

All About Presidential Primaries

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1 Comment January 1, 2020 John Coleman

For good or ill we are in an election year and a major one at that. All the seats in the House are up for grabs, one-third of Senate offices are in contest, and of course so is the Presidency. No sooner has one election gone, then another is in the offing. And while “blackout periods” (legal restrictions on advertising before election day) may shield our mental space for a few precious days, we are helpless otherwise.

Besides, even the murkiest of blackout periods don’t stop radio showmen, television talking-heads, or (horrors!) YouTube comments from jabbering on. Even the heartiest news hounds weary of election updates by September. Come October, the best of us look like deer at the end of the rut, scrolling away at our news feeds in a bleary daze.

Luckily, I’ve caught you before the thing gets going in earnest; when we’re spry and sprite, and when we still have mental hard-drive space to learn a thing or two.

For all the minutiae – and drama – the press serves up in great doses, it is easy to be ignorant of the actual mechanics of our electoral process. What exactly is the path from idea to execution? How does one go from mucking around a run for office, chewing it over in one’s

mind and with one's friends around the water cooler, to formally applying as a candidate, to ultimately ending up on a party's ticket?

Definitions

At this time last year, when your minds and mine were far from this election, there were over 600 registered candidates running for the Presidency. Over 600 people embarked on the preliminary steps of a process we will now explore. How those hundreds of souls are whittled down to one candidate is done through the primary process. It is a system we find ourselves in at this moment.

As we set out on this exploration, we must make a distinction early on between caucuses and primaries. For stylistic reasons, I've chosen to use "primary" for both actual primaries and the rarer caucuses, unless otherwise noted. Both meetings are part of the opening steps in choosing a party's candidate for the general election. Both are inter-party elections held to choose delegates from the state parties to participate in the national conventions held the summer preceding the November election.

The name-difference, firstly, designates who is funding those meetings. Caucuses are private gatherings which are run and paid for directly by the private political parties (n.b., both the GOP and the DNC are, after all, private associations). Caucuses are altogether in-house affairs. On the other hand, primaries are organized and paid for by the states. Besides funding, the name-difference indicates a difference in voting styles.

Caucuses use open ballots, everyone knows who voted for whom. They're closer to open meetings than anything, and they try to arrive at a consensus. Primaries use secret ballots of the sort we're familiar with in the general November election, with the winner usually receiving all that state's delegates in the summer.

The overall trend since the 19th-Century, and especially since the 1970s, has been towards the primary system. Various dynamics come into play behind this trend. The most outstanding argument includes the perception that primaries are more open and democratic. The merits of this supposed openness is something we'll look at later. (Not all that glitters, is gold.) In any case the purpose of the primaries is to choose delegates, who themselves will choose their party's national presidential candidate.

Early History

How did the primary system arise? After all, political parties were not a planned feature of our government. Indeed, during the Revolution, the subsequent six-year rule of the Articles of Confederation, and during the final system developed at the Constitutional Convention, parties (or factions, as they were called then), were gravely cautioned against.

With the heavy examples of Rome and England during their civil wars, and the persistent machinations of factions in Medieval republics – think Romeo and Juliet’s Verona – weighing on their minds, the Founding Fathers were greatly set against such combinations.

Alexander Hamilton, oddly enough, given his later support of the Federalist party, warned in a tract, “There is no political truth better established by experience nor more to be deprecated in itself, than that this most dangerous spirit [of political parties] is apt to rage with greatest violence, in governments of the popular kind, and is at once their most common and their most fatal disease.”

The most revered statement in all of American political religion is Washington’s “Farewell Address.” It was once an oration commonly memorized by America’s schoolchildren. In it the outgoing president cautioned (in the best tradition of 18th-Century run-on sentences), “[Political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”

There were a number of Constitutional measures in place to squelch “partyism,” such as, the appointment of a presidential runner-up at be Vice President. Yet even the warning given at Washington’s 1796 retirement – or rather, his re-retirement, the general having first demurred further public life in 1783 at the disbanding of the Continental Army – the young nation was drifting towards a seemingly factionalism. It is a drive that seems to be irrepressible in men.

During the debates revolving around the ratification of the Constitution, two groups formed to voice their opposition to, or favor for the new national government. In after-years these groups metastasized. By the turn of the century, the Democratic-Republicans and the Federalists, as the parties came to be known, were well on their way to becoming as entrenched as their Tory and Whig predecessors were during colonial days. Indeed, by the time the 19th-Century was well underway, America not only had parties in abstract, it actually had a “Whig” party!

Later History

Whatever the Framers’ thoughts on the matter, political groups were here to stay. Indeed, Washington himself threw in the oppositionist towel in 1798, saying, “You could as soon scrub the blackamoor white, as to change the principles of a professed Democrat; and that he will leave nothing unattempted to overturn the Government of this Country.”

Even Cincinnatus became a partyist. From those early groups, the caucus system developed. How it did so and how it eventually morphed into our present primary gauntlet is something we will look at now.

With or without parties there developed a need to select and publicize candidates up for office. Washington's decision to bow out of a third term in the 1796 election created chaotic conditions for the new nation. In those days, before the passage of the 12th Amendment, every state Elector cast two votes for the two men thought best to be president.

With something of the logic of Europe's parliamentary system, neither of these ballots was designated over the other. The man with the most votes in this semi-blind election became President; the runner up became the Vice President.

Because of this, because a large pool of candidates lowers the percentage one needs to win (i.e., if two men run, you need 51%; if three run, 34%, and so forth), the new American parties backed any number of candidates for President, hoping to get a majority in an over-saturated field. To our modern eyes this system becomes murkier when we remember that candidates at the turn of the 18th-Century, and indeed until the eve of the Civil War, did not actually campaign themselves.

With the fumes of the Framers' wariness of ambition still lingering well into the following century, candidates sent their supporters out on the campaign trail to kiss babies and press the flesh, but they themselves did not budge from home.

The embryo of our present system goes back to those heady days of the 1796 and 1800 elections. In 1800 both Democratic-Republicans and Federalists held their first political caucuses. In the public, official arena those messy events spurred to passage of the 12th Amendment specifying the purpose of the Electors' two votes.

It reads in part, "The Electors shall meet in their respective states and vote by ballot for President and Vice-President, one of whom, at least, shall not be an inhabitant of the same state with themselves; they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as President, and in distinct ballots the person voted for as Vice-President."

We will move into the modern era and delineate the technical organization of the primaries. However, one last historical note ought to be mentioned. The caucus system by the mid-19th-Century would largely remain the same for the next 100 years. In the middle of that stretch, however, there occurred an electoral feature which is at once an element of our primary process today, and yet one whose historical impact likely is never to be matched. I speak of the split ticket of 1860.

In the run-up to the vote that year, the Democratic Party broke into three groups. Regionalism, slavery, tariffs, Federal power, and a host of topics, festering since before the Constitutional Convention came to a head in the 1860 election.

In this fateful contest, caucus candidates mounted their high horses. The typical bowing-out of contenders did not happen. Steven Douglas received the support of northern Democrats. John C. Breckinridge enjoyed the patronage of the southern wing of his party. More

confusing still, Tennessee's John Bell led a rump of the DNC, to work with remnants of the Whig Party, to form the Constitutional Union Party. The group was a desperate attempt to head off a war and largely represented western voters.

Whatever is to be said of the split ticketers, of their philosophical consistency and doggedness, a split ticket dooms a party to failure. This is what happened in 1860. Because the DNC was split, the insurgent Republican Party won the Presidency. With Abraham Lincoln set to come into office in March of the following year, South Carolina seceded in December 1860. The fallout from the caucuses of 1860 triggered an avalanche of events culminating in a civil war.

Schedule

By the time of the primaries, with many candidates campaigning for over a year before this actual first stage of the Presidential election process, the Iowa Caucus, begins. Preference, ease, tradition, and vanity contribute to the eclectic schedule of party meetings, every fourth spring.

At present, the schedule of the major gatherings is in Iowa on February 3. Note well that while primaries dominate nowadays, like a vestigial organ, the caucus format still officially kicks off the election cycle. New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina follow later that month. The far-famed "Super Tuesday" follows on March 3, with 16 states and related entities, such as American Samoa – alone in the caucus format since Iowa – and "Democrats abroad" choosing their selections.

By the close of March, over half of the primary selection events are over. Humble Connecticut, the land of steady habits indeed, prudently falls in the middle of the primary/caucus season. On April 28th, it joins five other Northeastern states for meetings, primaries all. This participatory gauntlet concludes on June 6th with the Virgin Islands holding their last primary, in this case for the Democratic Party.

Beyond the "Big Two"

Lest they be omitted, we remember that there are not two but five political parties recognized by the Federal Elections Commission, the regulatory agency which monitors national election financing. Beside the "big two" so often mentioned, in descending order based on the number of their members the other groups are the Libertarian, Green, and Constitution parties.

Primaries are fearfully expensive things to organize. According to the group Open Primaries, an association advocating primary reform, this stretch of the electoral cycle costs nearly half a billion dollars. This is a burden unsustainable by orders of magnitude for third parties. Thus, the Green and Constitution parties skip right over the primary season and designate their candidate at their summertime conventions. The plucky Green Party will mount a modest total of four state gatherings this year, primaries all.

Straw Polls

For the truest of political junkies, those who cannot wait until the primaries to get their electoral “fix,” there are straw polls. These unofficial queries are conducted by any number of private associations and they often precede the actual primaries by several months.

The most revered of these queries was the Iowa Straw Poll (of happy memory). An heir in its way to the ‘70s democratic fervor which has so influenced the primaries as we know them, the Iowa poll was held by the GOP six months before the Iowa Caucus. The Poll was of mixed accuracy and intent. Over the six times it was held, it successfully chose the correct GOP nominee only three times, and that’s leaving aside the open question of whether the Poll was supposed to choose a mere winner in Iowa or the ultimate GOP nominee

Though a child of the ‘70s, the Iowa Straw Poll channeled something of a 19th-Century democratic hoedown. The Poll, whatever its inaccuracy, also served the role of part-fundraiser and part-summer barbeque. Quaint but inaccurate, the Iowa Straw Poll was discontinued in 2011. Brisket-loving politicians rallied to their state’s dear bellwether, however, and since 2015 the Iowa State Fair Straw Poll has been dishing out inaccurate electoral auguries.

Iowa

Unlike the majority of preliminary meetings Iowa has chosen to keep the minority caucus system. 1916 was the last time the state held a primary. Citing costs, they went back to the caucus system the following year.

They’ve kept it that way since. In response to upheavals during the 1968 cycle, the Democratic Party decided to spread out their nominating process over a longer period of time, and this explains the early February (and some years late-January) date. In 1972 the DNC held their first winter caucus. The Republican Party followed suit four years later, pulling the opening of their process to the same early date since.

Iowa’s system is anomalous. Not only does it still maintain a caucus format (a minority amongst the 50 states), it also does so in the dead of winter (when poor weather might deter voters and the aged from venturing out). The state’s demographics are peculiar too. Iowans are not especially representative of the larger American voter pool, being overwhelmingly white and rural. And those white and rural voters are few in number. With only six votes in the Electoral College, the winter meetings are about the only time national candidates pay attention to “the corn state.”

However, elections can be tied to hallowed custom. America’s agrarian days explain the tradition of our November election placement. It was chosen as a convenient post-harvest, pre-sowing month to travel in. Religious concerns lie behind like the choice of second

Tuesday election. Such a day avoided both Sunday travel in pre-automobile America and the Catholic All Saints' holiday.

Even recent customs such as the ubiquitous "I voted" sticker, popular since its introduction in the '80s, are firmly kneaded into the county's electoral customs. With the overall trend towards earlier and earlier primaries, Iowa has staked its claim on democratic ritual. They will not budge on their February date.

Tradition aside, however, the main argument for Iowa keeping their caucus and their early date is that it allows otherwise unknown contenders to elbow their way into the fray. The greatest example of this is Jimmy Carter. Taking advantage of the post-'68 McGovern reforms and liberalization of campaign finance, Carter's team aggressively pounded the pavement to get their candidate into the media's spotlight and onto people's radars.

It worked; and candidates have been trying to get that same edge ever since. As of last November, Democratic candidates visited Iowa more than 800 times. Donald Trump, who developed such a taste for rallies in 2016 that he has not stopped holding them in the intervening four years, visited Iowa last June as part of a state GOP fundraiser.

Super Tuesday And The Rest

Following the Iowa and New Hampshire gatherings, the next milestone on the journey to the White House is "Super Tuesday." On that day, in early March, upwards of one-third of Americans are represented at the party polls. This year, California joins the 2016 shift of Texas to Super Tuesday. Both states have large populations, and large Hispanic populations at that.

The justification of their moves lies in the greater racial diversity they bring to the primary season. The late relocations of the Golden and Lone Star states add even more energy to Super Tuesday. Of course, high-minded motives of diversity aside, we mustn't pretend that old fashioned vanity is innocent from the trend of state parties towards earlier and earlier starts in their nominating processes.

Platforms

When the primary season winds down this spring, what can we expect to see at the party conventions come summer? When the 3,769 Democratic delegates meet this July in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and when the 2,551 Republican representatives meet this August in Charlotte, North Carolina, they will be charged not only with choosing their nominee but also their party platform. What will the parties decide on? Standing at the cusp of this election year, primaries help shape the talking points of both parties for their official codification, come the summer conventions. Let us turn now to the platforms of the major candidates.

Donald Trump will doubtless take the Republican nomination. Six states' GOPs – Alaska, Arizona, Kansas, Nevada, South Carolina, and Virginia – are confident enough in this that they have saved themselves logistical troubles and canceled their primaries altogether. While the party's Presidential nominee is a done deal for Republicans, this year's primaries still allow the political faithful the opportunity to develop their platform.

While the choice of the RNC's candidate is open and shut this time around that does not mean President Trump is without challengers to his incumbency. Serving within the Republican Party, the same role that third parties do in the general election, three men are indeed running for the GOP nomination.

Former Massachusetts governor, Bill Weld, one-term “Tea Party” congressman, Joe Walsh, and former South Carolina governor Mark Sanford all hope to inject various issues into platform discussions, which otherwise would go silent. Longest of long-shots all, these men will be successful, if they influence this August's GOP convention. And like many a politician of many a stripe, defeat – even obviously and overwhelming defeat – always can prime the pump for the next run!

As for the Democratic Party, the winnowing has yet to begin in earnest. Yes, some have already dropped out, like former Montana governor, Steve Bullock, retired admiral, Joe Sestak, and California's Attorney General Kamala Harris; but some have also entered the race like Michael Bloomberg. There have been over 20 DNC candidates who were running at one time or another this cycle. At present there are 15 candidates, who have registered with the Federal Elections Commission on the DNC ticket.

The sheer volume of contenders this time around combines with the fact that some have been campaigning for a year already. Besides the 15, we often hear about, 270 other people are also running for the Democratic ticket. This mass promises to inject a number of new topics and positions into this campaign.

Due to the clear divide between career politicians, such as, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, and Michael Bloomberg, and relative neophytes, like Tulsi Gabbard and Andrew Yang, the DNC may be challenged by a similar split, which the Republicans experienced in 2016. Back then, the old guard were pitted against the “black horse” of the Trump campaign.

This was an upset which some in the GOP have not been quick in forgetting. A number of erratic decisions in the Trump administration, such as the DACA tug-of-war and the lack of control the President exercises over his advisers, are explainable in light of this in-house disquiet.

Amongst the Democrats, the split is between careerist candidates who boast of their experience in office against populist newcomers, promising more radical policies. “Lifers” like confident Joe Biden, who claims more qualifications than Henry Kissinger (a telling

comparison), go toe-to-toe with *populares*, like newcomer, Andrew Yang, who promise more radical policies, such as, Universal Basic Income.

At this early stage of the race it seems that domestic topics will be of decidedly more interest to American voters than foreign policy. The student debt crisis, the massive disruption to come from looming automation and digitalization, and endless saga of American health care financing, all promise to hold more attention than they did during either the Bush or Obama days. These are concerns of average Americans.

But those average Americans aside, despite charges of undue Russian election interference and corruption in the Ukraine, despite some down and out neoconservatives still wraithing about Washington since the Bush II days, there is a pronounced disinterest in the Trump administration to become intrusively involved in overseas affairs in the manner of the previous two presidents (i.e., wars and coups). Whether one calls it “America first” or “isolationism,” the incumbent administration holds a lot of sway, when it comes to deciding the pressing topics of an election. It’s the home team advantage.

Conventions

The party primaries lead to the conventions. By the time they are held the summer prior to an election, most of the candidates have dropped out. Amongst those who remain, it’s usually obvious who will take the ticket. However, if they’ve the will – and the funding – some campaigns doggedly go to the bitter end.

With the horrible consequence of the 1860 split-ticket rattling around literate candidates’ heads, some candidates go to the bitter end in earnest, and more “play chicken,” backing down at the last minute. Theodore Roosevelt’s “Bull Moose” split in the 1912 election, is another memorable election in this regard. Woodrow Wilson, like Lincoln before him, came to power because of disunity within the other party. Of course, countless historical ramifications stem from Wilson’s subsequent victory.

Ross Perot’s 1992 break with the GOP, which paved the way for two-termer Bill Clinton to win the day, is the most recent example of a party split. The stand, which Ron Paul’s and Bernie Sanders’ supporters have made in recent years, had some of us wondering, if we’d not see the split-ticket dynamic once again.

In any case, and ordinarily speaking, as happens informally during the primary season, and so formally at the conventions – at the close of each round of voting, losing campaigners choose which remaining candidate receives their delegates. For example, say that I win Connecticut’s primary but don’t have the steam to get the nomination. I can choose to give those 10 Connecticut GOP delegates to whatever candidate remains in the running.

The conventions come down to an equation of “delegate math,” when all is said and done. This is not dissimilar to the Electoral College set up; the delegate system operates on a state-by-state basis. Democratic delegates are doled out proportionally while Republicans follow a method truer to the College: the winner of a state primary takes all the delegation of that state.

Superdelegates

We now come to the definition of, and distinction between, delegates and superdelegates during the election cycle. Delegates, regular pledged delegates, are sent by the state parties – the same ones who organized the spring primaries – to the summer meetings. While there, they vote according to the previous choice of their state meeting.

Strictly speaking, though, there is nothing, not even the social opprobrium of being a “faithless elector,” as in the general election, which mandates that pledged delegates must actually vote according to the previous decision at the primary. As such, there is more elbow room, more jostling, than one might imagine at the summer conventions.

Beyond – and we may say, above – these regular delegates are the much-mentioned “superdelegates.” Properly called “unpledged delegates,” superdelegates have no expectations whatsoever to vote according to state conventions. They are free agents recruited from the most loyal party members. Various office holders, such as, the President, Governors, and Speaker of the House are eligible, as are members of the parties’ national committees – the “C” in DNC, for example – are superdelegates.

Now what sort of person do you suppose is going to fill such a role? Lifers, that’s who; not populists, not faddists, not single-issue sorts, not an enthusiastic clique.

The present system continues to evolve following a general prejudice towards greater participation. However, for party bosses this participation opens the door to populists; that is, candidates who appeal to the “little guy,” the “average” American, and who hold themselves as champions against a ruling elite. Superdelegates are a conservative reaction, an elitist reaction, to the recent history of primaries.

The DNC was walloped in both the 1972 and 1980 elections. The leaders of the party felt that things had become uncontrollable. In the rush to democratize and open up their nominating system, after the disaster of 1968, the proper vetting process was ignored, they felt, and they subsequently lost. In those elections, the DNC nominated George McGovern, in hindsight too liberal, and Jimmy Carter, whom a more entrenched Ronald Reagan was able to paint as a babe in the woods.

These were candidates who had great appeal to the party faithful, but who did not resonate with the general American population. In response to these developments, unpledged delegates were instituted by the DNC during the 1984 cycle. (Much good it did them. They

lost in that year).

Who are the superdelegates? Many have held or presently hold office. Jim Carter, a hero in our primary story, fellow Southerner Bill Clinton, Dick Durbin, and Connecticut's Elizabeth Etsy are superdelegates. Oddly enough, so are candidates Bernie Sanders, Tulsi Gabbard, and Joe Biden. Superdelegates are stalwarts of the organization. In the event of a dark horse candidate, the superdelegates, proverbial old men in back smoking rooms, swing into action behind their choice.

Of the two major parties, superdelegates play a more crucial role in amongst Democrats. Indeed, the results of the 2016 election bear witness to this. In Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, both the GOP and the DNC had insurgent candidates that year. Both men were not favored by their party establishment. However, only the DNC was successful in squelching their black horse Sanders (at least for another four years). This was because of the heft of their superdelegates.

And while incumbents may call the debate topics, they don't always call the election. Only 16 out of 43 Presidents have won a second consecutive term. Far more than being dead ritual or boilerplate, the primaries are primary.

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The image shows, "Election Day," by John Louis Krimmel, painted in 1815.

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