



This article continues our online series of election-year commentaries by American and international writers. Some articles will evaluate or compare the presidential candidates; others will examine issues that seem most important for voters to consider. We welcome your response to any of the articles, and, with your permission, will post some of them as commentaries in their own right. The series will run until shortly before Election Day.

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Empowering Party Conventions

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This summer's conventions in Denver and Minnesota's Twin Cities will see Senators Barack Obama and John McCain nominated as their respective parties' candidates for president. There will be no multiple ballots or jockeying for position among aspirants to the chief executive office and their competitors. The agenda was set long ago and the red carpets are already being rolled out for the "victors." It hasn't always been this way.

At one time, conventions were serious business, as delegates were charged with the grave responsibility of deciding their party's nominee for the highest office in the land. In 1896 it took five ballots at the Democratic Convention to elect William Jennings Bryan as the party's presidential standard bearer. In 1932 Democrats nominated Franklin Roosevelt after four ballots. If there was a deadlock among the front-runners, there was always the possibility of a so-called "dark horse" seemingly coming from nowhere and winning the nomination, as Wendell Willkie did at the Republican Convention in 1940. These were known as brokered conventions.

Now, however, it is only a slight exaggeration to call conventions glorified pep rallies, insofar as they do little more than to ratify the results of the earlier state primary elections and party caucuses. (They also function as platforms for potential future candidates to showcase their rhetorical skills, as Ronald Reagan did in 1964 and Obama did four years ago.) Delegates represent their respective states, not as trustees of the public interest but as agents acting on instruction. Thus the conventions are no longer genuinely deliberative bodies.

This all came about as a result of reforms adopted by Democrats and Republicans nearly forty years ago. During the turbulent 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, then Vice President Hubert Humphrey was able to secure his party's nomination without winning a single primary, but with the support of the traditional party bosses, such as the late Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley. Many party supporters were outraged by this outcome and determined to make the selection process more democratic.

Thus both parties adopted reforms that would effectively make the results of the primaries and caucuses binding on the delegates to the conventions. Theoretically, if voters remained divided during the long primary season, there might still be a brokered convention, as nearly occurred in 1976, when Ronald Reagan came close to unseating President Gerald Ford as the Republican nominee. Practically, however, this was unlikely to occur, as marginal candidates were usually eliminated early in the process. The fact that Hillary Clinton held out so long against Obama this year was somewhat unexpected but did nothing to change the outcome of the Democratic Convention.

Although these reforms appear to be more democratic, they have actually gone a considerable way towards eroding just governance in the U.S. Why?

Two flaws

First, the current, "reformed" process has tended to elevate relative outsiders with no track record of congressional coalition-building. That both Obama and McCain are senators is exceptional; recent presidents have been governors with state-level administrative experience but no federal legislative experience. This has hampered their ability to govern once they have attained the Oval Office. Moreover, the primary election process has encouraged Americans to view a prospective president as a heroic, Napoleonic figure who will sweep into office and shake things up in the stale corridors of power. The typical candidate promises "change" without going into too much detail as to what this implies. Because no one person can ever fulfill such exaggerated expectations, the public quickly sours on him, waiting for the next candidate to come along making similar promises.

This scenario fails to do justice to the complexities of a real-life political system, where getting things done demands not a well-intended Jimmy Stewart going to Washington in the style of a Frank Capra film, but genuine teamwork painstakingly cultivated by a president and like-minded members of Congress for the sake of doing public justice. It would be far better to hear from a candidate not what she will do as president, as if she had no one else to answer to, but how she and like-minded Senators and Representatives would go about meeting the ordinary challenges of governing a country.

Second, the current process does little to eliminate candidates who are unqualified for the chief executive office. All that is necessary for a would-be candidate to win his or her party's nomination is to appeal successfully to as many people in as many states as he or she can, especially the most populous ones. At present there is no means of filtering out those unequal to the demands of the job. A party is obligated to go with a candidate who has cultivated the best image in what is essentially a series of beauty contests.

In 1986, for example, in my home state of Illinois two disciples of the political extremist Lyndon LaRouche won the Democratic nomination for two state offices, mostly because their names sounded safe. Party officials were powerless to remove them from the ballot, even though their presence ended up handing over the gubernatorial election to the Republicans. One-time presidential candidate Al Smith was misguided when he said that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. Instead, democracy's flaws must be addressed by recognizing that it cannot be extended limitlessly.

Given what is at stake, the two American political parties would do well to rectify these defects, principally by giving primary elections an advisory status at most, thereby returning genuine deliberative and decision-making power to the convention delegates, and by encouraging aspirants to the presidency to build a strong base of support in Congress.

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