

CHAPTER FIVE

The Utility of Party Conventions in an Era of Low Visibility and Campaign Finance Reform¹

J. Mark Wrighton

In Chapter Five, J. Mark Wrighton discusses changes to the presidential nominating process that occurred during the media age and considers how these developments have influenced the national conventions. He also investigates the dwindling interest in and coverage of conventions and assesses the effects of campaign finance reform and regulation on convention financing. Wrighton concludes that, despite several concerns, national conventions continue to serve important purposes in the American political system and occupy a special place in the presidential selection process.

Over time, the process by which Americans choose their chief executive has changed in dramatic fashion. The process has progressed from individuals seeking the presidency to party elites choosing their standard bearers to a democratization of the process through which the mass memberships of political parties select nominees for the general election. Coupled with other changes in the political system (i.e. the Progressive ballot and voter registration reforms of the early 20th century and more recent campaign finance reforms), these modifications have had profound effects on the types of candidates who seek the presidency, the attention paid to the process by the wider electorate and the media, and the amount of resources required to win the office.

The principal vehicle by which the political parties choose their presidential nominees is the party convention. The nomination process has inherent importance in that it sets the conditions of the general election, and who is chosen to lead the party's ticket goes far in determining the party's electoral fortunes. Indeed, party bosses

¹ The author wishes to thank Lara M. Brown for her suggestions given in assistance in the creation of this chapter.

understood well the impact that determining who would carry their standards had on the general election.²

The nomination process itself has changed extensively over time. Each time a process change has occurred, the effect has been to open up, or “democratize,” the process further. In order to understand the current state of affairs in the American presidential election system, one must recall that significant changes have come in the last 35 years as more registered partisans have gained access to the process through participation in party primaries to select delegates to a national convention. The shift from party caucuses to a primary election process for committing party delegates to candidates prior to the nominating convention has further reduced the control party elites once had.

Recently, however, party chairs have found ways to affect the outcome of the presidential nominating process by adjusting the process prior to the convention. This has occurred principally through an ever-increasing frontloading of the schedule of state party presidential primaries. The resulting clustering of state primaries closer to the front of the process has made available many more delegates much earlier in the process. In 2004, the Democratic Party had – in Senator John F. Kerry of Massachusetts – a candidate with enough delegates in hand to claim the nomination by March 2, an extremely early date. As we will see, such extreme frontloading places intense pressure on candidates to raise large amounts of money earlier and forces those without large amounts of resources to withdraw from the process sooner.

² William Marcy “Boss” Tweed of Tammany Hall understood well his potential control over electoral outcomes afforded by controlling the nominating process when he remarked, “I don’t care who does the electing as long as I get to do the nominating.”

Further, in the period leading up to the conventions, frontloading has virtually removed much of the suspense surrounding the identity of the nominees. Because of the highly frontloaded processes for committing delegates, at least one candidate in each party is assured of arriving at the convention with enough delegates for the nomination. Thus, for outside observers of the political process, conventions appear to have become nothing more than “unity” events or four-day “commercials” for the parties and their candidates. We will see that the party conventions retain important purposes despite this lack of suspense.

Concomitant with the change from a party caucus process to a frontloaded primary process for selecting presidential candidates is an escalating decline in the attention paid to the process. Despite potential candidates considering runs for the presidency now almost four years in advance, the electorate seems not to pay attention to the process until the year – or sometimes not even until up to several months – before the election. Indeed, many voters now appear to be ignoring the conventions, thinking them to be no more than opportunities for speechifying with the “usual” partisan rhetoric.

Prior to the primary season, presidential candidates respond to demands placed upon them by this “invisible primary” by purchasing early paid media and seeking as much “free” media as possible. Doing so provides candidates opportunities to introduce themselves and their policy positions to those in the electorate who may be paying attention. With the assistance of an attentive media looking for stories, this ideally translates into a “buzz,” which assists candidates’ fundraising and endorsements efforts further along in the process of capturing the nomination.

As the summer of the presidential election year comes to a close, the parties try to attract viewers to their conventions by offering grand themes for their productions. In recent times, the parties have sought to attract viewers to their conventions and to “entertain” them with pop music acts scattered between the speeches, elaborate video biographies of the candidates, and “convention jockeys” on the floor and from remote locations.

For its part, the media – in its dual role as agenda-setter and public mood reflector – may, at first, be reluctant to cover the process until candidates take sufficient steps to enter the race. Once this occurs, the “horse race” metaphor (Who is up? Who is down?) dominates the coverage.³ Once the race is on, substantive issues of the moment may drop dramatically in their relative importance and coverage.⁴

Overlaid on the entire presidential election process is the ever-increasing requirement for large amounts of resources in order for a candidate to garner a nomination and for the parties to showcase their nominees. Getting through to primary voters who are not paying attention and generating a “buzz” about a candidacy require the expenditure of money early and often. A process of “natural selection” occurs to the extent that those candidates who are able to do this successfully and translate it into early success and momentum are the ones most likely – regardless of their objective ability to win the general election – to become the parties’ nominees. Additionally, parties must

³ In 2000, the percentage of “horse race” coverage jumped to 71 percent (from 48 in 1996 and 58 in both 1988 and 1992). See Table 6.2 in *Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?* by Stephen J. Wayne, p. 129.

⁴ As an example, in 2004, the media’s obsession with the potential order of finish in the Democratic Party nomination race hit a zenith at a debate in New Hampshire when the moderator focused most of the discussion – much to the chagrin of some of the candidates – on the frontrunner status of former Vermont Governor Howard Dean and his endorsement by former Vice President Al Gore. Six weeks later, Gov. Dean’s campaign fell apart after successive defeats in Iowa and New Hampshire.

raise and spend large amounts of money in order to capture the attention of and to influence voters during their conventions.

The demand for early and big money engendered by the process stands in marked contrast to the recent push for campaign finance reform, however. As the process has been opened up to more participation among partisans, the financing of American elections has been increasingly regulated. Reformers generally bemoan the amount of money in the political system and the perceived influence it may have in the political system, yet most reforms have the counterintuitive effect of increasing the amount of money in politics, reducing the accountability of that money – or worst yet for reformers – both. Additionally, we will see that the most recent round of reform has actually *increased* the influence groups and individuals might have through donations to the party conventions.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, this chapter will further explore the changes in the nominating process and their effects on the party conventions outlined above by going into more historical depth with some data to elucidate the trends. Second, I will attempt in this chapter to make an assessment as to whether the party conventions continue to provide any serious benefit to the process or stand as the expensive partisan “commercials” they are charged with being.

A Changing Nomination Process: Coming Full Circle?

The period leading up to the conventions consists of a process through which potential party nominees campaign around the country and attempt to amass enough delegates committed to them in order to claim the nomination on the convention’s first ballot. During the process, each party – through a contested nomination process – has an

implicit discussion about the issues of the day and how each potential candidate will address them. In order to become a party's presidential nominee, one needs to claim a majority of the party's available delegates.

The process of how delegates are committed to particular party candidates for president reflects the general expansion of other electoral processes in the American political system. Over time, the process has devolved from relatively small numbers of partisan elites to mass partisan electorates participating in state-by-state elections to commit delegates to candidates. Additionally, the parties have dramatically frontloaded their primary schedules with the effect of making their conventions "coronations" of their nominees. This section explores the extent to which this process has changed and how those changes have affected the character of the parties' national nominating conventions.

Back in the Day: Brokered Conventions and King Caucus

For a relatively brief period of their history, political parties in the United States did not hold nominating conventions. In the early 1800s, there were meetings of the parties' respective congressional caucuses. It would not be until the 1830s, however, when parties would begin formally holding meetings of party members from around the country for the purpose of nominating individuals to carry their standards in the general election for president.⁵ Individual states did have processes by which they named delegates to these conventions, but the delegates usually were partisan officeholders in state legislatures. There was very little suspense at these meetings as the party's bosses had conferred prior to the meeting – very likely in the apocryphal "smoke-filled room" – and decided who the party's nominee would be. Each party luminary would then deliver

⁵ For a description of the process leading up to the first nominating convention in Baltimore, MD in May of 1932 see *Why New Hampshire?* by Hugh Gregg and Bill Gardner.

a large bloc of delegates in support of the pre-determined choice. This process held very little external suspense, was not open to party rank-and-file members, and provided a means by which those in control of the parties could maintain their influence and loyalty to the party through the rewards system.

Over time, the process opened up slightly as each state party organization began holding caucuses of party activists and elites in order to commit delegates to the national nominating convention. The caucus process forced candidates for president to let go of the “front porch” style of previous campaigns, to begin addressing the concerns of different regions of the country, and to appeal to the local partisan elites in each state. However, “King Caucus” – while opening up the nominating process slightly – was still fairly unrepresentative of the parties’ rank-and-file memberships. The activists who participated in the caucus process possessed a smaller (albeit a larger one than the process with only state legislative partisans participating) variation in party loyalty and viewpoints than did the parties’ broader memberships.

The turn of the 20th century found a reform movement sweeping the nation. The Progressive movement – in addition to pushing for voter reforms such as the secret ballot and voter registration prior to elections – advocated a further expansion of the definition of those eligible to participate in the parties’ nomination process. The movement supported a change from caucuses to a system of party primaries, the results of which the parties might use to commit delegates to particular candidates at the nominating conventions.

Over the course of the past century, the major parties have employed this method to an increasing degree, resulting in a much broader participation by rank-and-file

members. In 1912, the Democratic Party held 12 primaries and chose 33 percent of its delegates by primary elections; in the same year, the Republican Party held 13 primaries and chose 42 percent of its delegates through the more participatory process. By 2000, the parties held primaries in 40 or more states and selected more than 85 percent of their delegates through a primary process.⁶ As a result of the increased use of state party primaries as the means by which to commit delegates to candidates – and their subsequent frontloading, 1952 would become the last year in which the nomination process exceeded one ballot at the convention.

The Front-Loaded Coronation

While the movement from caucuses to primaries represented an important change in the process, the last 30 years have seen more profound changes in the way in which candidates collect delegates toward the number needed to capture the nomination. The major transformation in the process arose in the form of an ever-increasing frontloading of the primary schedule. Its most significant effects have been the demands placed upon candidates. Prospective presidential candidates must now raise money and support among early-state party elites earlier than ever.

While the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary have maintained their relative positions at the outset of the process, the national parties have allowed more state party organizations to move their contests closer to the beginning. More and more, states have sought the advantages of greater influence and coverage by the candidates and the media associated with early primary contests. Indeed, an over-time glimpse at the relative percentages of delegates available early in the primary season reveals the extent of frontloading. In the 1960 Democratic primary season, 56 percent of the available

⁶ From Table 7.1 in *Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?* by Stephen J. Wayne, p. 156.

delegates were not committed until the first week of May; in 1996, 51 percent of the party's delegates were available by the third week in March.⁷ With such a larger percentage of delegates available earlier in the process, the party nominations are now effectively settled in the six weeks following the Iowa caucuses.⁸ Thus, while enhancing voter information about the candidates as candidates make themselves known earlier in the process, frontloading produces significantly lower turnout rates further “downstream” in the primary season as primary outcomes have less effect in determining the nominee.

Everything Old is New Again

With the parties' nominations effectively settled in March of the presidential election year, the conventions have become – to outside observers – events at which “coronations” rather than nominations occur. To some they may resemble the past process – if not in exact method then in effective outcome. While party bosses may not be choosing the nominees, an ever-decreasing number of state party organizations is effectively choosing them.

Further, the five to six months between harvesting enough delegates to capture the nomination and the convention enhances the challenge of running for president by reducing the candidates' visibility among the electorate. While the extra time gives them the ability to raise and to spend more primary dollars, candidates must work to overcome the temptation to “coast” into the convention. During the same lull in the action, the temptation for voters and the media may be to “tune out” once the parties have a nominee in hand.

⁷ Andrew E. Busch and William G. Mayer. “The Frontloading Problem” in *The Making of the Presidential Candidates, 2004* ed. William G. Mayer (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

⁸ In 2004, Senator John F. Kerry accumulated a majority of available delegates after the March 9 primaries.

A Dwindling Interest in and Coverage of the Conventions

Contrary to what one might surmise about the interest of the electorate in the presidential campaign, one does not observe an upward climb in it as the November election approaches. Rather, the voters' interest appears to peak at the time when the parties are in the final stages of determining a nominee. As explored above, the ever-increasing frontloading of the process has resulted in candidates amassing a majority of the necessary delegates very early. It should be no surprise then to see that voter interest in the 2000 presidential election campaign dropped precipitously after March of that year.⁹ With the conventions now occurring five to six months after the nomination process, one should expect a small number of viewers as well as sinking amounts of media coverage.

Fewer and Fewer Viewers

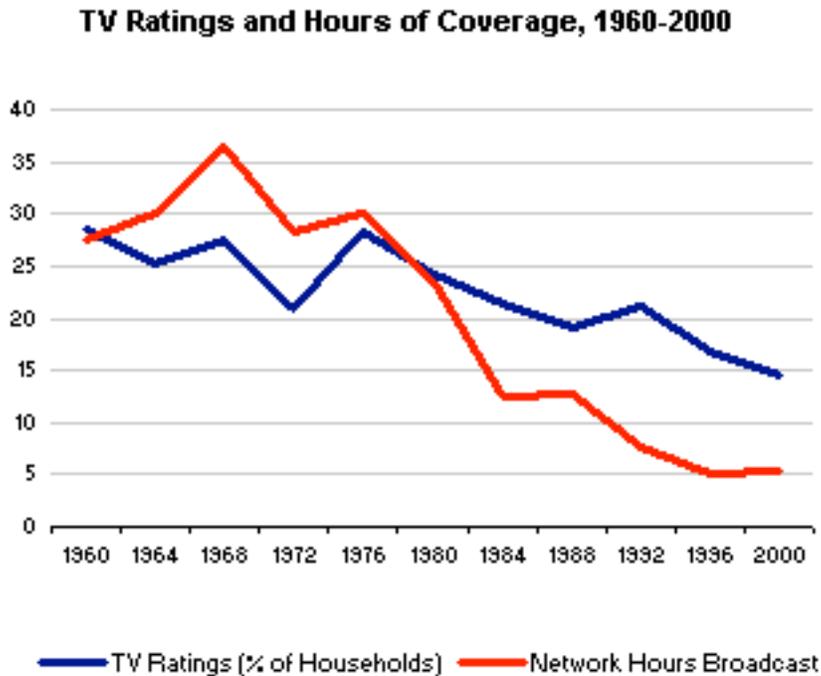
The figure below demonstrates the steady decline in television ratings for the party conventions.¹⁰ There are at least three potential explanations as to why fewer viewers are tuning into the conventions. Fewer in the electorate may watch the convention proceedings because the nominee is now "predetermined," they may not watch because the parties have stripped and scripted the conventions so that they now provide little substantive debate of the issues of the day, or they may be getting more of their political information from other sources.

First, the frontloaded primary process now produces party nominees well in advance of the occurrence of the conventions. In the presidential election process, there is nothing more dramatic than not knowing who the party's nominee will be as a party

⁹ See Figure 4 from "Is There a Future for On-the-Air Televised Conventions" by Thomas Patterson available at <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/background/papers.html>.

¹⁰ Preliminary figures for 2004 indicate relatively steady ratings.

convention begins. Indeed, those who miss “the good old days” might well yearn for the now unlikely possibility of the “brokered” convention in which no candidate arrives with a majority of delegates and speculation abounds about what deals may be necessary to cobble together a majority. The rules changes binding delegates to their pre-convention commitments and an expanding the use of the primary – derived from the McGovern-Fraser Commission study of the Democratic presidential nomination process – went far in removing much of the suspense from the conventions.



From <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/background/media.html>. Reproduced with permission of the Campaign Finance Institute.

Second, because the conventions appear to have become “scripted commercials,” voters may be tuning out. The 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago stands as a potential watershed event in that the antiwar protests in the streets of the Windy City took attention away from and marred – to some extent – the proceedings in the hall. Since

then, the parties have tightly controlled the events and messages of their conventions. In 2004, each party carefully structured its convention around a central theme and used the speakers on each night to communicate a finely-tuned portion of the message the party wanted to convey to the electorate. Voters may simply be bored with the prepackaged political messages each convention now presents. Even partisans bemoan the lack of substantive discussions at the party quadrennial meeting.

Finally, voters are relying on a much wider array of sources for their political information. Within the television medium itself, there has been a dramatic shift away from the traditional networks toward cable outlets. There has also occurred a steep increase in reliance on Internet news outlets.¹¹ Instead of viewing an event which has little drama and appears to be scripted so as to remove much controversy, the electorate seems to be fragmenting as voters seek sources of information which better fit into their increasingly hectic lives and desire for reinforcement of their beliefs.¹² Thus, voters have found other ways to remain connected to the political campaigns.

The Plummeting (and Morphing) Media Coverage

The figure above also demonstrates that the number of convention coverage hours has dropped along with viewer interest. On its face, this should come as no surprise as the media is likely to deliver only that which the electorate wants to see and in the amounts it desires. Indeed, television coverage has dropped to about one hour an evening

¹¹ For the specific figures, see Table 6.1 from *Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?* by Stephen J. Wayne, p. 127.

¹² There has even been an increase in the late-night comedy shows as a source of political news as they voters can see them at a time when they are not otherwise occupied and in a format which may seem more entertaining than the real thing.

during the four-day events. Television appears to have settled on covering that which voters rate as most interested in seeing – the major speeches of each night.¹³

In addition to “giving the viewers what they want” – or maybe do not need given their reliance on the plethora of other sources of information available to them – the television networks may have also deemed the conventions as lacking in news. The lack of suspense and general (scripted?) agreement among partisans do not make for riveting television. Television has responded by not only reducing the amount of overall convention coverage but also by increasing the amount of analysis at the convention in an effort to “liven up” the event, but even that may have begun to ring hollow among the electorate.

Despite the drop in coverage and the number of convention viewers, the electorate appears to still be engaged with the presidential election process. Zachary Karabell – in his paper from 1998, “The Rise and Fall of the Televised Political Convention” – reminds us that conventions continue to have discernible impacts on the political process. Bounces and slumps out of the conventions still affect candidate fortunes in the general election. What is – or is not – said, how it is said, and how it plays in the electorate may contribute to the ultimate outcome in November. In the age of a transforming media, voters do not have to see them on television to hear about and to be affected by the conventions.

The Effects of Campaign Finance Reform and Regulation on Convention Financing

The story of the American political regime continues to be one of gradual over-time change. Over the course of 200 years, the boundaries of the nation expanded from

¹³ Voters are most interested in seeing the nominee’s acceptance speech. For how voters rated other portions of the conventions, see Table 3 from “Is There a Future for On-the-Air Televised Conventions” by Thomas Patterson available at <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/background/papers.html>.

east to west across the North American continent. The set of Americans eligible to vote has broadened dramatically over time from white, male property owners to any citizen aged 18 or older. Additionally, the processes of American elections – including presidential ones – have changed over time. For example, by pressing for reforms such as the secret ballot and voter registration at the turn of the last century, the Progressive movement spurred dramatic change in the voting booth.

How candidates in the American political system finance their elections has – in relatively more recent times – been a major topic for reform-minded individuals. Just as reforms to the means by which presidential candidates collect delegates toward the party nomination have changed the way all involved behave, so, too, have changes to the system of financing elections changed the behavior of candidates, political interests, and parties. This section examines the changes to the system of financing American elections and their effects on the political parties and, specifically, the conventions.

A Brief History of Campaign Finance Regulation

In 1972, Richard Nixon set what was then a record for spending in a presidential election. The subsequent Watergate scandal raised concerns about the “cleanliness” of contributions to the Nixon campaign. Shortly thereafter, Congress – by amending a 1971 campaign finance law – enacted the first major campaign finance reform legislation, the Federal Elections and Campaigns Act (FECA), Public Law 94-283. There have been several subsequent changes to campaign finance rules, all of which have had implications for the political system at large as well as for the conventions in particular.¹⁴

In 1974, Congress limited the amount which individuals could contribute to campaigns to \$1000 per candidate per election. For presidential elections, Congress

¹⁴ Provisions of federal campaign finance laws are available at http://www.fec.gov/finance_law.html

established a system of public financing for both primary and general election candidates for president. This system includes a “checkoff” provision on federal income tax forms to create and to maintain a public pool of funds for presidential candidates. FECA also limited the expenditures by candidates for public office.¹⁵ The campaign law further established an oversight body, the Federal Election Commission, which regulates and enforces campaign finance rules. For the parties’ conventions, the law provided a public grant program for both major and minor parties to help fund their nominating conventions. Each major party receives an inflation-adjusted grant and cannot make expenditures exceeding the allocated amount.¹⁶

With the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (BCFRA) – Public Law 107-155 – in 2002, Congress amended FECA and enacted a second major round of campaign finance reform. Among its major provisions was a doubling of the amounts which individuals can contribute to candidates to \$2000 per candidate per election, an indexing of this limit in future years to inflation rates, a ban on so-called “soft money” contributions to the political parties, restrictions on contributions by unions and corporations, and restrictions on electioneering activity by issue groups 30 days in advance of primary elections and 60 days in advance of general elections.¹⁷

In its infancy, the BCFRA proved to be quite controversial and has produced some unintended consequences. The legislation’s electioneering and soft money ban provisions survived a court challenge – one based primarily on the assertion that they

¹⁵ The Supreme Court struck down FECA’s spending limits on congressional candidates in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976). The decision did, however, uphold spending limits for presidential candidates choosing to take public funds available in the Presidential Election Campaign Fund. The decision also allowed uncoordinated “soft money” expenditures.

¹⁶ Source: 26 USC 9008. In 2004, this grant totaled \$15 million for each major party.

¹⁷ For a complete rendering of the BCFRA provisions, see <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/shays.html>.

violated the tenets of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment – put forward by political groups and party representatives in *McConnell v. FEC (2004)*. Subsequent group activity in the form of 527 groups – which go unregulated by BCFRA in both the amounts of money they can raise and spend – prompted a court challenge by the act's authors.¹⁸ Finally, despite reformers' claims in 2002 that the legislation would help “take money out of politics,” congressional and presidential candidates have raised and spent more money than ever before.¹⁹

These campaign finance regulations have had a significant impact on the American political landscape. As the rules have changed over time, individuals, candidates, and groups have adapted well in order to find legal – if not “legitimate” – means to maximize their ability to contribute to campaigns and to raise the funds necessary to conduct campaigns in an era of the ever-increasing costs associated with crafting and disseminating a message. Given the current state of campaign regulations and if one likens campaign cash to water – which always seems to find a way around barriers – it should be no surprise to learn that some of the influence groups can have in the process may be settling into the realm of the party conventions.

The Convention “Loophole” and the Growth of Group Influence

In 1979, the Federal Election Commission issued regulations allowing host committees, organized in the cities awarded the party conventions, to contribute to party

¹⁸ Not only were these groups' activities unregulated but also they became campaign issues in and of themselves in the presidential election of 2004 as both major-party candidates faced well-financed attack campaigns from these groups.

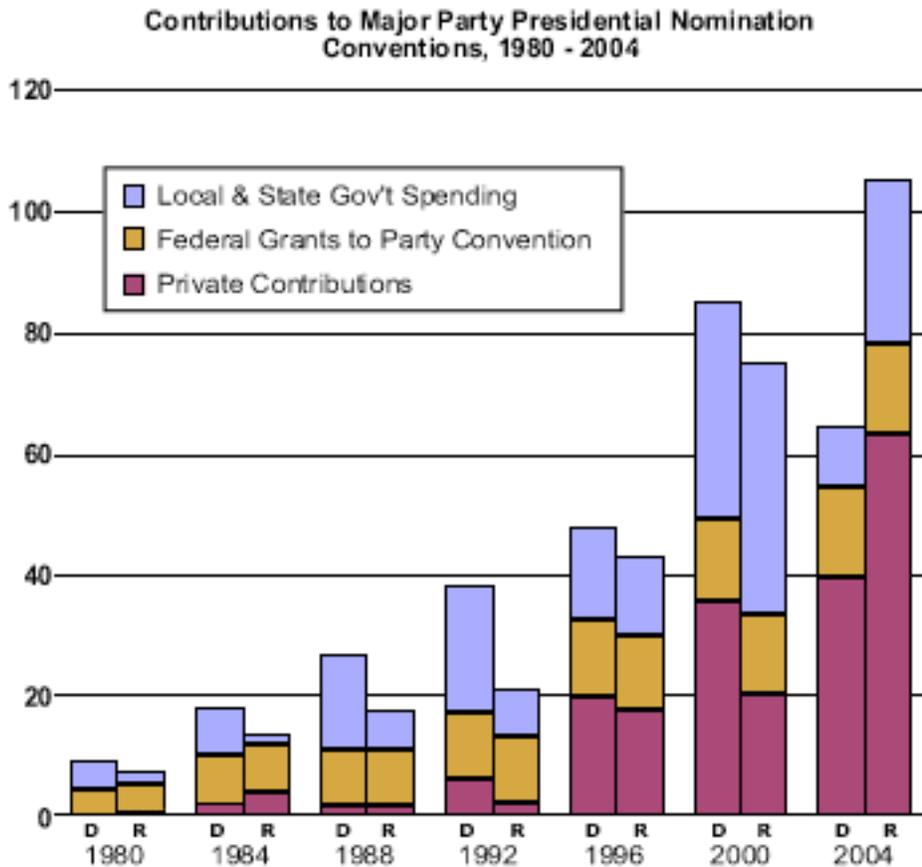
¹⁹ The Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org) reported that – as of August 2004 – the two major-party presidential candidates had raised almost \$600 million.

committees and also allow unions and corporations to give freely to those host committees.²⁰ Thus was born the “convention loophole.”

As the FEC’s interpretation of its regulations has changed, the size of this loophole has changed as well. In 2004, the Campaign Finance Institute (CFI) produced a report detailing the growth of the loophole. In it, the CFI details how the commission has – over time – relaxed its initial 1979 requirements that donors to convention host committees be “local” as well that expenditures for convention expenses be in amounts proportional to what retailers might expect to recoup during the convention.²¹ Because these exemptions provide resources above and beyond those supplied by the public grants-in-aid established in 1974, the amounts raised (and spent) on conventions would grow exponentially in the next 20 years.

²⁰ Source: 44 *Federal Register* 63037, 63041-42 (November 1, 1979)

²¹ Source: “The \$100 Million Exemption: Soft Money and the 2004 National Party Conventions, pp. 1 –2 at <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/financing/cfistudy.html>.



From <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/financing/conventions101.html>. Reproduced with permission of the Campaign Finance Institute.

The figure above demonstrates this dramatic growth in contributions to the party conventions. First, one can see clearly the identical blocks of federal grants-in-aid given to the major parties every four years; these are indexed to inflation, amounted to just under \$15 million in the 2004 cycle, and derive from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund *before* any candidate receives matching funds. Second, despite some variation in their contributions, it is clear that local and state governments view the conventions as worthwhile investments for their economies.²² Finally, and most importantly as to the concerns raised by reformers, there has occurred a marked rise in the amounts of funds

²² If not in the short term – as Boston discovered in 2004 with a negligible economic impact – then perhaps in the long term as an intense week-long promotion of the host city as a tourist destination.

contributed by individuals and groups. Between the two major-party gatherings of 2004, the convention loophole generated \$100 million in private donations, up from \$9 million a scant three cycles earlier.

The Campaign Finance Institute report characterizes this growth in private contributions as “inconsistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of BCRA’s ban on national party soft money.” Further, the CFI recommends that political parties pay for convention expenses with “hard” dollars – ones contributed to the parties under the regulated limits of campaign finance rules – and that host committees raise soft money for “civic promotion activities” only.²³ Doing so would tighten the convention loophole and reduce group influence in the nominating process. Recalling that changing the rules potentially alters outcomes, however, gives one pause to examine the implications of the full implementation of CFI’s recommendations on financing nominating conventions.

First, conventions – and by extension the entire political process – have become extremely expensive undertakings. Figures from the Campaign Finance Institute’s report provide a surprising glimpse at the enormous amounts of money necessary to conduct the conventions. The institute reports the two parties were expected to spend, combined, a total of \$76 million of the \$100 million in private contributions on facilities, computer and technical support, and transportation.²⁴ These are costs associated with simply “putting on” the events, ones that are certainly likely to rise in the future. In 2004, requiring the parties to use hard dollars – in conjunction with BCRA’s \$25,000 maximum on donations to the party – would have compelled them to raise funds from *at*

²³ Source: “The \$100 Million Exemption: Soft Money and the 2004 National Party Conventions, p. 42 at <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/financing/cfistudy.html>.

²⁴ Source: “The \$100 Million Exemption: Soft Money and the 2004 National Party Conventions, p. 7 at <http://www.cfinst.org/eguide/partyconventions/financing/cfistudy.html>.

least 3040 different individuals if not more so as the number of donors willing to give at that level is constrained.²⁵

Second, the massive fundraising effort simply to hold their quadrennial meetings would detract from the parties' other, equally important functions in the American political regime. Parties serve important functions beyond nominating candidates for election and seeking to win those contests. Besides contesting elections, the parties are vehicles by which new participants get their first experience in the political world. For better or worse, the political socialization process occurs in the context of the major political parties as parents pass on their political values which – in turn – form the basis and energy of a generational renewal of the body politic. The adoption of the recommendations in the CFI report would likely compel the parties to choose between raising money for their conventions and doing this important outreach work.

Because these donations are made to host committees and other entities with the short-term interests of attracting conventions and then hosting them, the current system of financing conventions does not provide the electorate with any means to punish tainted donations; simply put, private donations cannot be tied directly to the parties. It is, however, possible for the political parties to assist in reducing the perceived corruption of the current process without impairing their ability to perform important political socialization functions. Allowing parties to raise unregulated soft money for the dedicated purpose of financing their conventions would unite concerns about the sources of the money to entities with their long-term electoral interests in avoiding scandal. At the same time, the parties could remain important players in the process by which citizens

²⁵ To see just how constrained the donor population is, one may find relevant numbers at given contribution levels at <http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/donordemographics.asp?cycle=2002>. In the last presidential cycle, 1999 - 2000, about 14,900 Americans gave more than \$10,000.

participate in their government. Ideally, placing the responsibility in the hands of the parties – instead of host committees – would assuage reformers’ concerns about soft money continuing as part of the process of convention financing.

The Continued Importance of Conventions in a Period of Change

Given that the nomination process has lost much of its suspense, that the electorate and the media seem to have “tuned out” to the four-day party meetings, and that they have become expensive undertakings fraught with potential corruption and influence by donors, one might assume that conventions have lost their value in the American political system. Despite all of these concerns, however, they continue to serve important roles and deserve to continue to occupy a place in the presidential election process. That the quadrennial party meetings serve as showcases for the basic political values of the American regime, are a means by which candidates can “fire up” the troops and build support for future campaigns, and function as vehicles through which the political socialization process occurs cements them firmly in the American political process.

First, political parties – like any other membership organizations desiring to perpetuate themselves – must act to pass on their “lore.” The national party meeting once every four years provides a singularly unique opportunity for members to renew connections and unify to get their nominee elected. Further, partisans can use their conventions to make new connections for future battles and races at state and local levels.

Second, the conventions provide an early opportunity for party candidates to begin the next “invisible primary.” As noted earlier, the high demand for early support and resources has stretched the length of presidential elections beyond the four-year

mark. The conventions provide a centralized opportunity for would-be candidates for president to meet important state party officials. Given their place at the beginning of the process, the Iowa and New Hampshire convention delegates receive extra attention from those considering a run for the White House. In addition to trying out their “stump” speeches and glad-handing prominent state officials, potential candidates can exhort the delegates to work hard for the current nominee.

Finally, conventions play an important role in the political socialization process. Delegates bring their children and other family members along to experience the circus atmosphere and to learn about the political process. Important values – such as solving political differences through the use of persuasion tactics and not violence – of our political society are passed on to the next generation. Thus, the republic is reenergized once every four years as both parties meet in convention. In recent cycles, both major parties have emphasized this important function by holding special youth-oriented events during the week and including youths in the convention programs.²⁶

Of all of the rituals of American politics, only the presidential inauguration ceremony provides some of the same important – and intangible – benefits by emphasizing the republic’s basic values of civil partisanship and conflict resolution. The conventions, however, represent unique opportunities for participatory politics. Concerns expressed over the modern conventions’ lack of suspense, the dwindling voter interest and media coverage in them, and the large degree to which private contributions have

²⁶ As an example, in New York in 2004, the GOP introduced “convention jockeys,” interviewers on the convention floor and at remote locations, in an ostensible effort to provide more variation in its convention program and to – perhaps – reach out to the MTV culture by emulating the music television channel’s “VJ” (video jockey) concept.

become a major source of their funding fail to acknowledge the important contributions they make to the republic.

The one constant lesson derived from studying political processes is that changes to them inevitably result in changes to outcomes and candidate behavior. Further frontloading of the nomination process – potentially leading to a national primary, the possible replacement of “traditional” television network coverage by other media, and significant changes to the means by which they are funded may result in fundamental changes to the purposes served by the national conventions. Reformers would do well to remember their contributions to the American polity before calling for such changes.