

Chapter 10: Electing the President

The Meaning of Presidential Elections

- As one editorial put it, "Election '08, with its plot twists and vivid characters, topped any reality show the networks could cook up."
- The Republicans were the incumbent party.

Evolution of the Nomination Process

- The Constitution does not explicitly say anything about how candidates for president (or for any other office) are to be nominated, but the dominant understanding at the Constitutional Convention was that this function would be filled primarily by the Electoral College.
- In 1796, when Washington announced he would not seek a third term, both the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans decided to nominate a presidential candidate *before* the members of the Electoral College were selected.
- In the early twentieth century, one important innovation was added to this system.
- Sometimes called the "mixed system," this set of procedures was used by both the Democrats and Republicans to nominate presidential candidates between 1912 and 1968.
- In 1960, for example, John Kennedy entered only seven primaries. After winning them all, he then used this showing to convince state party leaders of his electability.

The Contemporary Nomination Process

- By 1972, the rules had been so completely transformed that most political scientists treat the nomination races since then as an entirely different era in nomination politics.
- Specifically, delegates to contemporary national conventions are chosen in three major ways:
 - By primary election
 - ❖ Presidential primaries- Elections held for the purpose of selecting or instructing national convention delegates.
 - By caucuses
 - ❖ Caucuses- meetings of candidate supporters who choose delegates to a state or national convention.
 - ❖ These precinct caucuses, as they are usually called, select delegates to county, congressional district, or state conventions, and it is only at these latter meetings that national convention delegates are chosen.
 - ❖ Yet in most respects caucuses are, as one presidential candidate described them, "the functional equivalent of a primary."
 - Superdelegates
 - ❖ Superdelegates- as they are generally known, have accounted for about one-sixth of the votes at most recent Democratic conventions. Certain party leaders—members of the U.S. House and Senate, governors—who became automatic or ex-officio delegates.

- ❖ In 2008, for example, Obama did not technically possess a majority of delegates without taking superdelegates into account. But the superdelegates ultimately shifted their support to Obama because he had won the largest number of delegates during the primary season.

Financing Nomination Campaigns

- Prior to the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act amendments (FECA) of 1974, the financing of presidential campaigns was almost completely unregulated.
- The new regime established by FECA had five major features:
 - Contribution limits
 - Matching funds
 - ❖ Matching funds- public moneys (from \$3 check-offs on income tax returns) paid out of the federal treasury.
 - Spending limits
 - ❖ As a result of an important Supreme Court decision rendered in early 1976, however, candidates who did not take federal money could spend as much of their own money as they wanted *on their own campaign*.
 - Disclosure requirements
 - ❖ Especially in the year before the election, these results are carefully monitored by the media—some pundits refer to it as “the money primary”—as an early indicator of the candidates' progress.

The Presidential Nomination Process in Action

- In the old “mixed system,” presidential candidates generally did not begin active campaigning until early in the election year itself or in the final months of the preceding year. Today a presidential nomination race begins just a few weeks after the preceding midterm election.
- This extended period of campaigning that goes on before a single primary or caucus takes place is called “the invisible primary.”
- Even though most voters are not paying attention to these efforts, evidence suggests that these early attempts to build popularity among the party faithful can be a good predictor of later success.
- One former candidate has estimated that 70 percent of his time during the invisible primary was devoted to fundraising.
- Two states, in particular, have traditionally received a remarkably large share of candidate time and money and, consequently, of media attention: Iowa, which holds the first caucus, and New Hampshire, which holds the first primary. Especially for a non-front-running candidate, a victory or even an unexpectedly strong showing in these two early events can endow the candidate with a key attribute known as “momentum,” as the media, campaign contributors, and voters

- Knowing how important the early phases of the nomination race are, more and more states have moved their primaries and caucuses forward in the calendar, generating a process that is often described as “front-loading.”

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Nomination Process

- Few other democracies in the world give millions of ordinary party voters such an important role in selecting their party leaders and nominating the person who, if elected, will be the most important official in the national government.
- As E.E. Schattschneider, the most important defender of this position in American political science, has put it, “Democracy is not to be found in the parties but *between* the parties.
- Political activists- those who regularly participate in politics and are more interested in and committed to particular issues and candidates than are ordinary citizens, can exert more influence in the nomination contests than they can in general elections, where turnout is much higher.
- A database search of March 2008 newspaper articles about the presidential campaign finds few stories that focus on issue details and many stories that frame the race as a “game”: “Presidential Campaigns Shifting into Overdrive,” “Hurdles Line Path for Dem, GOP Candidates,” “Back on Attack, Candidates Hit the Airwaves,” and so on. One study finds that such “game” themed stories have a 4 to 1 edge over substantive policy stories in the media.
- In 2007, for example, senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain, all of whom were running for president, missed, respectively, 23 percent, 38 percent, and 56 percent of the roll call votes held in the Senate that year (the average senator missed 5 percent of votes).
- For example, no one who wrote or approved the new delegate selection rules hoped to make the process so much longer. If anything, one of their complaints about the mixed system was that the delegate selection process in some states started too early. Yet the evidence unmistakably shows that, when the new rules were implemented, presidential nomination campaigns became dramatically longer.

Who Nominates the Vice President?

- Today, the choice of vice presidential candidates is in the hands of the presidential nominees, although they still attempt to choose a nominee who will improve the ticket’s chances.

The General Election for President

- From the start of the campaign until Election day—the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November—the candidates maintain an exhausting pace, and the campaign dominates the news.

Financing the General-Election Campaign