

5-1993

American Party Roles in Campaigns

Jeff King

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses

Name on Title Page: Jeffrey B. King

Recommended Citation

King, Jeff, "American Party Roles in Campaigns" (1993). *Honors Theses*. Paper 25.

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Political parties have a history in the United States that dates almost as far back as the creation of the country. Despite their changing history, though, parties have long focused on one major area: political campaigns. They have long been responsible for what happens in these campaigns, but new technology and rules of the game have led to what many believe is the decline of the political party. Political parties are open to change, however, to attract new voters. It is my theory that despite what is seen as their recent downfall, political parties will remain active for quite some time in the realm of campaigning.

In order to get an idea of the direction parties are taking, the past history of parties must first be explored. Even before that is done, a definition of political parties must be considered.

Parties go back a long way in American history. James Madison certainly had his own term for parties: "factions." In fact, Madison felt that these parties would originally form around what was deemed "justice and the general good" (Lawson 10). The problem was whose definition of that would count.

A little more concrete definition of a party might be "a group of citizens holding opinions which differ somewhat from the rest of the community" (Lawson 17).

In her book, though, Kay Lawson describes a political party as:

An organized group of individuals, which calls itself a party, which seeks power for the purpose of influencing or determining public policy in

accordance with the wishes of its members, and which performs one or more of the following functions: formulating public issues, nominating candidates for public office, securing their election and enforcing their adherence after election to the program of the group. (Lawson 18)

Why would a party even be interested in doing all of this, though?

Well, parties have two fundamental needs they must fulfill:

- 1) A mass electorate needs help in choosing from its great numbers the few who shall rule
- 2) Those who seek to control the power of government need help in convincing the mass electorate that they or their candidates are worthy to be so chosen (Lawson 19).

This shows there is a distinction in the two goals of the party, but both tie in with the process of campaigning. After all, the votes and the candidates are what make parties exist (Lawson 20).

Now that it is clear that parties serve as a means to reach power, the focus should turn to how parties came about.

In all actuality, the creators of American government never allowed for political parties in the original structuring of government. In fact, political parties are not even mentioned in the Constitution. The framers had hoped that government could work effectively without them. These founding fathers felt that parties were only necessary evils that were short term solutions until national consensus could be built (Wattenberg 1991, 32). History, however, has produced the political parties to help make choices of leaders (Berman 94). Despite the design of the system to fragment power, parties

are now one unifying force that does exist in government (Wattenberg 1990, 1).

With the election of George Washington as first American president, parties had been avoided because there was consensus that he should be nominated and elected. During his administration, though, parties began to grow. There were those in favor of the Washington Administration, and there were those against it. This led to early parties (Berman 95).

Washington withdrew his nomination for future terms, so there was a lack of national consensus as to who should run the nation next. It was now up to the parties to offer candidates. In fact, William Crotty explains that the evolution of nominating systems parallels that of political party development (Crotty 195). In pre-party elections, candidates had nominated themselves, but the post-Washington era saw an end to that (Lawson 131). Candidate nominations indeed have provided much of the activity for political parties.

By 1800, partisanship was in full swing (Berman 95), and the legislative caucus was now the popular method of candidate nomination. Before the 1830's, the party members that were in Congress would caucus every four years to choose presidential and vice presidential candidates, and this restricted access to the process to those in office already (Lawson 132). By 1828, though, "King Caucus" had been dethroned in favor of the nominating convention, brought on in part by the election of Andrew Jackson (Berman 110).

Despite the change in the way candidates were nominated,

parties still played the lead role in nominations. The political structure of America was still at that time a highly localized phenomenon (Silbey 41). This Jacksonian era paved the way for a new method of nominating, and the era of the convention was upon America (Lawson 132).

Actually, the Anti-Masonic party was first to use the convention. They decided that convention delegates should equal representation in Congress on a state-by-state basis, and the delegates were chosen as states determined them to be. A three-fourths vote was needed to gain the nomination, and this was later amended to two-thirds (Lawson 132). These conventions also saw the use of credentials, platforms, and nominating regulation committees (Crotty 199). The other parties adopted this style of presidential nomination, and it dominated throughout the rest of the century.

The convention was still a party-dominated event, and the rank-and-file voters pretty much had no input on nominations. Since the party elites made the rules to choose delegates, they still had a great deal of control over candidate choice. The convention had traditionally focused on building a coalition for a candidate who could win (Lawson 133), and in later years it was seen as better at creating party unity than at consulting the will of the average voter (Lawson 133). At times, this included the 'favorite son' method of choice, which entailed taking uncommitted delegates to the convention to sell to the highest bidder. The price was that of appointments and gratuities (Lawson 136).

Of course, at the height of party control of nominations, America saw a high rate of participation in elections, especially when it involved two parties. Most of the voters were "core" voters, and there were few swing voters (Silbey 42). Of course, this could be attributed to the smaller eligible electorate and possibly the fact that these party elites were pretty much the same people who voted.

The turn of the century began to see some power over elections being wrested from party elites by voters and new nomination and election procedures. Even as early as the 1880's, creations such as the Civil Service were created in hopes of stymying political patronage. In the early 1900's, the Australian ballot was introduced to weaken party control in the elections. Voters could now check off candidates in secret, whereas before parties distributed colored ballots that listed all of their candidates. Voters just dropped them off at the ballot box, and it was obvious which party they had chosen. Australian ballots also allowed split-ticket voting, so candidates could be chosen from different parties (Wattenberg 1991, 33).

The early 20th century also saw a small emergence of the primary election in addition to the convention. These primaries were elections at the state level that permitted consultation with party members or the electorate about who should be the party nominee (Lawson 134). They were used to increase popular participation in nominations (Lawson 135), but they were only used to see which candidate voters wanted. It was no guarantee

that the candidate would be chosen (Lawson 136).

The mid-1900's was beginning to see a decline in partisanship and in party control of elections and nominations. There was now the split-ticket voting, and voters were getting a taste of the nomination process themselves. Other changes were also occurring that would lead to different roles for the parties.

As early as 1956, evidence was beginning to show that people were voting for the candidates more than the parties (Wattenberg 1991, 34). The evolving form of politics was candidate-centered and technocratic, and this was becoming very expensive (Jacobson 65). With wealth, a candidate could begin to skip some of the lower offices in the chain of command and challenge the incumbent more directly (Jacobson 67). American citizens were beginning to conceptualize the issues in terms of the candidates and not the parties (Wattenberg 1990, 81). Much of this could be attributed to what would prove to be the next level of candidate nominations: party primaries.

The ushering in of the era of primaries was not easy. Much turmoil had to occur before parties decided to take action and institute party reform. This reform led to much of the process of presidential nominations that is in place today.

American voters got their first tentative taste of television use in national campaigns in 1952. This was the year that Dwight Eisenhower's people used personalization in an election, and this effort worked (Jacobson 68). This also meant people saw what went on at the national conventions.

The rules for nominating candidates were antiquated in many states, and grass roots voters had no influence. Americans were beginning to realize this (Jacobson 156). The spirit of democracy was fading in the nominating conventions, and television showed the flaws in them (Berman 111). Conventions were supposed to bring competition among candidates (Berman 112), but the party regulars often had their hands on the power of votes.

This was especially brought to the attention of American voters in 1964, when publicity was gained by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. It became obvious that representation of minorities was not a goal of the parties (Crotty 238). Add to this the growing push for primary nominations, and things were coming to a critical point.

Much of the turmoil came to a head in 1968, when the Democrats experienced their most violent national convention ever in Chicago (Jacobson 156). Growing party disunity led to violent riots outside the convention site that made national headlines. This was coupled with the political infighting that occurred inside the convention site. The party regulars and the party insurgents both sought power, and they both threatened to withdraw their support from Hubert Humphrey if he caved in to the other side (Crotty 241). All this party disunity led to defeat of the Democrat party in the presidential election of 1968, and the result was a decade of reform by the Democrat party (Jacobson 157).

The immediate consequence of this 1968 convention was the

formation of two reform commissions. One was created to study and improve upon the selection of delegates. The other was created to recommend ways to codify the convention laws and to modernize its procedures (Crotty 242). The first and most aggressive commission was the McGovern-Fraser Commission. It was related to the first goal, and it assessed party nominating practices and recommended changes (Jacobson 157). The weakness of parties was seen in their organization (Ladd 52), and reform sought to change some of that.

This commission was led fiercely by George McGovern. He made record of party abuses in numerous states and showed that most delegate selection was left up to the party officials (Crotty 243). McGovern held nationwide hearings with substantial media coverage, and eventually his commission formulated numerous guidelines to allow more open participation by Democrats (Jacobson 157). These guidelines were adopted by the party and states were required to follow them in order to have their delegates seated at the national convention (Jacobson 158).

There were other commissions that came out of this reform movement, too. For instance, the O'Hara Commission handled the unglamorous work of dealing with the rules (Crotty 242). The backlash of the 1972 convention also saw the rise of a new commission on delegate selection known as the Mikulski Commission. The Compliance Review Commission followed as well. The final work of these commissions was the elimination of quotas that had been required by the McGovern-Fraser Commission and the requirement of proportional representation of delegates

for the primary elections after candidates had received the set percentage of votes (Crotty 246).

The pattern of reform had run its course by 1978, but the results were definitely a huge change in the pattern of presidential nominations. The primary system was now required to win the party nomination, and this meant voters directly got to choose who the party candidate would be. Of course, more equal representation among the delegates was highly encouraged as well. Even more astounding, though, was the fact that parties now had promulgated federal criteria that had to be met by states concerning how the parties should behave (Crotty 245). Prior to this, national party committees had been advisory, with no power over the state parties (Jacobson 158). Reform changed this.

With all this reform in the Democrat party, what was the effect on the Republican party? Certainly the steps taken by one party must spill over on the other.

Well, there was some effect on the Republican party. Since states had to adopt new primary procedures, both parties had to comply with the new rules. Republicans were now subject to the primary nominations, too. They were not as interested in party reform as the Democrats, though.

The Republican reform came in the Delegates and Organization Commission (1969-1972) and the Rule 29 Commission (1972-1974). These sought to reflect the grass-roots base more (Jacobson 162). Republican reform, however, had less impact than the Democrat counterpart. There was less support for change

nationally since the national party considered itself more of a coordinator of state parties (Jacobson 162).

As a result, Republican reform came in the form of nationalization and institutionalization of the party through providing new services and support for party candidates. Instead of changing all the rules, they decided to offer campaign specialists and coordinators for Republicans. They also offered public relations people, candidate recruitment, and campaign counseling (Jacobson 163).

Now Republicans also have to run in primary elections, but they can often gain party consensus more quickly by securing winner-take-all primary elections. This way, candidate support is solidified earlier in the campaign season. Republicans just have not been as concerned about being as representative as the Democrats have. They are more focused on party unity and ability to win office.

This all leads to the current form of nominating, which is still the party primary. With a party primary, though, the candidate begins to receive more attention in the primary season. If six or seven candidates are vying for the party nomination, voters can hardly rely on party label for a voting cue. Even if they could do such, voters are becoming less partisan with the passage of time anyway, so they probably would look more at the candidate. Nevertheless, American parties are the first and only ones to have their nominating function taken away from them (Wattenberg 1991, 33). This primary system has combined with other factors to create a relatively new phenomenon in

the election process: candidate-centered campaigns.

As discussed, primary elections led to selection of nominees by the voters. Parties used to play a crucial role in the selection of candidates (Wattenberg 1990, 74), but these new primaries meant candidates had to appeal to voters directly. Parties used to be the source of candidate information for the electorate, but a new source was needed to reach a greater audience. Mass media has become the vehicle for such change, and television has supplanted the party as a conduit between the candidate and the voter (Jacobson 67). It is now the principle influence and the chief resource of information.

It was mentioned above that television had begun to enter the political process as early as 1952. It obviously had immediate impact, because by the 1960's two-thirds of the electorate relied on television for campaign information (Jacobson 68). Most assuredly, those numbers have grown over the past two or three decades.

Television is now the major player in the campaign process. Does this mean that parties no longer have a role in the process? No, but it does mean that their role has changed. Television, though, should be further explored to look at that change.

Television has not only led to candidate-centered campaigns, but it has also led to the era of 'sound bites.' The coverage in campaigns is now a bit superficial, and the emphasis now rests on the visual (Jacobson 76). Candidates seek to give action-oriented messages in brief passages and they avoid long oratories (Jacobson 77). The media campaigns also reinforce

the image of the candidate but not the partisan attitudes (Wattenberg 1990, 91).

Voters now look for short messages from candidates, which means these messages may be greatly oversimplified (Lawson 146). In this day and age, the general level of American campaigning is extremely and deliberately low, and if candidates try to raise the level of the campaign, they could lose the audience (Lawson 149). This has certainly meant that party platforms are not the first and foremost topic of candidate discussions. This candidate-centered age has meant that performance outweighs policy, and people now look more at the short-term focus (Wattenberg 21).

This has also been perpetuated by the media. News is now also used to entertain, and reporters may water down the issues in the process (Jacobson 69). Nightly news also tries to be a little more objective than past media sources, which means they look at the 'horse race' aspect rather than delving deep into the issues themselves (Jacobson 77). Reporters are now the talent scouts for candidates (Wattenberg 1990, 76).

It is a well known fact that to get the media coverage that is wanted, a candidate must invest plenty of money. This is probably why money is now seen by some as the expensive base of new politics (Jacobson 100). Since the constituency went from party regulars to the public and mass media (Wattenberg 1990, 75), candidates must now have a new source of campaign contributions. They need a tremendous source of wealth.

Parties had traditionally contributed to candidates by

providing funds to them, but pre-reform years saw more and more private contributions that were becoming bigger and bigger. Some were afraid that candidates were being bought. That is why the reform commissions of the late 1960's and early 1970's also sought finance reform. They put limits on individual contributions, and this forwarded the efforts of Political Action Committees (PACS). PACS actually emerged because of the new funding laws, and they have overshadowed parties in financing since 1974 (Jacobson 65).

Even though the general presidential elections are run on public funding, PACS are able to make large contributions in the primaries and in elections for lower offices. In 1978, for instance, PAC contributions were responsible for 25% of candidate funds while only seven percent of these contributions came from parties (Wattenberg 1990, 109). PACS contribute money and organizational skill, and as they increase their contributions the local party organizational influence will decrease. This is bound to have an impact on the candidates since this money is interested money (Wattenberg 1990, 110).

Now it is visible that the party has given way somewhat to the television-centered campaigns, and the 'partyless campaign' is emerging with candidates using professional consultants (Jacobson 65). It is also clear that there are fewer reasons for candidates to foster a link between themselves and their parties (Wattenberg 1990, 74). The question remains whether this new direct contact with the voter will completely erode party ties.

The logical answer to this would be no. Looking at party history shows that parties tend to adapt to survive, and this will most likely be the case in the future. Even if their power is diminished, they will not completely disappear. Besides, without the parties to create unity within the governmental bodies, there would be no reason for independents to coalesce. In all reality, very little would get accomplished because of terrific gridlock.

The two major American political parties have perpetuated themselves for years, and they will most likely continue to do so. The use of winner-take-all districts discourages third parties at many levels (Berman 97). The electoral system has reinforced the two-party system, and it is likely to stay this way. The parties are, of course, the ones who are in power and they make up the election rules. What's more, if second parties can go for such a long time without winning a presidency, it is difficult to imagine third parties mustering the votes to do so (Berman 99). Without giving exact details, one could reasonably speculate that parties will come up with a solution to stay in power- after all, it is historically their goal to win elections.

Having now considered all of the above, it is time to turn to the presidential election of 1992 and the future of campaigning and parties. This portion will involve my recollection of the campaign and my speculation to future elections.

The campaign of 1992 proved to be most interesting. Having

discussed all of the relevant party roles and the relative dominance of the two-party system, one would have to say that the emergence of one Mr. H. Ross Perot in the midst of the presidential race provided a fresh outlook. Perot announced he would run as a candidate if the people got him on the ballot in all fifty states on a Larry King talk show, and an unconventional campaign was under way (Pomper 57).

It is true that parties are contending with television and PACS for control of their candidates, but now they have to reconsider their strategy. Ross Perot brought a new element into the campaign process. He simply went around all the party complications and offered himself as a candidate to the public. This was definitely a good example of how superwealth could overcome the regular party process. Perot circumvented the parties, asked the public to put him on the ballot, and spent his own funds to run for office.

Considering his potential, it was wise for neither party to attempt to belittle Perot. The parties will have to encompass a new strategy now, though. Considering their past history, parties should survive such a threat by picking up on Perot's (or any other independent's) platform and offering it as part of their own. It is in their best interest to incorporate other voters under their party umbrella.

The problem again lies largely in television, though. Perot went straight to the public via his 'infomercials'. This gave him a chance to discuss the issues a little more in depth and avoid the 'sound bites' that permeate television coverage

of campaigns. This action did begin to rub off on the public a little, but not so much that tremendous change swept the nation.

It is my speculation that this is actually a fad that will eventually pass with the American public. Perot used this tactic well, but parties have been around for years. They fully realize the attention span of the American public, and they will take advantage of that as long as possible. They will continue to offer the candidates that look good and that give the brief message that voters want to here. This will be a standard on which they can rely, and they will continue to use this tactic. Despite the push for the town-hall campaign by some, the majority of the electorate will continue to go for the slick candidates for convenience if nothing else. This will help keep the parties in power.

Of course, this may all prove to be wrong in elections to come. Looking at the history of party survival instincts, though, I cannot help but think that they will find a way to again gain prominence and prove to the voters that they offer the best candidates.

Parties have been with the nation since its birth, and they will not become extinct soon.

Sources Cited

- Berman, Daniel, and Louis Loeb. Laws and Men (The Challenge of American Politics). London: Macmillan, 1970.
- Crotty, William J. Political Reform and the American Experiment. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977.
- Jacobson, Gary C., and William J. Crotty. American Parties in Decline. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980.
- Ladd, Everett Carl. Where Have All the Voters Gone? New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982.
- Lawson, Kay. Political Parties and Democracy in the United States. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.
- Pomper, Gerald M., et al. The Election of 1992. Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1993.
- The Rise and Fall of Political Parties in the United States, 1789-1989. Ed. Joel H. Silbey. Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. The Decline of American Political Parties 1952-1988. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. The Rise of Candidate Centered Politics. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.