

# The Coattail Effect in Elections: Assessing the Impact of Incumbent President's Performances on their Vice President's Electoral Outcomes

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## Abstract

The coattail effect, a phenomenon where an incumbent president's performance influences the electoral success of their vice president, is a critical yet underexplored dynamic in political science. This study examines the impact of incumbent presidents' governance on the electoral outcomes of their vice presidents, focusing on key factors such as economic management, public perception, policy implementation, and political stability. Employing a qualitative thematic and content analysis of voter interviews on electoral trends across multiple case studies and timelines, comparing instances where vice presidents succeeded and failed in their bids for the presidency in both the US and Ghana. The study is anchored in the political contexts of both developed and developing democracies, providing insights into the global relevance of the coattail effect. Findings suggest that the incumbent president's perceived effectiveness significantly shapes public trust in vice-presidential candidates, with economic performance and crisis management emerging as pivotal determinants. Additionally, the research reveals that the coattail effect is moderated by factors such as partisan loyalty, campaign strategy, and external socio-economic conditions. This study contributes to the broader discourse on electoral behaviour, emphasizing the interplay between executive performance and succession politics while offering practical implications for political strategists and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Coattail Effect, Vice President, President, Performance, Election Outcome.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between an incumbent president's performance and the electoral prospects of their vice president is a significant area of study in political science. Historically, the performance of a sitting president can have either a positive or negative "coattail effect" on the vice president's chances of being elected as the next president. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in political systems where the vice president (running mate) is often perceived as a symbol of continuity with the previous administration (DaVinha & Ernst, 2018; Devine & Kopko, 2020).

The coattail effect in electoral politics refers to the phenomenon wherein popular candidates, especially at the top of the ballot, positively influence the electoral fortunes of their party's candidates in down-ballot races (Nicholson, 2021). While this effect has been extensively studied in mature democracies such as the United States, it is also evident in emerging democracies like Ghana. This paper examines the coattail effect through a comparative lens, exploring its theoretical underpinnings, governance legacies, economic performance, public perceptions, and manifestations. Additionally, it analyzes the implications of this phenomenon in both Ghana and the United States, highlighting how the performance of incumbent presidents has significantly shaped the electoral prospects of their vice presidents in subsequent elections.

The relationship between an incumbent president's legacy and the vice president's political trajectory and prospects is shaped by several critical factors, including public perception, policy continuity, and the vice president's independent public image. Public perception of the incumbent president's legacy is particularly influential in determining the vice president's electoral fortunes (Woods, 2022). A positive view of the president can benefit the vice president, as illustrated by George H.W. Bush's success in succeeding Ronald Reagan,

whose popularity and leadership were widely celebrated. Conversely, when the incumbent administration is perceived as ineffective or scandal-ridden, the vice presidents may struggle to distance themselves, as was the case for Al Gore in the 2000 election, where the Clinton administration's controversies posed significant challenges.

Policy continuity is another essential aspect of this dynamic. Voters often view the vice president as a reflection of the incumbent administration's policies. If these policies are considered successful, the vice president may campaign to preserve the status quo. However, if the policies are unpopular, the vice president faces the delicate task of balancing continuity with reform. This can significantly impact their campaign, as they may be seen as either a steadfast proponent of or a necessary departure from the administration's trajectory (Aldrich, Carson, Gomez & Merolla, 2023).

A vice president's independent public image also plays a vital role in shaping their political prospects. A strong, independent reputation allows the vice president to craft a distinct leadership vision, even if the incumbent president's legacy is mixed or unfavourable. For instance, Joe Biden's 2020 campaign effectively leveraged the positive elements of the Obama administration's legacy while highlighting his vision for unity and progress. In contrast, Dan Quayle in 1992 struggled to gain traction due to his association with George H.W. Bush's administration, which faced economic downturns and waning public approval.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for analyzing the coattail effect and its influence on vice presidents' electoral outcomes can be strengthened by integrating several voter behaviour and political science theories. The coattail effect, which suggests that a popular presidential candidate can influence the electoral outcomes of down-ballot candidates from the same party, is deeply rooted in models of voter behaviour, party identification, and psychological attachment.

### Voter Behavior and Party Identification Theories

Campbell et al. (1960) posit that voters often rely on cues from prominent political figures, particularly presidential candidates, to inform their voting decisions, especially when considering down-ballot races. In this regard, voters' behaviour is not only driven by policy preferences but also by emotional and cognitive associations with candidates they view as leaders or representatives of their broader political ideology. This idea forms the backbone of the coattail effect, as voters are more likely to support candidates affiliated with a highly visible, popular president. In the case of Ghana, this theory can be applied to vice presidents running for office, as they often benefit from their association with a popular incumbent president. The same mechanism is observable in the U.S., where a strong presidential candidate can positively influence the electoral prospects of their vice-presidential counterpart (Kernell, 1977).

### Psychological Attachment Model

A more nuanced approach to understanding the coattail effect can be drawn from Dalton's (2016) "psychological attachment model." This model suggests that voters develop psychological attachments to political parties and their leaders, driven by both emotional and cognitive cues. The coattail effect leverages these attachments, where voters perceive the incumbent president and their policies as extensions of their political identity. For instance, when a popular president like Ghana's John Kufuor or the U.S.'s Ronald Reagan enjoys high approval ratings, voters' emotional and cognitive attachment to the party and the candidate may extend to the vice president. This attachment amplifies the vice president's appeal, reinforcing voter support not just for the president but for the entire party ticket (Bartels, 2008).

### Voter Turnout and Mobilization

Another crucial component of the coattail effect is its impact on voter turnout and mobilization. According to political mobilization theories (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), high-stakes elections, particularly those involving the presidency, often serve as focal points for increasing voter engagement. This heightened engagement can benefit vice-presidential candidates, especially when they can align themselves with a popular, mobilizing president. In Ghana, elections in which a sitting president's popularity is high often see increased voter turnout, which tends to favour the incumbent party, including the vice president. This dynamic is equally evident in the U.S., where a charismatic presidential candidate can generate significant down-ballot support, increasing turnout and benefiting other candidates from the same party (Green & Gerber, 2019).

### Institutional and Contextual Considerations

While the coattail effect is powerful, it is not deterministic. Institutional design and political context play a significant role in shaping the magnitude of the effect. In both Ghana and the U.S., party structures, electoral systems, and political traditions mediate how effectively the coattail effect operates. In Ghana’s presidential and parliamentary systems, the relationship between the president and vice president is often framed in terms of policy continuity, which may influence voter perceptions differently depending on the political climate (Gyampo et al., 2016). In contrast, the U.S. system’s focus on the executive-legislative divide may dilute the vice president’s direct association with presidential performance in some contexts.

The coattail effect is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be analyzed through the lenses of voter behaviour, party identification, and psychological attachment. The emotional and cognitive cues provided by a popular president play a critical role in shaping the electoral fortunes of their vice president. However, the extent of this influence is shaped by institutional, electoral, and contextual factors, which must be considered in the analysis of the vice president's electoral outcomes.

### Comparative Insights of the Coattail Effect

The United States provides a classic case of the coattail effect, particularly in presidential election years. For instance, the 2008 election of Barack Obama saw significant Democratic gains in Congress, attributed to Obama’s charismatic appeal and high voter turnout among key demographics. Similarly, Donald Trump’s polarizing presidency in 2016 helped Republicans secure numerous down-ballot victories, although the effect was mitigated in the 2018 midterms due to a backlash against his administration. The coattail effect is influenced by the electoral system. The U.S. employs a federal system with staggered elections, meaning presidential races often overshadow congressional and gubernatorial contests during the same cycle. Research indicates that down-ballot candidates who align their campaigns with the presidential candidate’s message benefit significantly (Jacobson, 2019).

In Ghana, the coattail effect manifests within the context of its hybrid presidential-parliamentary system. Presidential elections are held concurrently with parliamentary elections, creating a synergy that enhances the visibility of parliamentary candidates affiliated with popular presidential contenders. For example, in the 2016 elections, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo’s victory as the presidential candidate of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) was accompanied by significant gains in parliamentary seats for the NPP. Akufo-Addo’s promise of "Change" resonated with voters, providing a coattail boost for down-ballot candidates. Similarly, in 2008, John Atta Mills of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) helped the party secure a parliamentary majority, showcasing the direct impact of presidential appeal on parliamentary outcomes.

According to Arenas (2024), the coattail effect in elections is influenced by the electoral context and systems. Ghana’s concurrent elections correlate presidential and parliamentary outcomes, while the staggered elections in the U.S. result in less pronounced effects during midterm years. Party organization and campaign strategies are crucial in both cases. In the U.S., extensive media coverage amplifies presidential candidates’ visibility, while in Ghana, radio, community engagement, and grassroots mobilization are crucial. Institutional factors, such as party loyalty and incumbency advantage, moderate the coattail effect in both nations (Anas, Herawati & Wisnaeni, 2023, Arenas, 2024).

**Table 1. Presidents and Vice Presidents of the USA from 1993 to 2025**

Term	President	Vice President	Political Party
1993–2001	Bill Clinton	Al Gore	Democratic Party
2001–2009	George W. Bush	Dick Cheney	Republican Party
2009–2017	Barack Obama	Joe Biden	Democratic Party
2017–2021	Donald Trump	Mike Pence	Republican Party
2021–2025	Joe Biden	Kamala Harris	Democratic Party

Author’s construct (2024)

The 2020 U.S. presidential election and the 2020 Ghanaian general election exhibited intriguing underlying factors that serve as potential predictors for the outcomes of the 2024 elections in both nations. These factors merit scholarly investigation to uncover patterns and dynamics that may shape the political trajectories of these democratic systems. Joe Biden’s victory in 2020 had a mixed coattail effect. While he won the presidency, Democrats underperformed in congressional races, losing seats in the House. Analysts attribute this outcome to Biden’s moderate campaign strategy, which, while effective in securing his presidential victory, failed to generate widespread enthusiasm for down-ballot candidates (Cohn, 2021). Compared to Ghana’s 2020 election,

President Nana Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) secured re-election for a second term, maintaining his popularity and winning the presidential race by a narrow margin. However, despite his victory, the NPP suffered significant setbacks in the parliamentary elections. The party lost parliamentary seats, resulting in a hung parliament, a situation where no single party holds a clear majority. This outcome underscores the potential limits of the coattail effect, as localized dynamics and candidate quality also play significant roles.

**Table 2. Presidents and Vice Presidents of Ghana from 1993 to 2025**

Term	President	Vice President	Political Party
1993–1997 1997–2001	Jerry John Rawlings	Kow Nkensen Arkaah John Evans Atta Mills	National Democratic Congress (NDC)
2001–2009	John Agyekum Kufuor	Aliu Mahama	New Patriotic Party (NPP)
Jan 2009–Jul 2012	John Evans Atta Mills	John Dramani Mahama	National Democratic Congress (NDC)
Jul 2012–Jan 2013 2013–2017	John Dramani Mahama	Kwesi Amissah-Arthur	National Democratic Congress (NDC)
2017–2025	Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo	Mahamudu Bawumia	New Patriotic Party (NPP)

Author's construct (2024)

Ghana's political landscape in the past three decades has demonstrated a cycle of leadership shaped by crisis management, economic frustration, political sympathy, and the desire for continuity. The country's ability to navigate these challenges, often peacefully, reflects the maturity of its democracy. The interplay of public sentiment and economic realities will continue to shape the leadership dynamics in future elections, with voters increasingly influenced by both immediate governance issues and long-term political legacies. In the 2000 elections, John Evans Atta Mills, the vice president under Jerry John Rawlings, lost to John Agyekum Kufuor of the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Rawlings' administration stabilized Ghana politically and economically, but public dissatisfaction with economic hardships and perceptions of authoritarian tendencies eroded Mills' chances. In the 2008 presidential election, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) candidate, John Evans Atta Mills, defeated the New Patriotic Party's (NPP) Nana Akufo-Addo, who was the successor to President John Agyekum Kufuor, in a highly competitive race that went to three rounds. The election was marked by intense political rivalry and was largely shaped by economic challenges and public dissatisfaction with the outgoing NPP administration.

In 2012, John Mahama, initially Mills' vice president, assumed the presidency after Mills' death and won the 2012 elections. Mahama's success can be attributed to public sympathy following Mills' untimely death and his ability to consolidate the National Democratic Congress (NDC) base. However, John Dramani Mahama lost to Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo of the NPP in 2016. His administration faced criticism for economic challenges, including inflation, unemployment, and a prolonged energy crisis, which significantly tarnished his record and led to his defeat.

In 2024, Vice President Dr Mahamudu Bawumia is vying for the presidency against former President John Dramani Mahama. Akufo-Addo-Bawumia's administration has faced mixed reviews, including economic difficulties like high inflation, a depreciating cedi, corruption allegations, scandals, and rising public debt.

## Key Factors Shaping Vice President Fortunes

### Economic Conditions

The economic conditions under an incumbent administration are among the most critical factors shaping the electoral prospects of a vice president. Adrangi and Macri (2019) highlight that economic performance acts as a litmus test for the electorate, with economic hardships such as recessions, high unemployment rates, and inflation eroding public confidence in the administration. This erosion makes it challenging for a vice president to position themselves as a credible successor. Similarly, Gyampo et al. (2016) emphasize that poor economic management can tarnish the administration's reputation, placing vice presidents in a defensive position during campaigns.

The relationship between economic performance and electoral outcomes is intricate, necessitating strategic responses by vice presidential candidates during periods of economic strain. Achanso, Benson, and Zuure (2021) argue that while favourable economic conditions create an environment conducive to campaigning on continuity, economic crises require a nuanced approach. Vice presidents must address voter concerns head-on while

distinguishing themselves from perceived administrative shortcomings. This balancing act underscores the pivotal role economic contexts play in shaping voter perceptions and the broader political narratives surrounding vice presidential candidacies. Economic performance, therefore, remains a decisive factor in vice-presidential campaigns, influencing public trust and shaping the electorate's willingness to endorse continuity or demand change.

Extensive research underscores the profound impact of economic conditions on electoral outcomes, demonstrating how voters' priorities are shaped by prevailing economic realities. Early foundational studies, such as Key (1966) and Fair (1978), established that economic factors like unemployment, inflation, and overall economic performance significantly influence voting behaviour. These findings are corroborated by Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2008), whose work aligns with Key's conclusion that economic conditions are central to shaping voter decision-making processes.

More contemporary analyses expand on these foundations to highlight the specific economic stressors that influence electoral dynamics. Factors such as high inflation, rising unemployment, stagnant or declining wages, stock market instability, elevated interest rates, national debt crises, and economic recessions have been identified as pivotal in shaping voter preferences (Bartels, 2008). Additional concerns, including widening income inequality, spikes in energy prices, housing and accommodation challenges, shortages of essential goods, and the perceived inability of governments to protect domestic markets, further exacerbate voter discontent and drive electoral shifts (Gyampo et al., 2016; Kramer, 1971).

This body of literature collectively emphasizes that voters are highly responsive to economic challenges, particularly those that directly affect their livelihoods. As such, electoral outcomes are often framed by voters' assessments of the incumbent government's economic performance and its ability to address pressing economic concerns. This economic voting theory remains a critical lens through which political scientists analyze elections across various contexts.

### **Public Perception of Continuity**

Public perception of continuity is a critical factor shaping a vice president's electoral prospects. This perception functions as both a strategic asset and a potential liability, depending on the political context and the incumbent administration's standing with the electorate. When continuity aligns with public approval, it enhances the vice president's chances by positioning them as a stable candidate capable of sustaining progress achieved under the current administration. This alignment fosters confidence among voters who prioritize stability and incremental progress in governance (Flanigan & Zingale, 2002).

The role of public perception is particularly pronounced in situations where the incumbent administration enjoys high approval ratings. For example, Fiorina (1981) explores the dynamics of electoral behaviour and underscores how voters often assess administrations based on performance metrics such as economic stability, governance effectiveness, and policy achievements. A positive evaluation of these factors can lend credibility to the vice president's campaign by associating them with the administration's successes. However, if the incumbent administration is marred by controversy or perceived inefficiencies, the association with continuity can act as a liability, compelling the vice president to recalibrate their campaign narrative to emphasize independence and reform (Green & Gerber, 2019). Thus, public perception of continuity remains a double-edged sword, requiring vice presidential candidates to carefully navigate its implications to align with voter priorities and contextual realities.

Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign exemplifies the complexities of navigating public perceptions of continuity. Despite benefiting from the Clinton administration's strong economic record, marked by low unemployment, a budget surplus, and robust economic growth, Gore's campaign faced significant challenges due to widespread "Clinton fatigue" among voters (Pomper, 2001). This fatigue stemmed largely from the administration's controversies, including the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which eroded public trust and overshadowed its economic accomplishments. Gore's efforts to distance himself from these scandals while still claiming credit for the administration's successes proved difficult and ultimately contributed to his failure to consolidate a strong electoral base (Miller & Wattenberg, 2004).

The interplay between the public perception of continuity and the vice president's ability to establish an independent identity further complicates the dynamic. A vice president perceived as too closely tied to an unpopular or scandal-ridden administration may struggle to differentiate themselves as a viable alternative. Gore's inability to strike a balance between continuity and independence serves as a cautionary tale for vice presidents attempting to navigate similar situations. The challenge lies in crafting a narrative that aligns with the positive aspects of the administration's legacy while convincingly addressing its shortcomings to project a vision of renewed and independent leadership (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2008).

## **Crisis Management**

The next factor is the effective management of a crisis. Crisis management during economic downturns or energy crises profoundly impacts the electorate's perception of an administration's competence and, by extension, the vice president's suitability for leadership. In Ghana, these dynamics have been evident in various administrations, shaping political fortunes and public trust. The widespread public frustration with the energy crisis contributed to the National Democratic Congress's (NDC) defeat in the 2016 elections. Although the NDC administration ultimately resolved the Dumsor crisis, the delayed response and entrenched public misperception had already inflicted significant political damage. This case underscores the critical role of effective and timely crisis management in shaping electoral outcomes. Failure to address crises promptly and decisively can erode public confidence, casting a long shadow over both the president's legacy and the vice president's viability as a successor. The Dumsor episode exemplifies how prolonged inaction or perceived inefficiency in managing national challenges can tarnish the political standing of an entire administration, diminishing its prospects at the polls (Gyampo & Asare, 2016).

This pattern is frequently observed in the handling of numerous national projects, including the persistent issue of poorly maintained roads and the phenomenon of last-minute infrastructural projects initiated in the run-up to elections. These delayed interventions not only fail to address the systemic challenges faced by citizens but also reinforce perceptions of inefficiency and electoral opportunism within the administration. Such practices often undermine public trust, as voters view them as superficial attempts to secure votes rather than genuine efforts to address long-standing developmental issues. This recurring approach further highlights how poorly managed public policies and crisis responses can negatively impact the political capital of both the president and the vice president, ultimately jeopardizing their electoral prospects.

The 2008 presidential election in Ghana offers another relevant example of how poor crisis management and misperceptions of government performance can shape the electoral prospects of the vice president and the incumbent party. The New Patriotic Party (NPP), led by President John Agyekum Kufuor, faced significant challenges in managing economic issues, particularly rising fuel prices and energy shortages, which contributed to public dissatisfaction. Vice President Aliu Mahama's association with the administration, coupled with the economic difficulties, weakened the NPP's standing among voters.

The National Democratic Congress (NDC), led by John Atta Mills, successfully capitalized on this discontent, positioning itself as a viable alternative with a fresh approach to governance. Mills' campaign resonated with voters who were frustrated by the economic hardships they associated with the outgoing NPP administration. Despite the NPP's economic achievements earlier in its tenure, the lack of timely solutions to these pressing issues and the perception of the administration as disconnected from the people's struggles ultimately led to their loss in the 2008 election. This shift exemplifies how economic mismanagement and poor crisis response can tarnish the electoral prospects of both the president and vice president, even in the face of previous successes.

## **Public Sympathy**

Sympathy can play a significant role in shaping the outcome of elections, particularly when a candidate's personal story or connection with the electorate evokes emotional support. In Ghana, sympathy has influenced elections in a variety of ways, often linked to national tragedies, the death of key political figures, or a candidate's circumstances.

One of the most prominent examples of sympathy influencing an election in Ghana occurred in the 2012 presidential race. After the sudden death of President Atta Mills in 2012, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) rallied around the late president's legacy. His vice president, John Dramani Mahama, was nominated as the party's candidate, and his victory was seen in part as a response to national grief and the outpouring of sympathy for the loss of the sitting president. Mahama's compassionate and steady leadership during this period of national mourning won him widespread public support, helping him to win the presidency in a highly competitive election (Gyampo et al., 2016; Ayee, 2013).

Similarly, in 2009, sympathy played a key role in the electoral fortunes of the late John Atta Mills, who successfully ran for the presidency. His 2008 victory, after a closely contested election, was partly attributed to the sympathy he garnered from voters, who were impressed by his calm demeanour and message of hope and healing following the painful political divide. His win was also seen as a response to the national desire for a change in leadership from the tenure of outgoing President Kufuor (Agyeman-Duah, 2014).

In both cases, sympathy not only served as a political tool but also highlighted how deeply personal connections and the broader emotional state of the electorate can impact electoral outcomes. Additionally, these examples show that when leaders can effectively tap into national sentiments; whether through a compassionate

response to tragedy or through a legacy of healing; they can build significant political capital that resonates with voters across diverse segments of society (Gyampo et al., 2016).

### 3. Research Design

The study investigated how the performance of an incumbent president influences electoral outcomes for their vice president, focusing on the "coattail effect" in elections by finding out to what extent an incumbent president's performance affects their vice president's chances of electoral success. And also, which dimensions of presidential performance have the most significant impact on vice-presidential electoral outcomes? The respondents were asked about the issues on their minds as they approached the voting booth to decide on a candidate.

Purposive sampling of elections where incumbent presidents completed their terms and their vice presidents contested between 1993 and 2024 (see table 2) in Ghana where vice presidents commonly run for president after the incumbent's president completes their term. The sample used represents the views and sentiments of a few Ghanaians who were willing to share their opinions and views on the 2024 voting decisions.

The study employs qualitative data analysis, specifically utilizing thematic analysis to discern recurring patterns and themes within interviews and content analysis. Additionally, a comparative case study approach is adopted to examine and contrast instances in which vice presidents achieved electoral success with those where they did not.

### 4. Discussion of Results

The upcoming elections in both Ghana and the United States, highlight the economy as the central concern for voters. In the United States, former President Donald Trump is championing the slogan "Make America Work Again," reflecting a focus on economic recovery, job creation, and revitalizing industries. This echoes his previous administration's emphasis on trade and job opportunities, with promises to address the economic challenges facing many Americans, particularly in terms of manufacturing jobs and wage growth. Similarly, in Ghana, former President John Dramani Mahama is leading with the slogan "Resetting the Country," which points to the need for economic revitalization after the country faced high inflation, debt concerns, and a stagnating job market. Mahama's push for change reflects his previous term's challenges, particularly in managing economic policies during a time of international economic uncertainty.

Both leaders, having served only one term in office, are seeking to complete a second four-year term, with each positioning themselves as the change agents needed to reverse current economic downturns. In the U.S., Trump's appeal revolves around economic nationalism and reasserting American competitiveness globally, while in Ghana, Mahama's platform focuses on stabilizing the country's economy, reducing unemployment, and implementing reforms aimed at growth. Voter concerns in both nations are shaped by economic conditions, making these elections pivotal for addressing key socio-economic issues. The common theme of "change" underscores the electorate's desire for a shift in policy direction to better address the growing challenges of inflation, unemployment, and national economic resilience.

In both the United States and Ghana, the upcoming elections are marked by a significant faceoff between former presidents and sitting vice presidents. It is either a continuity of government and administration or a change of government. Economic performance has been a central theme in the campaigns.

In the United States, Vice President Kamala Harris is seeking to beat Trump and become President based on Biden's economic recovery efforts. President Biden is not contesting due to ageing and other related concerns. Hence, Kamala's presidential ambition. Kamala's campaign emphasizes building on the successes of her Boss, President Joe Biden, focusing on job creation, infrastructure investments, and handling the post-pandemic economy. However, Trump, with his slogan "Make America Work Again," is positioning himself as a challenger promising to return to his previous policies that emphasized economic nationalism, deregulation, and tax cuts aimed at bolstering American businesses.

In Ghana, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, who has been integral in the current administration's economic policies under President Akufo-Addo, is positioning himself as a candidate focused on continuing the economic development efforts, particularly in the digital and infrastructure sectors. However, former President John Dramani Mahama, who served from 2012 to 2016, is leading the charge with his "Resetting the Country" slogan, focusing on reversing the economic downturn and addressing rising inflation, debt, and unemployment rates during the current government's tenure. Mahama is framing the election as a choice for a return to a more stable and growth-oriented economic environment, highlighting the challenges faced under the current leadership.

These dynamic narratives in both countries, with economic management being the primary point of contention, as voters look to decide whether to continue with the sitting vice-presidents' policies or elect the

former presidents promising a change in direction.

As Ghana approaches its ninth general election since 1992, the mindset of the Ghanaian voter reflects a blend of practical concerns, political values, and aspirations for change and stability. Responses from voters suggest that economic issues dominate decision-making, with many citing inflation, unemployment, and the rising cost of living as critical factors influencing their choices. These everyday challenges have heightened expectations for leaders to provide tangible solutions, particularly in stabilizing the economy, creating jobs, and improving access to essential services. This economic focus is paired with frustration over corruption and governance, as voters express a desire for accountability and transparency in leadership.

### **Economy, Corruption and Unemployment**

Many voters' express concerns about the state of the Ghanaian economy, particularly inflation, job creation, and cost of living. A businessman/voter claimed that *"performance of the cedi to the dollar is my major problem"*. *"I want a change,"* one voter said. Another respondent mentioned, *"The increasing public debt and debt restructuring has affected the economy, especially the aged and pensioners. I heard some have died."* *"I am looking for a candidate who can bring down the cost of living and create more jobs for the youth,"* says another voter. Another voter stated that *"the government has done well with the economy, but COVID and other things affected the government"*.

Corruption remains a major concern for voters. Many voters are looking for a candidate who promises transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures. *"We need a government that will fight corruption effectively and ensure that our resources are used for the development of the country,"* says one respondent. Another respondent, *"I want a new government to come and hold the past government accountable for the scandals and acts of corruption"*. *"I am looking forward to probity and accountability will be the measure for elections in Ghana"*. A journalist /voter exclaimed, *"I am voting for change because of ORAL"*. (ORAL means Operation Recover All Loot). A campaign message by the biggest opposition party and leader in Ghana, former president Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) to voters on the recovery of alleged loots of state resources by the current NPP administration.

There is a significant focus on policies that support job creation and youth development, including entrepreneurship, education, and access to capital. *"I want a government that will empower the youth, give them job opportunities, and not leave us behind,"* says a young voter. A voter mentioned, *"I want the current party to continue in power so that they can continue all their good products. A change in government may stall all those projects"*. According to another voter, *"I am voting for the one who will give us the youth of Ghana jobs", there are too many unemployed people on our streets.*

### **Environment and Health, Infrastructure and Education**

Environmental issues, including galamsey and pollution of water bodies, are emerging as important considerations, particularly for environmentalists and farmers. *"The environment, health, and potable drinking water are very important for future generations, and I want a leader who will take these issues seriously,"* says a concerned voter. Another voter claimed, *"Galamsey will cause this government a lot of votes"*. Another voter said, *"I am voting for change so that the next government properly manages the Water pollution and the galamsey mess"*.

Access to quality education and healthcare remains central to many voters. In interviews, individuals note that they want a candidate who can improve infrastructure and existing challenges in senior high schools, reduce tuition fees at the tertiary levels, and provide better healthcare services. *"I want a leader who will invest in the education system, so our children can have a brighter future,"* shares a voter. Health policy will guide my decision because *"the government plan for free dialysis treatment"*. A party loyalist said, *"The current administration needs our vote to maintain the free senior high school policy"*.

The development of infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water, and transportation networks is another key issue. *"I will vote for someone who has a track record of building good roads and improving access to clean water,"* says a voter in the rural area.

Support for the elderly, the disabled, and vulnerable groups is an important consideration. *"I am looking for a leader who will take care of the needs of the most vulnerable in society,"* states a voter with a disabled family member. Another respondent said, *"It is about economic performance and not infrastructure development"*.

### **Perception of Continuity and Insecurity Issues**

Some voters emphasize loyalty to political parties and the candidates' affiliation with them. *"I have always voted for my party and I will continue supporting,"* shares a party loyalist. Many voters emphasize the need for



strong and decisive leadership. “I want a president who will lead the country with integrity and who can stand firm in times of crisis,” says one participant in a focus group discussion. One voter said, “*We are looking for an experienced leader for the country and our party*”. I have seen that some of them are mature, and others are not according to a voter, “*Ghana needs a mature president to take the most difficult decisions to get us out of these current challenges*”.

The safety and security of citizens before, during and after elections have been a major concern for most voters especially the vulnerable groups in society. Voters indicate that their choice will be influenced by a candidate's stance on maintaining law and order, as well as their ability to ensure a peaceful election process. A voter said, “*I am voting for continuity. The vice president has done well. He can do even better as the President*”. “*Security is very important to me. I want to feel safe in my home and on the streets,*” mentions another voter. A first-time voter “*We are voting for change because the current government has completed their eight-year term, and we need another party in power to maintain the peace*”. Another voter says, “*I will vote for a peace-loving candidate*”.

## 5. Implications

The critical implications of this study are multifaceted and extend beyond the immediate electoral context, providing insights into party strategy, governance, and the broader dynamics of political systems.

1. The impact on party strategy and governance. The coattail effect carries significant implications for political parties, particularly in the context of electoral strategy. In the United States, the coattail effect varies across election cycles, requiring political campaigns to remain adaptive to shifting voter sentiments and economic conditions (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2008). Similarly, in Ghana, the interaction between presidential and parliamentary elections underscores the need for strategic candidate selection and effective grassroots mobilization to harness the power of the coattail effect in a politically fragmented system (Gyampo et al., 2016). These dynamics emphasize the importance of cohesive party strategies to maximize electoral success.
2. The interconnectedness and dynamics of elections. While the coattail effect illustrates the interconnectedness of elections, it is not deterministic. Voter preferences, institutional frameworks, and broader societal factors all shape the magnitude of the effect. As noted by Green & Gerber (2019), political context, including regional factors and party alignment, significantly influences how coattails manifest in different electoral settings. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics allows political actors to tailor their campaigns more effectively, ensuring they address both national concerns and local voter priorities.
3. The incumbent president's performance. As this study emphasizes, the performance of the incumbent president remains one of the most decisive factors influencing the electoral prospects of the vice president. The connection between presidential performance and the vice president's success reflects broader trends observed in political systems globally (Bartels, 2008). Positive governance legacies bolster the vice president's prospects, while economic or policy failures detract from their political viability.
4. Other factors influencing vice presidential prospects are public scandals, national crisis management, sympathy and legacy, and the vice president's identity. All these factors influence public perception and, consequently, the vice president's political fortunes (Kramer, 1971; Greenberg, 1993). These factors underscore the complexity of electoral outcomes, where vice presidents must navigate not only their political vision but also the public's judgment of the incumbent administration's performance. Additionally, the importance of crisis management and national leadership during difficult times (e.g., economic downturns or pandemics) can significantly impact the vice president's image and electoral chances (Achanso, Benson & Zuure, 2021).

In summary, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of the coattail effect and its implications for political strategy, governance, and vice-presidential electoral prospects, offering valuable insights for both political practitioners and scholars.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the period from 2000 to 2023 highlights the critical role of incumbent presidential performance in determining the electoral prospects of vice presidents in Ghana. Positive governance legacies, characterized by economic stability, effective policies, and public approval, significantly enhance the chances of vice presidents by establishing a narrative of continuity and trust. Conversely, economic crises, policy failures, and widespread dissatisfaction diminish voter confidence, making it challenging for vice presidents to secure

electoral success.

This analysis underscores that the electoral fate of vice presidents is intricately linked to the public perception and performance of the administrations they represent. A positive association with a well-performing administration can act as a strategic advantage, propelling their campaigns. However, negative associations stemming from governance shortcomings pose substantial hurdles, requiring vice presidents to adopt nuanced strategies to address voter concerns and differentiate themselves. Ultimately, these dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between governance, public sentiment, and electoral outcomes in Ghana's Fourth Republic.

## 7. Practical Recommendations

### 1. Enhance Policy Continuity and Governance Messaging

To optimize the coattail effect, vice presidential candidates should emphasize continuity in policies and governance strengths established during the incumbent president's term. This strategy requires aligning campaign messaging with the administration's key achievements, particularly in areas of high public approval, such as economic management, social programs, or crisis response. Research shows that voter trust in a candidate is significantly influenced by their association with a successful governance record (Campbell, 2016; Feigert et al., 2020). Therefore, campaigns should highlight how the vice president, as part of the administration, contributed to these successes and can ensure policy consistency. This approach helps to mitigate concerns about leadership transitions and reassures voters seeking stability.

### 2. Strategically Address the Incumbent's Weaknesses

Vice presidential candidates must also develop strategies to distance themselves from the incumbent's perceived failures without alienating their shared political base. This requires nuanced communication that acknowledges public concerns about governance shortcomings while positioning the candidate as a reformer capable of addressing those weaknesses. Studies suggest that overly close alignment with a poorly performing administration can diminish a candidate's credibility (Abramowitz, 2018). By offering a vision for incremental improvement or transformative leadership that builds on, rather than rejects, the administration's legacy, candidates can appeal to both loyalists and undecided voters. This dual approach leverages the benefits of association while reducing the risks of being overshadowed by negative public sentiment.

### 3. Leverage Grassroots Voter Connections

To maximize the coattail effect, vice presidential candidates should focus on grassroots engagement to directly connect with voters and address localized concerns. This approach is particularly effective in regions where the incumbent's performance has been uneven or where opposition narratives dominate. Grassroots campaigning, including town halls, community meetings, and small-scale outreach initiatives, fosters trust by demonstrating a candidate's commitment to understanding and resolving voter issues. Research suggests that personalized voter interactions can counteract negative perceptions associated with national-level governance and strengthen the candidate's independent appeal (Smith, 2017; Huddy & Gunthorsdottir, 2020). By balancing association with the administration's achievements and direct engagement with communities, candidates can enhance their credibility and electoral prospects. This underscores the importance of connecting policy promises with the real-life challenges of the electorate, ensuring that the campaign resonates across diverse demographic and socio-economic groups.

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