

Could running mate Ryan run the country?

By [Jason Stein](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Is GOP running mate Paul Ryan the stuff that presidents and commanders-in-chief are made of?

Polling shows that many Americans are still making up their minds about the Janesville Republican as a vice presidential pick, though he's not surprisingly getting higher marks from voters in his home state.

Ryan has deep knowledge of Congress and the federal budget, brains and vigor, and a telegenic ease with the media. But if called, could he manage the vast federal bureaucracy, protect the nation from peril overseas and inspire citizens across the country?

The question isn't an idle one. Polls show it's the one that voters care most about in a vice presidential pick. And if presumptive GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney and Ryan win in November - or even come close - there's a significant chance that one day Ryan could find himself running for or even serving as president.

Jeremi Suri, a scholar of American foreign policy and the presidency at the University of Texas-Austin and a former Wisconsin resident, called Ryan's budget expertise impressive but noted that there were gaps in other parts of his White House résumé.

"He's someone who's shown a detailed engagement with one of the big challenges of the day. That's a big deal," said Suri, who's spoken with Ryan in the past. But "he hasn't shown yet that he's a national-level leader."

Vice presidents are famous for playing only a small role in government beyond standing ready for the worst. But even in the absence of disaster striking the president, the job can be a staircase to the world's most powerful post. Based on history, statistician Nate Silver of The New York Times gives Ryan a [one-in-three chance](#) of winning an election to become president someday - if he and Romney can win in November.

Ryan is still being introduced to a national audience, but he will likely play only a supporting role in any election or defeat. A [USA Today and Gallup](#) poll from last week found Ryan with slightly higher favorable ratings than unfavorable, though a significant share of those polled still are unsure about the 42-year-old Republican. But 66% of those surveyed said the pick of Ryan won't have much effect on how they vote in November.

Charles Franklin, a national expert on polling now at Marquette University, said that voters may latch onto just a few factors, such as experience and age, in deciding whether Ryan is qualified. They'll also be heavily influenced by whether they support or oppose Romney and the Republican Party, he said.

"A lot of what people bring to the evaluation is their partisan predisposition," Franklin said.

But a candidate's record also matters.

Ryan brings to the job his nearly 14 years in the U.S. House serving the 1st Congressional District, a southeastern Wisconsin region that includes rural areas, blue-collar manufacturing communities and some urban areas. The district, especially Ryan's hometown of Janesville, has suffered from plant closings and the harsh effects of the recession and the loss of manufacturing jobs afflicting many other parts of the country.

Ryan is best known for mastery of the federal budget, commitment to cutting both government spending and deficits, and his service on the House Budget Committee, which he now chairs and often talks about in the media. Suri noted that Ryan's experience is similar to past leaders such as Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson, who both first served in Congress before becoming vice presidents.

Knowing how to move legislation through Congress and defend it in the media would be a huge plus for Ryan in the White House, and it's experience that Romney lacks, Suri said. But there is also a vast difference between representing a district and representing an entire country, he said.

Gov. Scott Walker sees Ryan as qualified now to serve as president, arguing that his fellow young conservative is a bright, reform-focused politician who hasn't ducked difficult challenges such as controlling the growth in spending on entitlements such as Medicare.

"He takes on every element of the federal budget," Walker said. "I think he's just well-versed."

Rep. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, the ranking Democrat on the budget committee, knows Ryan so well that he was reportedly chosen to play Ryan in debate preparations for Vice President Joe Biden. Van Hollen called Ryan a knowledgeable and "collegial" counterpart who debates sharply but civilly with his fellow legislators.

But Van Hollen said he sees Ryan's views on the budget as an "uncompromising" approach that would reward the wealthy with level or lower taxes at the expense of needed spending on vulnerable seniors, education for the young and infrastructure for economic development.

"The math is pretty easy. If you're not going to ask for one penny more from the wealthiest, you're going to hit everybody else pretty hard," Van Hollen said.

These differences over Ryan's budget record have so far drawn far more attention than issues of foreign policy or national defense, where Ryan has much less experience. The Romney-Ryan campaign points out that on the budget committee Ryan did help write a defense budget that sought to protect the military from spending cuts and that he has also been involved in Middle East trade issues.

Republicans argue that President Barack Obama had little foreign policy experience when he ran for president in 2007 and 2008 as a U.S. senator elected in 2004.

"This election is going to be about which candidate has the right vision for growing the economy and balancing our budget, but Governor Romney chose Congressman Ryan first and foremost because he's ready on day one to step in as commander in chief should he need to assume that responsibility. They share the view that America's leadership position in the world is based on a robust national defense, strengthened

relationships with our allies and a philosophy of peace through strength," Ryan spokesman Brendan Buck said.

But Van Hollen, a former staffer on the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the son of a U.S. diplomat, noted the large difference between setting the financial targets for the Department of Defense and assessing the situation on the ground in key countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan and making the right decision on the use of the military or diplomatic corps.

"It's clear that a huge weakness on this ticket overall is the lack of national security and foreign policy experience. We still live in very challenging times, and I think that jumps out as an overall gap," he said.

Georgetown University professor Colin Kahl, a former senior policy adviser on the Middle East to the secretary of defense from 2009 to 2011, said Obama shored up his thin experience by picking Vice President Joe Biden, a former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. At a time of global terrorism and war in the Middle East, Romney, a former Massachusetts governor and business executive, picked a running mate who also lacked strong experience in national security, Kahl said.

"It's a strange choice. Normally, presidential candidates try to balance the ticket in some way," Kahl said.

Ryan's supporters also point to his 23 official trips since 2001 to 18 countries on several continents, including two to Afghanistan and one to Iraq, plus a trip to Israel funded by the American Israel Education Foundation, an organization affiliated with a pro-Israel lobby.

That's more foreign policy experience than former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who was mocked for trying to bolster her credentials by noting how close Alaska is to Russia. But it's far less than Biden or former Vice President Dick Cheney, a former secretary of defense during the first Iraq war.

Suri said that foreign trips have value for politicians but are "very different from going to foreign countries and negotiating with leaders." He said he believes Obama experienced setbacks in his first year in the White House because of his relatively thin foreign policy experience.

In June, Ryan himself said in [a speech](#) to the Alexander Hamilton Society that good fiscal policy - his perceived strength - will enable a strong foreign policy for the country.

"If we fail to put our budget on a sustainable path, then we are choosing decline as a world power," he said.

Ryan worked briefly earlier in his career at a family construction business, but lacks deep experience in the executive branch of government or the private sector. Serving in the U.S. House as one of 435 legislators is a different job than being the sole head of an entire arm of government employing more than 2.7 million civilians and some 1.6 million military personnel.

In that area, Romney has significant experience as a top decision-maker, both as a governor and business executive.

Suri and Kahl said that few candidates can bring to bear all the varied expertise needed in the White House - inevitably leaders must learn some of those skills while in office and lean on aides for others.

That puts more emphasis on the people Romney and Ryan choose as advisers and their records, Kahl said.

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