70%
- Tokko-Campobello bested by Maxwells-Roy = 42.52−57.48%
- Ahmad-Aronowitz trounced by Weizmann-Bill = 35.05−64.95%
- Watanabe-Bean routed by Monmouth-Beckerman = 36.62−63.38%
- Lee-Tabatabai easily overcome by Poole-Berenstein = 32.55−67.45%
- Ivanenko-Blanchard surmounted by Dawes-Howe = 34.45−65.55%
- Mussain-Khan demolished by Earl-Mahmoud = 29.77−71.23%
- Blumenstein-Malik overpowered by Ali-Davidson 37.56−62.44%

In two pairings, having only one non-Western-sounding name out of four still led to that ticket's defeat: Menendez-Todd was beaten convincingly by May-Sonnenberg by 63.21−36.79% and Hall-Gallegos was more narrowly defeated by Fry-Hobbes, 47.64%−52.36%. Those with names that could be considered Western-sounding were Richards-Howard/Hunt-Cummings; Locklears-Howe/Lowenthal-Macintosh; Boyd-Williamson/Bryants-Fox; and Reid-Sullivan/Lee-Vandersnick. Only Richards-Howard won within the B.S.E.'s +/-2-pt. margin. Lowenthal-Macintosh (9-9) and Bryants-Fox (7-3) should have won. The Mussain-Khan and the Blumenstein-Malik duos were roundly beaten by those candidates with at least one Western-sounding name in both cases. Seventeen of the 21 pairings featured at least one—and usually more—non-Western-sounding name. This prejudice disappeared in the actual-name list, perhaps because the candidates who did have non-Western-sounding names, such as Andrew Yang, were real and respondents had some familiarity with them.

2024 Election

So, what did this suggest for the 2024 presidential election? Biden upended the election by withdrawing on July 21 in the wake of a disastrous debate performance on June 27, amidst concerns over his age and cognitive abilities and trailing Trump in the polls. Various news articles and books have alleged a cover-up of Biden's health by aides and family members.[7] Vice President Harris then assumed the Democratic mantle almost by default. As Trump recuperated from being wounded in a July 13 assassination attempt, he considered his running mate in the run-up to the Republican National Convention. The three best B.S.E. pairings were:

> • Kristi Noem: Trump (5)-Noem (4). History has shown a vice-presidential candidate with fewer letters than the presidential candidate is most successful. The "N" and "m" appear to make Noem's name more dominate, taking away some of the one-letter advantage Trump might have had.

> • Tim Scott: Trump (5)-Scott (5). Given the two small letter "t's" in Scott's name, plus Trump's larger "m" made Trump's name appear more dominant. Plus, pairings of 5–5 have won three of the past four elections.

> • J. D. Vance: Trump (5)-Vance (5). Given recent history, the 5–5 combination has won 75% of the elections since 2008: Trump selected Vance and won. Vance easily carried his home state of Ohio's 17 electoral votes, 55.15%–43.93%, increasing the winning margin Trump-Pence had four years earlier, 53.27%-45.24%.

A month later, Harris faced the same vice-presidential dilemma and without any incumbency advantage. Her top B.S.E. options were:

> • Josh Shapiro: Harris (6)-Shapiro (7). As the popular governor of the crucial purple state of Pennsylvania with 19 electoral votes, Shapiro seemed the smartest choice, though far from perfect from a B.S.E. perspective. His name was within the two-vote margin, but still longer than that of the top of the ticket, which wasn't ideal. Trump won Pennsylvania, 50.37%–48.66%

> • Mark Kelly: Harris (6)-Kelly (5). The Arizona senator's name contains six letters, the same as the Democratic standard bearer, but two "ll's" in his name still conveys a presidential appearance advantage. Given some of the significant pluses Kelly had politically—a former astronaut, a senator from a battleground state with 11 electoral votes, and a wife and former congresswoman (Gabby Giffords), who survived an assassination attempt—he seemed to possess far more other tangible advantages. Trump won Arizona 52.22%–46.69%.

> • Tim Walz: Harris (6)-Walz (4). Historically, a vice-presidential candidate with fewer letters than the presidential candidate is the most successful, an advantage only the Minnesota governor possessed among the most-frequently mentioned candidates. Walz unimpressively carried his home state, 50.92%–46.68%, which Biden had carried 52.40%–45.28% in 2020 and which a Republican had not won in over half a century anyway.

Statistical Analysis

The B.S.E. dataset is quite small, covering just 47 elections over parts of three centuries and 184 years. This complicates statistical levels of confidence and validity. However, the Amazon MTurk data is compact and specific enough to analyze (figure 1).
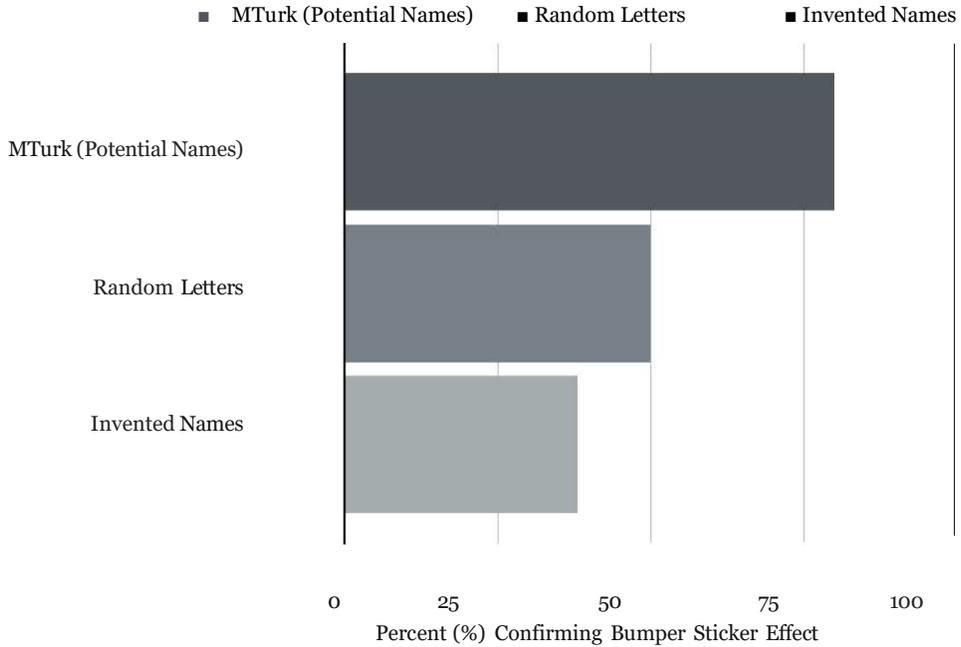

Figure 1: Bumper Sticker Confirmation Rates by Experimental Category

A Spearman Correlation yielded ρ ≈ - 0.25 for combined name length and vote percentage, detecting a slight negative association between shorter names and winning. The effect was inconsistent across categories. A series of binomial analyses was conducted to test the B.S.E. across all 35 simulated elections: 18 confirmed the B.S.E. (51.4%). A one-sample binomial test indicated this rate did not differ significantly from chance: $p = 0.87$, two-tailed. A chi-square test was also not significant: $\chi^2(2, N = 35) = 2.40$, $p = 0.30$.

In the Invented Names category, non-Western-appearing names lost decisively in 13 of 54 pairings (75.9–24.1%). A binomial test found this difference over chance was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ with a very large effect size (Cohen's $h = 1.57$). This suggests a pronounced and implicit bias against non-Western-appearing names.[10] MTurk respondents were not representative of the nation as a whole, whether by gender, age, and/or geographic distribution. Unlike professional opinion polls, there is no statistical margin of error possible for these simulated elections.

Conclusion[8]

> "The past does not repeat itself", Mark Twain remarked, "but it rhymes" (1873). And with bumper stickers and presidential elections, it does so in framed couplets.

> *"I do not propose to be buried until I am dead."*
> *– Daniel Webster, declining the Whig Party's 1850 vice-presidential offer[9]*

Vice President Garner called accepting the vice-presidential nomination the "worst damn-fool mistake I ever made". Maybe. But for a presidential candidate, picking the vice president without attention to the Bumper Sticker Effect may well be a critical blunder, especially if the election margin is razor thin. The value of any

political theory does not lie in explanations (or justifications) <u>after</u> the fact. Rather, it is its <u>predictive</u> value that is most valuable: whether a presidential candidate can gain an advantage—no matter how slight—and one the B.S.E. provides. Notwithstanding conventional political wisdom and dismissal of the impact of a VP candidate, a president should—in fact, <u>must</u>—select a running mate with a name tied with or shorter, preferably three or four letters shorter. And never should a presidential hopeful pick a vice president with a name significantly longer, especially beyond a two-letter differential.

Notes

[1] Garner was the incumbent Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives when elected to the vice presidency and served two terms under Franklin Roosevelt, 1933–1941. Newspaper journalists rendered his earthy comment involving "warm piss" with the publishable "bucket of warm spit" or "pitcher of warm spit." Garner is the longest-lived vice president in U.S. history, dying in 1967 just 15 days short of his 99th birthday. Garner was dropped as vice president because he announced he would seek the Democratic nomination before FDR decided on seeking an unprecedented third term.

[2] Vaughan wrote a syndicated column for the *Kansas City Star* for 30 years until his 1977 death. He memorably observed, "A citizen of America will cross the ocean to fight for democracy but won't cross the street to vote in a national election."

[3] Campaign buttons are much older and extend to well before the Civil War in some form.

[4] Grover Cleveland of New York was the first non-consecutive president with two number designations—22 and 24—winning in 1884 and 1892, while Trump became the second–45 and 47–winning in 2016 and 2024. Three U.S. elections featured incumbent or former presidents: Incumbent Benjamin Harrison and Cleveland in 1892; Incumbent Taft versus Theodore Roosevelt in 1912; and Incumbent Biden against Trump in 2024.

[5] Fillmore was a former president and carried just one state, though he received a significant number of popular votes: 873,053. Buchanan carried 19 states with 174 electoral votes and 1,836,072 popular votes. Frémont won the 114 electoral votes of 11 states with 1,342,346 popular votes. The Whig and American parties joined forces to support Fillmore.

[6] Iconography comes from the Greek words *eikon* 'image' and *graphien* 'writing' and describes the study of image writing or description (van Straten and De Man 1994).

[7] Among other accounts, see: Jake Tapper and Alex Thompson, *Original Sin: President Biden's Decline, Its Cover-Up, and His Disastrous Choice to Run Again* (New York: Penguin Press, 2025).

[8] There are other—some fanciful—predictors of presidential victory. There's the World Series forecast: If the American League wins the Series, then the Republican wins—the National League's Phillies and Giants won in '08 and '12, rightly predicting Obama victories; the National League Cubs won in 2016 wrongly predicting a Clinton victory; and the Dodgers won in 2020 correctly anticipating a Biden win. There's also a height predictor: The tallest candidate wins. This worked for Obama both times and Trump in 2016, but not in 2020. Then there is the Beaujolais Wine Harvest indicator that holds that a possible bad year for Beaujolais Nouveau wine in France presages a GOP victory: Recently, it has been the opposite.

[9] Had Webster accepted the vice-presidential nomination he would have become president in 1850 after President Zachary Taylor died in office. Instead, Millard Fillmore succeeded to the presidency. Webster died on October 24, 1852, age 70, and just before the 1852 election. Speaker of the House Lin Boyd would have succeeded as president until March 4, 1852, when Franklin Pierce would have been inaugurated, giving the U.S. four presidents in a four-year period.

[10] Barack Hussein Obama was twice elected U.S. president (2008 and 2012) despite a non-Western-sounding name. Zohran Kwame Mamdani was elected mayor of New York City in 2025 with an equally non-Western-sounding name. In 1986, the Illinois Democratic candidate for governor, Adlai Stevenson III, formed a new party rather than run on the same ticket with two Lyndon LaRouche, Jr., supporters, Mark Fairchild and Janice Hart, who won the party's primary for lieutenant governor and secretary of state, respectively. Their affiliation with the conspiracy theorist and cult leader LaRouche was not widely publicized until after their primary wins over George Sangmeister and Aurelia Pucinski, whose names sounded foreign to voters, according to post-election polls and interviews. In the general election, all five candidates lost to their Republican opponents.

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AI Disclosure Statement

No Artificial Intelligence Tools or Technology were used to conduct the research or write this article, and none of its content or the underlying research underpinning it has been generated, improved, corrected, or altered by AI. I have read, understood, and complied with *NAMES'* AI policy.

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Notes on the Contributor

Thomas C. Terry, PhD, owned and edited a small group of community newspapers in western Illinois before earning his M.A. and PhD in mass communication from the University of North Carolina at chapel Hill. He spent a year on a Defense Department Intelligence Community post-doctoral fellowship. Dr. Terry founded a Shakespearean Festival, launched three newspapers, served as President of the Illinois Press Association, and created the first website of any newspaper east of the Mississsippi in the mid-1990s.

Correspondence to: Tom Perry. Email: thomas.terry@usu.edu