

Nov-1987

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Recommended Citation

Sudhalter, David (1987). Electing a President. *Bridgewater Review*, 5(2), 3-6.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol5/iss2/5

ELECTING *a President*

BY DAVID SUDHALTER

No other nation in the world devotes as much time and energy to electing a national leader as the United States. Every three years, with clocklike regularity, presidential candidates begin preening for what has to be one of the greatest tests of human endurance known to civilized man.

The signals are sent out to would-be supporters as the candidates get ready to appear before the TV cameras. Before you can say "Spiro Agnew" the media hype is on. Now we're off and running towards a new election which will not be held for another thirteen months.

Capturing the White House is of crucial importance to both parties. The heady aroma of power, jobs and influence help create the competitive atmosphere of our presidential elections. Two important changes over the past six decades have profoundly altered our method of choosing presidential candidates. The first change has been the sudden and remarkable growth of the presidential preferential primary. The second change has, of course, been the federal funding of presidential campaigns.

Nominating and electing a president today is vastly different from what it was in June, 1924. At that time, the very popular Governor Al Smith ("The Happy Warrior") was the favorite candidate of the northern city bosses. But Smith was a Roman Catholic and unacceptable to southern democrats, who made it clear that they would never support a Catholic candidate.

The convention became so deadlocked that it took more than 100 ballots in the sweltering heat of Madison Square Garden before John W. Davis, a compromise candidate, was nominated. Davis subsequently went down in defeat to Calvin Coolidge.

Until the nineteen sixties, almost all presidential candidates were chosen by their parties at national conventions. There were few state primaries, and those that were held provided very limited opportunities for citizen groups to voice their opinions.

Only if you were an active politician, a city or ward boss could you possibly hope to participate in the important task of choosing the national standard bearer of your party. As Theodore White, the famous chronicler of presidential campaigns noted: "Bosses and established leaders hate primaries for good reason; they are always, in any form, an appeal from the leaders' wishes to the people directly."

Gradually, however, the national party conventions took on a very different role from those they had played in the earlier years of this century.

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—Theodore White

Today's political conventions are no longer dominated by fat cats and machine politicians. Instead, the process is now dominated by the long and arduous procedure of being chosen by the voters in almost every state. The so-called presidential preferential primary has

become the chief vehicle for the nomination of candidates.

It was not until the election of 1960 that radical change began in the way we select our presidential candidates. At that time another Roman Catholic, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, decided to throw his hat in the ring.

Unlike Al Smith, however, Kennedy faced an altogether different kind of challenge, for presidential primaries had become accepted by some sixteen states. So the issue was no longer going to be decided solely by tired delegates in a steamy convention hall. Instead, the voters were beginning to have an impact on the process.

Kennedy's tour de force was remarkable. Realizing that, like Gov. Al Smith, he had two strikes against him, he set out on a barnstorming tour of the country.

His efforts at winning over delegates to the national Democratic convention culminated in a confrontation with southern Baptists in West Virginia. Kennedy's candor won over the West Virginians and paved the way for his first startling show of strength by defeating Hubert Humphrey in that state. Nevertheless, the religious issue continued to plague Kennedy right up until election day. Hearing of accusations that a Kennedy presidency would mean that the Pope would rule the U.S.A. from the Vatican, Pope John XXIII joked, "Do not expect me to run a country with a language as difficult as yours."

In the same year, Richard Nixon easily won the Republican nomination on the first ballot. Nixon failed, however, to win the support of much loved President Dwight Eisenhower who answered a reporter's query as to which important decisions Nixon had participated in when he was Vice President by saying, "If you give me a week, I might think of one."

Following Kennedy's untimely death, Lyndon Johnson's succession to the presidency coincided with the most unpopular war in American history. The result was a number of challenges by Senators Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern.

Again, the convention process was reformed as George McGovern, heading up what was known as the McGovern Commission of the Democratic Party, decided that women and minorities must be represented at future national conventions.

By 1968, President Johnson, reacting to the public criticism of the Vietnam war, announced he would not run for reelection. The ensuing campaign by Senator Hubert Humphrey saw another great change in the way we select presidential candidates.

The year 1968 was marked by a bitter battle between youthful anti-war protesters and the Chicago police. By contrast, the Republican nominating convention was almost a nonevent, with Richard Nixon winning handily against Nelson Rockefeller in what was advertised as a battle between conservatives and liberals in the Republican Party.

The 1968 campaign was altogether different as a more popular and more confident Nixon announced a secret plan to end the Vietnamese war. This time, Nixon easily defeated the democrats who were in profound disarray after Chicago.

It was probably Richard Nixon who provoked the next major watershed of change in the way we select our Presidents.

The Watergate crisis of 1972 not only caused the resignation and near

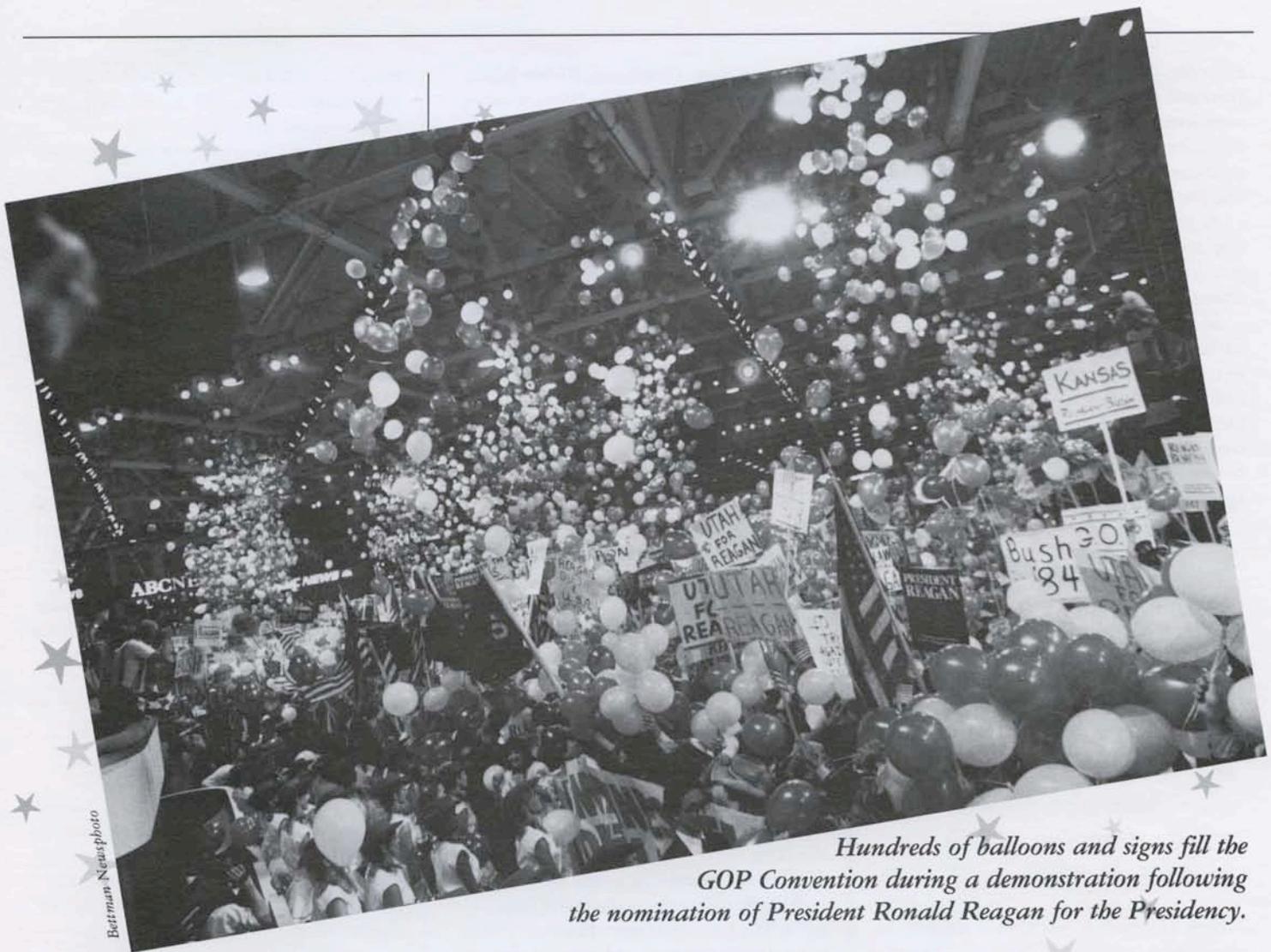
impeachment of Nixon; it also caused Congress to rewrite the laws governing presidential elections. The 1968 campaigns also convinced the Democrats that reform of the party machinery and the process by which delegates were selected were of crucial importance. The McGovern-Fraser Commission was thus created to propose the reform of delegate selection to future conventions and to ensure that minorities and women would be represented. Henceforth, elections of delegates would be held in each congressional district. Primaries had now become accepted in 36 states and the voters in each state would now have a strong voice in the selection of delegates to the national conventions. Thus ended an era in which the process of selecting presidential candidates had been largely a private affair, funded by generous contributions from individual supporters.

The new era dawned in the shape of a law which created the Federal Election Commission. After Congress listened to testimony from Maurice Stans, who was the treasurer for Richard Nixon's CREEP (Committee to Reelect The President), it became obvious that the presidential election process must not become tainted by scandal. Revelations that money was



The main arena at Madison Square Garden at the 1980 Democratic National Convention.

Bettman Newsphoto



Hundreds of balloons and signs fill the GOP Convention during a demonstration following the nomination of President Ronald Reagan for the Presidency.

laundered in Mexico; that campaign money was unaccounted for and kept in old shoe boxes; or that foreign governments were contributing to an American President's campaign were shocking to the general public.

It had long been a matter of faith among liberals that presidential elections must not become victims of interest groups anxious to curry favor with the candidates. Rather, they argued, the process should be objective and not become a play thing of the powerful and the wealthy. For justification, the liberals pointed to the Watergate scandal and if that wasn't enough, dirty laundry was dragged out from the Johnson administration to demonstrate that no President can act in a disinterested fashion if he is a captive of the interest groups who financed his campaign.

Consequently, in 1971, Congress passed the Federal Election Campaign Act. This act has profoundly influenced the way in which we elect our presidents.

First, it created a federal election commission whose purpose was to

regulate and act as a watchdog over the process. Second, it monitored the handling of campaign money (both the spending and the contributions). Third, it restricted the size of contributions so that the big spenders who formerly might have given a million dollars to a campaign, now could not give more than \$1000 to each candidate. Finally, the act provided for financing of campaigns by the federal government.

The amount of money available is, by any standard, generous. For, in addition to individual contributions, presidential candidates can each receive up to \$10 million for the purposes of being nominated by state primaries. The law allows for each candidate, nominated by his/her party, to receive \$20 million and for each party to receive \$2 million in federal funds.

The nomination procedures have had a drastic effect on presidential primaries. In order to qualify for federal matching funds, a candidate must first raise money from individual contributors. Only the first \$250 of each contribution can be

counted, so that each candidate must raise his/her funds from a rather large population. To be eligible, each candidate must raise at least \$100,000 in 20 states. This, of course, automatically means a great deal of popular support must be engendered by the candidate.

The federal election law also allows for the creation of Political Action Committees, popularly known as PACs. These groups have become among the most controversial results of the federal election law.

PACs can receive as much as \$5,000 per year from any individual. They can end up controlling millions of dollars in campaign funds. Although they are supposed to act independently of candidates, it remains to be seen how many and what kinds of influences come from the candidates themselves.

PACs are free to take out ads, sponsor fund raising shows, solicit by direct mail, and contribute to election campaigns. Their detractors feel that they wield too much power and influence on behalf of individual interest groups such as, for

example, the Teamsters Union or the National Rifle Association. Their supporters feel that PACs serve an educational function and make the candidates less dependent on government and party support.

At any rate, PACs appear to be here to stay and will undoubtedly remain a powerful influence in the coming election unless Congress decides to change the law.

So far, we have elected Presidents Carter and Reagan under the federal election law. A Federal Election Commission made up of a mixture of Democrats and Republicans must be given credit for keeping the process reasonably honest. The system is to be tested once again in 1987, and '88.

R*arely do we see a voter turnout in this country that exceeds 60%. Since 1968, voter participation in presidential elections has shown a disturbing downward trend, dropping as low as 53% in 1980.*

New Hampshire has always wanted the privilege of holding the first presidential primary in the nation. The commercial and publicity advantages of such a move have proven to be a great boon to that state of little more than a million inhabitants. However, South Dakota is trying to get into the act by announcing an earlier date of February 23rd. If South Dakota carries through with its threat, New Hampshire will try to move its primary to February 16th.

As of January 1, 1988, candidates can begin receiving matching federal funds (if they have raised enough in the states) for the primaries. Four states still hold caucuses, which are party meetings not open to the voters at large. The first caucus will be held in Michigan by the Republicans on January 11th. The Iowa caucuses will be on February 15th, the Washington caucus March 13, the Alaska caucus, March 19th.

March 1st is the date of the Vermont primary, but March 8th dubbed "Super Tuesday," will see primaries in fourteen states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri,

North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Texas. The last primaries will take place on June 7th in California, Montana, New Jersey and New Mexico.

Undoubtedly, by the time the sun sets on "Super Tuesday," one of two things will have happened: either one sure winner from the ranks of the Republicans and the Democrats will emerge victorious or the issue will have become so cloudy that the parties and the candidates will have to turn to their national conventions for the final answer. Thus, we could see a return to a brokered convention with interest groups, big city politicians and elitist leaders playing the major role in selecting the nominees.

One of the chief criticisms of the current primary system is that it is too time consuming and wasteful. Moreover, it encourages a bandwagon psychology, so that the first horse out of the gate tends to have a distinct advantage over the others. Suggestions have been made that we have a single national primary on one day; or that we might consider a few regional primaries taking place in the southwest, the northeast, etc. Other critics feel that the present system leaves the nomination largely up to the casual voters who have no real party ties and this tends to weaken the party system on which we so heavily depend, for a democratic way of life.

Already the image makers are hard at work. The first casualties - Hart and Biden - have already occurred and two very popular people - Lee Iacocca and Mario Cuomo have turned down offers to be candidates. Jesse Jackson, the first black to run for president has proven to be a solid attention-getter while a woman, Patricia Schroeder of Colorado, gave serious thought to becoming a candidate. Governor Michael Dukakis is trying to prove that a sitting governor can also run for the presidency. George Bush, who had become somewhat tainted by the Irangate scandal, still is considered a front runner but he can feel the hot breath of Jack Kemp and Bob Dole on the back of his neck. In short, it promises to be a most interesting campaign year.

With American domestic and foreign policy at a critical and uncertain crossroads, will voters respond with their usual apathy or will they react with the spontaneous enthusiasm of old time election campaigns?

My guess is that unless the candidates display vigor combined with superb acting ability, the election year 1988 is apt to play second fiddle to meteoric financial news. Unfortunately, the voters will buy the

image more quickly than they'll look at the substance. But so be it, and the parties must respond in kind.

1988 might also turn out to be another election year that reflects profound voter apathy in a country that prides itself on being the world's greatest democracy. Compared to our neighbor Canada, where more than 75% of its 25 million citizens turn out to vote in every national election, Americans run a poor fourth or fifth among the world's democracies when it comes to generating voter interest.

Rarely do we see a voter turnout in this country that exceeds 60%. Since 1968, voter participation in presidential elections had shown a disturbing downward trend, dropping as low as 53% in 1980. While it is true that some states have a much better turnout than others, the record is still quite dismal.

So let's hope that 1988 will be the year in which the voters will have a real choice over substantial issues and interesting, lively candidates to choose from.

In conclusion, the methods by which we elect our presidents, have undergone substantial changes over the last several decades. Government financing of campaigns, the creation of PACs, and the almost universal use of the state primaries to determine the nominees of each party, have put a different stamp on what used to be brokered conventions run by big city bosses in smoky convention halls. Certainly, more changes are going to come. Perhaps we shall one day see presidential campaigns that are only two or three months long. ■



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