

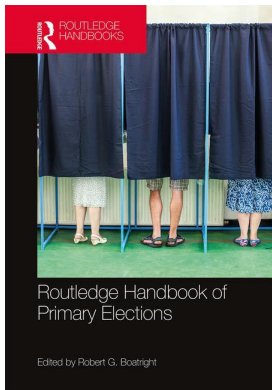
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections

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### The Origins of the Direct Primary

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-4>

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**Published online on: 26 Feb 2018**

**How to cite :-** John F. Reynolds. 26 Feb 2018, *The Origins of the Direct Primary from:* Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-4>

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## 2

# THE ORIGINS OF THE DIRECT PRIMARY

*John F. Reynolds*

The United States Constitution holds the states mainly responsible for administering elections. Consequently, it was the state legislatures that ushered in direct primary laws stipulating that political parties hold government supervised elections whereby voters determined their respective party nominees. Prior to that time, candidates commonly won their party's endorsement in conventions of party officials meeting at the local, state, and national levels. The direct primary was one of a number of changes in electoral procedures dating from the Progressive Era (1890–1920): the Australian ballot, women's suffrage, the direct election of United States Senators, the initiative and referendum, and campaign finance laws. The collective impact of these changes in the rules of the game was soon apparent. A party-dominated political system dating back to Jacksonian times evolved into a candidate-centered political process marked by waning partisanship and diminished voter turnout.

Scholars have long singled out the direct primary as one of the more consequential electoral changes of the Progressive Era. One noted political scientist deemed the direct primary “the most radical of all party reforms adopted in the whole course of American history” (Ranney 1975, 18). But the reform's causes and consequences remain a source of contention. Like many of the measure's initial proponents, early scholarly assessments characterized the shift from the convention to the primary as a democratizing trend that empowered the electorate at the expense of self-serving political bosses (Merriam et al. 1928; Lovejoy 1941; Noble 1946). By the latter half of the twentieth century, many academics were less enamored with the reform; they blamed the direct primary for the relatively weak state of political parties in the United States that had rendered them less “responsible” once in power (Key 1964; Sorauf 1972). From this perspective, the party leaders conferring in “smoke filled rooms” could more reliably be trusted to come up with competent nominees who shared their party's values and principles (Wicker 1992). When the choice devolved upon a more fickle electorate, a candidate's positions and qualifications might be lost sight of as voters responded to his or her personal appeal. Whatever their opinion about the effects of the measure, historians and political scientists generally viewed the direct primary as something that was imposed on political parties from without. Progressives adhered to a long anti-party tradition in American political culture in this view. The direct primary was one of many measures they promoted in hopes of curbing the influence of political parties and promoting a more independent political outlook among the electorate.

The historical perspective framing this chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of the direct primary's origins and impact on the American polity. The direct primary was neither as deleterious to the electoral process as was once thought, nor was it unpopular among party elites. To understand how the direct primary came to be and what its effects were on the political order, it is necessary to first understand how the nominating system operated at the end of the nineteenth century. Party leaders – elective office seekers in particular – had their own set of grievances with the candidate selection process during the convention's heyday. Ideally, the parties' councils were supposed to promote harmony by working up a slate of nominees that promised something for all the party's constituent parts. The system worked best when candidates at least appeared to take a "hands off" approach to its workings and awaited their party's call. When candidates became more active in promoting their interests around 1900, the added pressure they brought to bear was more than the convention system could endure. Chaos and controversy disrupted the informal, locally run caucuses and indirect primaries selecting the delegates that overflowed on to the convention floor and lingered on. Parties and their standard bearers suffered at the polls when the nominating process gave rise to disharmony and ill will. The Democratic and Republican parties implemented rules governing their nominating procedures to adjust to these more contentious circumstances, but they soon turned these duties over to the state. The transition to the direct primary might best be understood as an accommodation to a new form of electioneering emerging in the Progressive Era. Consequently, the direct primary is best understood as a response to a more candidate-centered political regime, rather than the other way around.

### The Convention System

Political parties invented the nominating convention early in the Jacksonian Era. The recurring party conferences played a key role in the emergence of the Whig and Democratic organizations during what historians refer to as the "party period" (circa 1840–1900; see Silbey 1991; McCormick 1966; Dallinger 1903, 4–45). The Greenbackers, Prohibitionists, Populists, and other minor parties arranged their nominations following a similar format. The advantages a formal nomination bestowed on a party and its candidates were readily apparent. First and foremost, it helped mobilize a party's vote behind a single candidate rather than see it scattered across several aspirants. Moreover, in an age when political ambition was rated as a vice rather than as a virtue, the convention could maintain the useful fiction that a nomination had come unsought and unbidden. The convention itself served to promote party unity. The consultation and negotiation among the party elite assured that the party's choices would be more acceptable to its voting base.

Nineteenth-century political parties were solely responsible for administering their affairs. The nomination process began with an announcement from a national, state or county committee calling for a convention to meet at a given date or place (Dallinger 1903, 63). Given the multilayered framework of the nation's electoral system, several calls were issued over the course of the year for several different conventions selecting candidates for multiple office levels. In the spring the major and minor party state committees might summon a state convention to select delegates to go to the national convention. In the summer the state committee might schedule another party congress to pick candidates for statewide offices. Party organizations representing counties and legislative districts (federal and state) and judicial districts and municipalities might call yet more conventions to fill out a portion of the party ticket to be voted on in the spring or fall. The party's numerous subdivisions responded to each of these appeals by arranging for a set of caucuses or primaries in their townships or wards. Here they might select delegates to the

county convention, whose duty it was to appoint delegates to state or congressional conventions. In presidential years the beleaguered voter might be implored to attend a half dozen such caucuses to select delegates to attend multiple nominating bodies (Lovejoy 1941, 17).

Because election laws varied from state to state, and because party organizations were so decentralized, the rules and traditions that governed the nominating process varied considerably from place to place. When it came to local offices, the voters might select the candidates themselves under what was called the “Crawford County System.” Administering a primary election was an expensive proposition, however, and it did not guarantee that the result would be satisfactory to all elements of the party. Party-run direct primaries were also popular across much of the South where they were designed “in order to keep the white men united” (Kousser 1974, 76). Far more common was an “indirect primary” where voters selected delegates to act for them. In a medium-sized town a meeting – or caucus – to pick a delegate or two might convene in a local law office or saloon. In other times or places the choice of delegates might be done by ballot at voting places open an hour or two in the evening. Many rural residents could not be bothered traveling miles over rutted roads just to designate someone to attend the state convention; they left that choice with the county committee. In urban areas the party’s voters might be convened in a mass outdoor rally where they formally gave their assent to some slate of representatives to attend the state convention (Ware 2002, 57–63; Merriam et al. 1928). Although delegates were commonly appointed just weeks or even days before their nominating body was scheduled to meet, many failed to attend. Perhaps as many as one-fifth of the men participating in the typical convention were never formally selected for the role but held “proxies” they secured from a duly elected delegate (Reynolds 2006, 121).

However organized and administered, primaries and caucuses were rarely well attended. Roughly one in five or perhaps one in ten of the party’s loyal followers chose to participate in these wholly internal party affairs. In New York City, for example, it was established that less than 8 percent of Republican voters took part in the party’s primaries in the late 1880s (Keller 1977, 533; Bernheim 1888, 112–115). Explanations for the low voter turnout are not hard to come by. First and foremost, there simply was not a whole lot for a voter to do at these local functions. In the interests of “harmony,” factions typically agreed on a full slate of delegates ahead of time. The partisan press encouraged the formation of such consensus coalitions, hailing them as harbingers of party unity in the general election. The citizen was left to endorse a single list of delegates whose candidate preferences for the array of offices up for grabs was wholly unknown to him. Voters were left in the dark because it was not always clear who was running – or “available” – for elective office in any case. Moreover, caucuses and primaries occurred at different dates and times for different offices and were often not well advertised. The local party establishment might abruptly call “snap caucuses” before any local opposition could get organized (Dallinger 1903, 121). The abysmally low voter participation rates should come as no surprise, especially after one multiplies these obstacles to grassroots governance by the four to six primaries or caucuses a dedicated Democrat or Republican was supposed to attend in a single election cycle.

Yet, if the system did not welcome input from the party’s electoral contingent, it did accord some citizens the occasional opportunity to participate more fully in party governance. Apportionment rules typically set aside a delegate seat at the county convention for one out of every 25 votes cast for the party in a previous election; at the state convention the ratio might be raised to one for every 100 or 300 votes. Given these voter/delegate proportions and the numerous party nominating bodies convened during a political campaign, it can be supposed that many voters attended one or more nominating bodies over a span of a very few years. Here they had an opportunity to frame a platform and select party officials in addition to deliberating over the

candidates vying for a place on the ticket. Caucuses and conventions surely helped reinforce the intense partisan feeling that we have come to associate with the “party period” (Silbey 1991).

While formats for citizen input varied, there was much more uniformity across political and partisan boundaries when it came to the workings of their nominating bodies (Bryce 1891, II, 170–179). The chair of the respective party committee called the session to order and introduced a temporary secretary and chair. The latter favored his audience with a rousing speech lambasting the opposition and appealing for unity. At this point, the delegates took a break for lunch while newly appointed committees on credentials, platform, and permanent organization set to work. When the body reconvened, the credentials committee suggested how best to resolve any disputed delegations in a report that the full convention might vote up or down. The committee on permanent organization issued a roster of officers and rules to guide the proceedings. A platform or set of resolutions appeared articulating a set of sentiments or policies that the organization was for or against. The prominence accorded the platform in their proceedings allowed the parties to reaffirm their devotion to “principles not men.” The authors of the partisan manifestos took their duties seriously even if the opposition would routinely dismiss their handiwork as flypaper to catch the unwary voter. References to liquor control or free silver could spark an intense debate in the committee and on the convention floor, exposing internal divisions that needed to be addressed.

Finally it was time for the nominating speeches to elaborate on the many virtues of an array of potential nominees, starting with the top of the ticket. As practical politicians, the delegates desired chiefly to settle on men who would draw in the most votes. They rarely touched on a candidate’s record or qualifications for any given office (Bryce 1891, 239). The balloting that followed continued until one individual had amassed a majority of the delegates’ votes. (The national Democratic Party and many southern states set the bar at a still higher level, requiring two-thirds of the vote to make a choice.) A motion to make the vote unanimous usually followed the emergence of a winner. If the victor was in the vicinity he might be called upon to make a few remarks briefly expressing his thanks. Losing candidates might also be expected to make another short address reassuring one and all of their full cooperation in the coming campaign. Conventions generally did not have time for so much of the hoopla and speechifying that we associate with national party conventions today. A long-winded acceptance speech was neither solicited nor desired. The delegates were anxious to get back to work filling out the rest of the ticket.

### The Quest for Harmony

Throughout the convention’s proceedings the goal of harmony remained paramount. It manifested itself in the requirement that the winner secure a majority or more of the vote, in the subsequent motion to officially label the choice unanimous, and in the gracious concession speeches from the also-rans. The major parties relied on additional strategies to secure unity in their ranks. One was to require that the loaves and fishes be widely distributed among the faithful. Nineteenth-century political parties functioned as confederations of locally organized political organizations. Arranging for a ticket with geographical balance was an imperative to incentivize all its constituent parts. “It is very necessary that the Republicans of Delta County should nominate a ticket this fall that is fairly representative throughout the different sections of the county,” one Colorado newspaper admonished. “It is but fair – to both the people and the party – that a ticket be selected that the entire Republican organization of the county can feel an interest in and support” (*Delta Independent*, Aug. 12, 1904). Under the “claim of locality” each of the political subdivisions within an election district could expect to nominate one of its own

in due time. For each election, a different county within a congressional district might choose a favorite son to go to the nation's capital. Some states had their own unique guidelines that recognized special geographical or political domains. Michigan Republicans for a time awarded the lieutenant governorship to men hailing from its upper peninsula. After women achieved suffrage in Colorado, Democrats and Republicans reserved the post of State Superintendent of Instruction for female candidates (Reynolds 2006, 136, 218). But no political subdivision could expect more than its fair share of offices up for consideration. Much of the discussion taking place on and off the convention floor revolved around achieving this geographical balance. Candidates and their surrogates worked out "trades" whereby delegates backing different candidates for different offices from different regions of the state agreed to mutually support one another. The men cast as political bosses or "wire pullers" at party functions were consummate practitioners in this art of vote swapping. Trading in public offices offended some political observers but was perhaps the surest method for building a winning coalition under the convention system.

The principle of rotation in office was another mechanism for widely disseminating the spoils of victory. Andrew Jackson lauded the practice of term limits as a "leading principle in the republican creed." Officials holding an electoral office with a two-year term might expect to be re-nominated to a second term as a matter of course, but thereafter they were usually expected to step aside and let someone else enjoy the privileges of a public trust (Struble 1979). No political figure was subjected to more ridicule in the press or on the stump than the "chronic office seeker." One Colorado politician allegedly grew "dangerously ill if out of office for ten days at a stretch" (*Rocky Mountain News*, Sept. 10, 1886). The sum effect of conventions attempting to achieve balance and enforce term limits was to bring an abrupt end to many promising political careers. Turnover in the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, and other elective offices was high; few members served more than two terms (Bogue et al. 1976; Kernell 1977). Incumbents desiring an extended stay in elective office had to make their case to a skeptical body of partisans with political aspirations of their own.

Would-be candidates hoping to run under the Democratic or Republican banner in the general election consequently faced an assortment of obstacles and circumstances beyond their control as the convention loomed. The political culture imposed further constraints on ambitious office seekers. A lingering legacy of republican ideology still viewed political ambition as a vice rather than as a virtue. Hence, canvassing for support for a nomination was a low-key affair in most states. Presidential aspirants in particular needed to maintain an aloof indifference to the workings of the nomination process; they would not attend the convention where their name was under consideration. In many northern states would-be governors and other state officials maintained a similarly low profile during the nomination process. They were not expected to appear at the nominating bodies where their names were under consideration. Southern states, on the other hand, appear to have suffered fewer qualms about candidates for major offices making speeches and openly soliciting support. These regional differences in campaign styles may date back to the colonial era (Dinkin 1989, 37–38). When it came to more local offices, however, it was not regarded as unseemly for northern or southern candidates to openly appeal for support. This might be accomplished in the local newspaper with a letter to the editor or perhaps a paid announcement. An 1880 edition of South Carolina's *Charlotte Democrat* included fourteen announcements from men interested in serving in the state legislature, eleven postings from men putting themselves forward for sheriff, and twelve notices from Democrats ready to serve as county commissioner. "Citizens" signed this typically terse communication: "Please suggest as a candidate for coroner the name of C. S. Sturgeon, who is a one legged ex-Confederate soldier and deserves the suffrage of the people" (July 30).



The aloof stance assumed by candidates for offices at the top of the ticket did not necessarily indicate a more virtuous or disinterested mindset. The multi-tiered nominating process severely hampered a candidate's efforts to influence state or national conventions. Delegates to these bodies were customarily selected by other delegates in county or state conventions. The latter set of decision makers were generally much more interested in the local nominations they controlled than in the state or national offices they did not. (This assumes they had no plausible favorite son of their own for one of the coveted state offices.) As noted, the convention system also made it difficult for voters to make their preferences known in the way of candidacies, especially when local party organizations only served up a single unity slate to vote on. Thus, whatever support an office seeker could generate at the grassroots tended to get filtered and diluted at each stage of the delegate selection process. An aspirant for a major party office would be better advised to wait until the caucuses and conventions had concluded. Thereafter he might write friendly letters to the delegates or to persons who might influence them. A different dynamic unfolded for local offices where only one layer of delegates stood between the voters and the candidates. Even here, however, the vox populi could emerge if public attention focused on a specific office, but it was much harder to make itself heard across multiple offices. A single voter was unlikely to find a delegate who concurred on all his choices for the range of offices up for consideration in the county convention. Of course, all this assumes the voter had such preferences and shared them with his party representative. In short, the system was not well designed to allow voters to make their candidate preferences known, and many politicians would have regarded this feature of the convention system as one of its strengths rather than as a weakness.

The nominating process worked best, so it was maintained, when the delegates were untrammelled. A delegation to a county or state convention might still be expected to find a place on the ticket for one of their own, but the matter of which office and which prospective office holder would depend on developments taking place on the convention floor. Thus, candidates during the party period tended to leave their fates "in the hands of their friends." "Your friends can do far more for you than you can do for yourself," James Garfield was advised as the 1880 Republican National Convention approached (Evans 1960, 39). Candidates at all ranks were urged not to meddle with the delegate selection process; let the voters or the county conventions appoint as delegates the wisest and most public spirited and knowledgeable citizens from their ranks. New Jersey's *Burlington Gazette* urged the friends of the various candidates to refrain from interfering with the work of the 1883 county convention. "Enough good men may be found in the Democratic Party of Burlington County who may be sent to the state convention entrusted with the duty of selecting a candidate that shall not only command the vote of every Democrat but shall also gather in those of many Republicans . . . Men have tried to make [the convention] hew wood and draw water for them, but that time, we hope, has passed forever . . . The individual is nothing; party, in a true sense, is everything" (Sept. 1, 1883). The partisan press generally extolled the high caliber of men sent to deliberate at the party's official gatherings and predicted that their collective wisdom and knowledge would elevate men worthy of public trust. Under the convention system, the welfare of the ticket as a whole took precedence over the interests of any one candidate.

The quest for harmony could prove elusive. The source of discord was often the informal, decentralized, loosely administered nominating process itself. Many complaints arose about the poorly publicized "snap caucuses" called on short notice or scheduled for inconvenient times or places. Charges of participation in the primaries and caucuses by persons not affiliated with the party were rife. Alternatively, disappointed office seekers might claim that a convention violated time honored practices or simply ran roughshod over the opposition and did not allow for a fair distribution of the spoils of victory. The rules governing rotation in office or balanced tickets

were rarely written down; indeed, as late as 1895 the major parties in about half the states had no written rules at all regarding their nomination practices (Remsen 1895, 38–39). What one side labeled “a time honored custom” might be dismissed by the other as a random pattern of no particular consequence. The major parties did not put much faith in procedural measures to resolve or avoid the controversies that inevitably led to defections on election day. Democrats and Republicans relied instead on outcomes – on the negotiations among the interested parties – to work out a deal that gave everybody a reason to back the ticket.

An aggrieved candidate might successfully appeal the convention’s decision to the voters in the general election. Voters arriving at the polls might be presented with two different Democratic tickets to cast, each claiming to be “regular.” Since political parties enjoyed no official status in the electoral process for much of the nineteenth century, they were in no position to brand such maverick candidates as apostates. Any enterprising politico could print up a facsimile of his party’s ticket and insert his name for any office under consideration. The effect of these independent, partisan candidacies was often to divide the party vote sufficiently to allow a minority party candidate to squeeze in. During the 1880s, at least 21 contests for New Jersey’s sixty-seat state assembly contained two or more candidates running under the same party label; bolting candidates amassed on average 12.7 percent of the vote. A disgruntled Democrat might fuse with a third party, such as the Greenback or Labor parties, or even the opposition party. Dissatisfaction with the nomination process often surfaced in the form of split ticket voting, aided and abetted by men at the polls who handed out the ballots or party tickets. While voters displayed strong party loyalty when it came to the top of the ticket, they exhibited a more independent streak when it came to more local races for state representative or county clerk (Reynolds and McCormick 1986). The dominant party had the most to lose when a nomination lost legitimacy, but the dominant party was also in the best position to call on the state’s help to address the problem.

The convention system surely had its drawbacks, but it did sustain the major parties throughout most of the nineteenth century. The many conventions required to furnish candidates for numerous elective offices in frequent elections over multiple venues renewed and reinvigorated the party organizations. The debate and passage of resolutions and platforms affirmed that the major parties represented something more than mechanisms to carry elections in the interest of local elites. The convention system was less effective at injecting public opinion into the candidate selection process. The voter’s role was to select honest, knowledgeable, and intelligent representatives to participate in the party’s deliberations; it was the latter’s responsibility to select the candidates. (In this respect, the party convention fulfilled a role the framers of the Constitution had assigned to the Electoral College.) Candidates found their roles severely constrained, especially when it came to prestigious offices at the top of the ticket. Again and again they were reminded to keep their ambitions in check – or at least out of public view; the contest was not supposed to be about them but about the fate of the party and its principles.

### **The Transition to the Direct Primary**

The decision to turn the selection of party candidates over to the voters was a consequence of several developments altering the electoral environment at the close of the nineteenth century. It was the political parties, not the reformer types, who bore chief responsibility for these changes. The shift began when Republicans and Democrats each sought to bring more order to their often disorderly and discordant proceedings. The major parties developed a heightened appreciation for rules and an administrative apparatus to make them stick. In areas characterized by one-party rule there was a movement to leave the selection of local candidates with a



party-run primary rather than a county convention. Eventually, when the major parties found the new procedures too unwieldy or costly they turned to the state to shoulder some of the burden of administering these affairs. Elements of the direct primary appeared in bits and pieces beginning in the 1890s. Changes in the delegate selection process made it easier for some candidates – those running for the most visible offices – to manipulate the system on their own behalf. Candidates cast an ever larger shadow over the nomination process.

The earliest state laws governing the nomination process appeared shortly after the Civil War. Informal party practices that worked well enough in rural communities proved unsatisfactory in congested, impersonal, and heterogeneous urban centers, giving rise to numerous complaints of irregularities if not outright fraud (Ware 2002, 204–207). Much of this early legislation was enacted with overwhelming bipartisan support and without much public pressure or controversy. Typically, early statutes criminalized vote fraud in the party-run primaries. California's Republican legislature passed the first such statute bearing on the nomination process in 1866 in the wake of a bitterly contested and even violent sequence of caucuses and conventions. The "Porter Law" established guidelines regarding how primaries and caucuses should be conducted and threatened penalties for party officials who violated them. Like much of the pioneering legislation of its kind, the law was optional, but, significantly, both major parties invoked it when announcing their primaries and conventions for some years to come. Enforcement, however, was notably lax and a source of much complaint in California and elsewhere (Dallinger 1903, 173–198; Merriam et al. 1928, 7–14; Sarasohn 1953, 30). Any charges filed or arrests made before the election were generally dropped thereafter. Lacking much teeth, the laws nonetheless represented an important milestone; here was the first indication that the doings of political parties were not to be viewed as purely private affairs but as actions serving a public purpose and warranting official oversight.

The advent of the official or so-called "Australian" ballot in most states around 1890 put added pressure on the major parties to further delineate their nominating practices (Ware 2002, 31–56). In almost all states the new ballot laws automatically assigned space on the ballot for the nominees of the major parties. Many states stipulated that only "regular" candidates could run with the party's label attached to their name; the names of maverick candidates appeared as "Independent Republicans" or without any partisan designation at all (Reynolds and McCormick 1986). In this respect, the state-printed ballot allowed party officials to protect their brand. But candidates who wished to pass themselves off as the official nominee needed to satisfy county clerks and secretaries of state or perhaps the courts that they had come by their title legitimately. The major party organizations came under pressure to implement standard procedures and to see that they were obeyed.

The evidence of more careful supervision of the nomination process appears in the convention calls published by the state and county committees. Prior to the Progressive Era, announcements merely reported when and where the state and county conventions were to be held. The party organizations in the townships or wards were free to choose their delegates however and whenever they pleased. During the 1890s, the calls became more detailed and uniform in their application. They might dictate that all the delegates to the county convention should be selected at a particular date and time and even identify the schoolhouses or stores or private residences where the voting or caucusing would take place. The proclamations further specified who was authorized to participate in the electoral contests, often requiring a voter to swear that he backed the party's choices in the previous election. The practice of county committees appointing the delegates was officially proscribed. Party rules also cracked down on the custom of delegates bestowing their proxies on whomever they pleased; now the delegation as a whole usually chose any replacements in its ranks unless alternates had already been provided for (Reynolds 2006, 110–123).

The most portentous change for the nominating system came with the demise of the indirect primary. In more and more localities, especially in urban areas, the county convention was dispensed with entirely. The citizenry selected both the nominees for more local offices and the delegates going to the state convention. The elections where these officials were selected were still supervised by the party organizations (Ware 2002, 100–105). Although solid data on voter turnout is scarce, the public appears to have been drawn to these more spirited primary proceedings. The hours for voting expanded over time as did the number of voting sites within wards or townships: all were indications of greater mass participation. A party-run primary was an expensive undertaking: voting places needed to be rented, election officials paid, ballot boxes secured, ballots printed up, and votes counted. Candidates who wished to have their names appear on the primary ballot might be assessed for some of these costs. Leaving the final decision about local candidacies in the hands of the voters provided some measure of protection from charges of “fraud,” “foul play,” or “machine rule.” The system had been in place some half dozen years in Newark, New Jersey when the local Republican leader explained its appeal in 1902: “When the present system was adopted it was a question of expense, but it was decided to do it and save the cost in reducing the expenditures in meetings, parades and such demonstrations. We felt that if we satisfied the people that they had fair and honest primaries it would do more good than the parades.” The change proved satisfactory to the citizenry. “It is a fact that we wouldn’t go back to the old system if we wanted to,” he averred (*Newark Evening News*, Oct. 29, 1902).

As political scientists have long suspected, the appearance of the direct primary was also associated with the greater sectionalism and the reduced party competition that we associate with the “system of 1896” (Schattschneider 1960; Key 1964, 373–377). Factionalism threatened to upend the one-party control that Democrats exercised across the southern states and Republicans exerted elsewhere. Majority parties consequently evidenced greater interest in relying on the direct primary to resolve their internal contests. One-party regimes had both greater means to administer a party-run primary and more to lose when a contentious nomination struggle opened a split in their ranks. Majority parties, as a rule, were more financially secure than their competition and could shoulder the extra costs of organizing an election. Bolters were more likely to appear within the dominant party within a given jurisdiction than the minority. Consequently, we tend to find the early experiments with the party-run direct primary in areas of one-party rule. In Iowa, for example, a survey in 1902 found that Democrats employed primaries in only three of the state’s 99 counties; the GOP, which captured 58 percent of the vote for president in 1900, employed the system in 34 counties. Iowa counties relying on the party-run direct primary were also much less competitive than those that adhered to the caucus and convention format (Crossley 1903). A similar pattern unfolded in Republican controlled Michigan where GOP voters selected their local officials in 58 of its 83 counties in 1909 while Democrats did so in only seventeen (Reynolds 2006, 217). Democrats in the Solid South readily took up the reform while their Republican opponents retained the convention. In the states of the former confederacy the primary winner needed to secure a majority of the vote to avoid a run-off election. The second primary effectively served as the general election, rendering the state GOP further impotent (Kousser 1974, 73). Given the sorry state of the Republican Party in the region after 1890, this second, run-off primary effectively substituted for the general election. The laws in the southern states granted the Democratic Party maximum authority in the conduct of their primaries, especially when it came to deciding who could participate. In keeping with the party’s racist appeal, the Democratic primary was for whites only in the South, a policy the Supreme Court only overturned in 1944 (Weeks 1948).

As parties dispensed with a layer of organization separating elective office seekers from the electorate, candidates redirected their appeals from a roomful of party notables to the electorate.

The individuals who blazed a new path toward the nomination were those vying to head the ticket. Where it had once been possible for gubernatorial candidates to remain above the fray, the new rules encouraged – and soon demanded – a more active canvas. It was possible now for candidates to field slates of loyal state delegates for the voters to approve, especially in the delegate-rich major cities. Oftentimes these candidate-endorsed tickets competed against an uncommitted slate representing the local party organization. Slates pledged to a specific candidate enjoyed an edge in these contests. What the local party organizations learned again and again was that voters attending a primary were more interested in registering a choice on the head of the ticket than leaving this matter to a bunch of uncommitted delegates. “Everyone has known that I am an aspirant for Governor,” asserted California’s state treasurer in 1894. “I have made my canvas in the San Joaquin valley and the southern portion of the State. In some of the counties I know that entire delegations could not have been elected had they not been pledged to me.” Where the slate backed by the local organization might be studded with various local notables and old wheel horses of the party, the men who appeared on a candidate backed slate were distinguished only for their loyalty and reliability. They were persons prepared to vote at their candidate’s command when it came to any issue coming before the convention and more especially on “trades” with candidates for lesser offices. “In regard to the delegates to the state convention,” California Governor George C. Pardee advised one local supporter in 1906, “it might be well to get together lists of reliable men in each district, who will ‘make good’ and ‘stay put’ . . . [E]verybody who goes on the delegation should understand that he must ‘programme’ for the head of the ticket clear down the line” (Reynolds 2006, 79, 91).

The fates of candidates for lesser state offices were lost sight of as the primary boiled down to one man’s determination to elect a slate of delegates wholly and solely committed to his gubernatorial quest. Under the convention system, it was difficult for a prospective secretary of state or county clerk to elect a slate of devoted delegates outside his own bailiwick. Because they could rarely hope to make their candidacy a priority for the voters, the fate of the many aspirants for places lower on the ticket would be decided at the convention. Here the rules governing geographical balance and rotation might prove decisive. The introduction of the direct primary would have a liberating effect on candidates for lesser offices. It was still difficult for candidates for down-ballot positions to get the voters’ attention, but at least they did not have to compete for delegates against candidates for more visible offices. The number of elective office seekers knocking on doors, showing up at social events and posting advertisements increased dramatically. A California newspaper reported how local office seekers “were compelled to be in their buggies almost day and night” during the week preceding Orange County’s Republican primaries in 1902 (Reynolds 2006, 73).

There were fewer changes made in the workings of the nominating convention itself, but a subtle shift occurred in its image and function. A deliberative body was becoming a more purely representative one. The delegates were less likely to be lauded for their political acumen or independence and more likely to be dismissed as political hacks. “In practice the delegates to nominating conventions are generally mere pieces on the political chess board,” derided New York Governor Charles Evans Hughes, “and most of them might as well be inanimate so far as their effective participation in the choice of candidates is concerned” (Beard 1910, 190). There is evidence that the social status of convention delegates also declined over time (Reynolds 2006, 94). Given their role in sending a body of loyal followers to the proceedings, gubernatorial nominees were in a decidedly stronger position to dictate the rest of the slate. Consequently, conventions became shorter and more perfunctory. Office seekers dominated the proceedings to a degree that would have struck an earlier generation as unseemly. Gubernatorial candidates now attended the convention and delivered

a more elaborate acceptance speech. (Still, the taboo proscribing presidential candidates from attending the national convention was not broken until Franklin D. Roosevelt captured the Democratic nomination in 1932.) In short, the outlines of a candidate-dominated electoral order had begun to eclipse the party-centered proceedings of the past.

The key change in nomination practices in the 1890s was the decision to dispense with the county convention in many localities under one-party rule. Candidates for county or municipal offices had to secure the nomination by winning a party administered primary. Prospective gubernatorial nominees challenged the local party establishment with a slate of loyal followers. The decisive battles for the nomination were taking place in the primaries – especially in the major cities – rather than on the convention floor. Competition was rising and the major political parties were not well equipped to respond. The informal rules and customs governing the conduct of primaries and caucuses could not handle the added pressure. The number of disputed delegations showing up at state and county conventions increased even as more and more regulations bearing on the nomination process piled up (Reynolds 2006, 154–155). Voter participation was on the upswing and the electorate was developing a sense that they should have a say at least when it came to selecting the individuals whose names would appear at the top of the ticket. By 1900, the need for a major overhaul of the nomination process was evident to party officials as well as more independent-minded reformers.

### **The Adoption of Direct Primary Legislation**

A fully realized direct primary system had three elements that did not come together until the Progressive Era: (1) it was administered by the government rather than the political parties; (2) it was mandatory for all major parties; and (3) it was statewide in coverage and applied to most elective offices. By this standard, Wisconsin is properly credited with enacting the first such statute in 1903 (Lovejoy 1941). By the time the nation entered World War I, hardly more than a decade later, all but a handful of states had followed suit (Wolfe 1966, 1). What popular support primary reform enjoyed among the general public could be attributed to the earnest efforts of intellectuals, journalists, and political gadflies. For many of its warmest advocates, the appeal of the direct primary was less rooted in its democratic tendencies than its promised “purifying” effect on the body politic. A direct primary, in their view, would draw more of the “better element” to the polls and ensure the selection of a higher caliber of public official. But it would be easy to exaggerate the amount of influence reformers exerted on public opinion, much less on the individuals who actually crafted and passed the legislation. Close observers of the movement for the direct primary have characterized its support among the citizenry as broad but not deep (Sarasohn 1953, 161). Former Wisconsin Governor Emanuel L. Philipp firmly denied there was any pressing public demand for the measure. He characterized the direct primary as a necessary measure given “the impossibility of continuing to do party business in an orderly manner in mass caucuses in congested municipal wards” (Philipp 1973, 10). Other party leaders, and elective office holders in particular, had reasons of their own to endorse the direct primary, and they were in a better position than the reformers to make sure it worked to their advantage.

“A decade ago the ballot reformer was much in evidence,” noted one political commentator in 1898. “To-day his younger brother proclaims the need of pure primaries. Then, an officially regulated election was announced as the harbinger of our political millennium. Now, with that millennium as far away as before, we are told that the trouble was not with the election, but with the caucus” (Hotchkiss 1898, 583). The convening of the “National Conference on the Practical Reform of Primary Elections” in 1898 marks the inception of the public crusade for the direct primary (Ware 2002, 81–84). The Chicago Civic Federation issued the call for the

conference after concluding that any change it wished to see in municipal administration could only be accomplished “through the purification and utilization of the party primaries.” It invited municipal officials as well as “practical and political reform workers.” Participants shared their experiences and frustrations with their diverse systems of party nomination. Most attendees expected the political parties to take the necessary steps to amend their candidate selection processes, but some proposals envisioned a larger role for the public sector. There was considerable interest in the system of direct nominations already in place in Cleveland and elsewhere, but no guidelines or best practices emerged from the event.

A twin set of concerns expressed at the conference reflected the different perspectives of partisan-minded political operatives versus more independent mugwump types. The latter group might be described as democratic in their approach only to the extent to which they wished to see more respectable, middle- and upper-class citizens participating in the process. Immigrant and working-class voters dominated the caucuses and primaries, so it was claimed, because so few of the “better element” turned out for these events. Corrupt political machines employed fair means and foul through their control of the nomination process to fend off challengers. Civic-minded citizens knew that the system was rigged, reformers averred, hence their decision not to participate was entirely understandable. The same citizens would flock to the polls if they knew their votes would be honestly counted by election officials who were not beholden to a corrupt political boss. A telegram to the conference from Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt nicely framed the issue from the reformers’ perspective: “The problem . . . is very largely how to stir reputable citizens up to their duties, and to make those duties easy to perform, while at the same time depriving the less reputable portion of the community both of the chance to commit frauds in politics” and the chance to be rewarded for doing so. Party officials and elective office holders, on the other hand, expressed their own unhappiness with a system that generated ill will and internal division. They were in search of a cure for “the mischiefs of faction.” Significantly, all sides agreed that the end result of reforming nominating practices would be to rejuvenate the major parties. A former Republican County committeeman from New York City expressed the sentiment that had brought many career politicians to the conference:

I say, as a party man, that it is the true interest of each party to make honest, straight primaries the possibility, and to render it impossible . . . to accomplish any result by fraud. The cleaner the primary the stronger the organization.

*National Conference on the Practical Reform of Primary Elections 1898, 86, 30, 109*

In the years that followed, the direct primary won swift and relatively uncontroversial approval from state to state. What opposition the direct primary encountered inside state legislatures chiefly aligned along an urban/rural axis. Rustic legislators understood that the apportionment rules in state conventions gave them greater clout than they could expect if governors or members of congress were selected by counting votes. “Should this bill become law,” warned one countrified Michigan legislator in 1903, “Detroit, Grand Rapids and one or two other cities in the lower peninsula could and would dominate state politics” (Reynolds 2006, 220). Given the suspicions of many rural legislators, it often proved easier to inaugurate direct nominations for county and local races, leaving district and state offices to be covered later. In many states the earliest legislation applied only to a specific municipality after one or both of its local political parties requested it (Merriam et al. 1928, 61–68; Hein 1957; Pollock 1943, 1). The progress of the reform from state to state could be slowed by numerous weighty matters entailed in its

implementation. What restrictions beyond suffrage should be imposed for participating in a party primary? Should the procedure apply to U.S. Senate seats? What proportion of the vote did the winner need to secure? While intense negotiations over these vital “details” sometimes stymied passage here and there for a time, no-one doubted that the nominating convention was a relic of the past.

Perhaps the most controversial issue associated with the direct primary concerned the criteria for certifying a winner. One of the saving graces of the convention system was its requirement that the victor amass a majority of the vote. Some politicians worried that requiring only a plurality of the vote in a primary might saddle a party with a candidate lacking sufficiently broad appeal. Setting the bar at 40 percent of the vote to qualify as the nominee satisfied some of these skeptics, while others required a convention or run-off primary when no candidate outpolled all his opponents combined (Horack 1921, 94; Dunn 1912, 439). The run-off feature was especially popular in the South (Merriam et al. 1928, 74). Ten states sought to ascertain the wishes of a majority of the electors through a preferential primary whose ballot allowed voters to rank their candidate preferences for each office. When no candidate had the support of a majority of the voters, their second-choice selections were tabulated, and if no majority winner emerged there, it was on to their third choice, etc. The preferential primary epitomized the reformers’ vision of a discerning citizenry eager to fully exercise their suffrage rights. Experience with the proviso proved disappointing; few voters took the opportunity to rank their preferences for anything more than their top choice for any office. The provision was soon abandoned everywhere it was tried (Martin 1947, 114). The principle of “first past the post” was the most common selection device in the earliest legislation, and it became more popular in time.

Later scholars would wonder why the major party organizations, most fully embodied by the nominating convention, allowed direct primary legislation to put them out of business (Ware 2002, 196–199). Of course, it was not as if these ephemeral conclaves had much of a say in the matter. But more importantly, a state takeover of their nominating functions had tangible benefits for the major parties themselves. Government responsibility for conducting the primaries lifted a sizeable financial burden off their shoulders. Other features of the laws took aim at the maverick candidates who sowed havoc in the general election. Some states enacted “sore loser” rules that prohibited candidates who lost in the primary from running for the same office in the general election (Petersen 1972, 373; Argersinger 1984, 507). Most of the early direct primaries stipulated that they be closed to all but party members, a policy that became more widespread over time (Merriam et al. 1928, 74). This principle had not been strictly observed when political parties ran their own primaries, in part because there were no clear guidelines conferring party membership. Now, new laws on the statute books required voters to declare a party affiliation when they registered or else forfeit their opportunity to participate in the nomination process. Independent-minded voters were greatly annoyed to find themselves frozen out of the nomination process. In short, state regulation offered an opportunity for the major parties to better control their membership and resist assaults from outsiders.

Democratic and Republican legislators and political incumbents in general found even more to their liking in the new statutes. Some states delegated authority for framing the party platform to their certified nominees instead of a body of party officials; the party stood for whatever its candidates said it did (Boots 1922). Longstanding party practices aimed at countering the influence of incumbency did not make it into the statute books. No effort was made to institutionalize the principles of term limits or rotation in office. Nor was there any requirement for geographical balance that had previously brought an end to many promising political careers. Office holders could exploit the many advantages of incumbency, which explains both



the popularity of the direct primary in legislative circles and the decline in turnover of elected officials at about this time (Bogue et al. 1976). Now name recognition reinforced with a steady stream of advertising provided officeholders with formidable weapons to ward off challengers. “Direct primaries liberated the congressman from the caucus and allowed him to employ proven campaign skills and the resources of office to maximum advantage,” notes one scholar. “Campaign experience, recognition, franking privileges, and diligent constituent service gave the incumbent . . . a competitive edge . . .” (Kernell 1977, 677). As one Illinois politician remarked with some hyperbole in 1912: “Under this primary law it is practically impossible to defeat the governor . . . if he uses his office to renominate himself” (Pegram 1992, 170). State primary laws would be constantly revised in the years to come to serve the short-term interests of influential public officials (Merriam et al. 1928, 68; Pollock 1943, 5). This pattern coincided with a general trend lengthening the terms of governors and other state officials from two to four years (Argersinger 1984, 496). A measure ostensibly designed to empower the voters was quickly put to use to protect the interests of elective office holders.

Several states introduced a presidential primary during the Progressive Era, but early experiments with the device were not so encouraging. Consequently, the presidential primary system took longer to take hold. Only half the states had a presidential primary by 1916, and over the next 40 years eight states abandoned the feature (Argersinger 1984, 508). The bitterly contested Republican presidential primaries in 1912 between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft did little to unify the party. When another series of contentious Republican contests ensued in 1920 the front runners met with widespread condemnation for the very considerable sums of money necessarily spent on their behalf (Baker 2012, 147). But the most important factor limiting the impact of the presidential primary was the reluctance of state leaders to surrender control of the national delegation to an outsider. Thus many of these early presidential primaries were purely “beauty contests” – where the delegates were not bound to support the winner. The question of who attended the national convention and who the attendees voted for was still left largely in the hands of the state party organizations. It was only in the 1960s that candidates began using victories in the New Hampshire or Wisconsin primaries as springboards to the White House.

Given the exorbitant hopes many invested in the direct primary, it was inevitable that some would express disappointment with its workings. This was especially the case among the reform elements who placed so much faith in the civic spirit of the “better citizens.” They proved largely willing to assume the duties of discerning convention delegates. Voter turnout plainly did increase under the direct primary, but this was largely a response to the heightened competition that pushed parties to adopt the measure. No-one pretended that the caliber of elected officials had improved much or that government had become notably less corrupt or more efficient. Other developments, like the disappointing experience with the preferential primaries, indicated that voters were not so very engaged in the electoral process. This was especially the case with down-ballot races. Political observers noted how candidates whose names appeared first on the primary ballot for a given office reaped a bigger share of the vote; election officials attempted to mitigate the effect by rotating the candidate listings (Merriam et al. 1928, 80). But this was not the first nor the last electoral reform that failed to live up to expectations. Soon the reform press moved on to tout the virtues of the short ballot or the direct election of United States Senators.

One new preoccupation of the political intelligentsia would be campaign finance reform – a problem the direct primary greatly exacerbated, even if it did not invent it. In retrospect, it is astonishing to come across predictions that a state-administered primary would put the man of

modest means on equal footing with an opponent with deep pockets. But the vexing problem of money in politics pre-dated the direct primary. After all, pursuing a nomination under the convention system always entailed some not inconsiderable costs. Prospective candidates were hounded by newspapers and local politicians demanding a hand out in one form or another. Delegates were known to have a soft spot for the rich candidate who was prepared to donate lavishly to party coffers. The *Detroit Free Press* complained in 1882:

If a candidate for governor is to be selected – in either party – the first question is, “Can he afford to run?” If he has no money to spend or no moneyed friends to spend it for him, and thereby establish a lien on him, he is set aside, no matter what his qualifications may be or even what his availability in a partisan sense may be . . . It is the same thing on a smaller scale if the office in question is that of alderman.

*Aug. 11, 1882*

Public concern over the use of money in elections only mounted when the hustling candidate arrived on the scene. In 1902 the Republican delegates attending their Barry County Convention in Michigan denounced “the use of money to pack caucuses or control conventions in the interest of any candidate for office.” Such practices were “unjust, unfair, un-Republican, accomplishing the debauchery of the citizenship and the degradation of our public life.” The solution, they concluded, was the direct primary (*Detroit Free Press*, June 10, 1902).

Advertising would drive up the costs of campaigning under the new nomination system, but this problem was not readily apparent to the reform’s early supporters. At the 1898 national convention called to consider changes in nominating practices, a Cleveland politician with some experience with the direct primary warned that the system

gives an opportunity for an immense use of money . . . Candidates seem to proceed upon the theory that the people are only waiting to vote for any person for any position, without regard to fitness or ability, and that ready success lies in a vigorous advertising campaign.

*National Conference on the Practical Reform of Primary Elections 1898, 101*

The import of his comments did not register with his listeners. “It is only when candidates get to spending money freely with leading party workers that the cost grows,” one apostle of the direct primary assured the National Municipal League, “and this is not a necessary expense nor is it a fault peculiar to the system” (Hempstead 1901, 206). It took a little time for the law’s repercussions to become apparent. When Missouri’s direct primary was introduced in 1908, many candidates did not know how it worked or how to adapt their canvassing practices accordingly. Some scorned the expense of newspaper advertising and confined their efforts at publicity to “a modest card or portrait.” Most office seekers mounted a conventional “man to man canvass, day and night, in streetcars, on street corners, in offices, lodge meetings, [and] public picnics . . .” Three years later, however, a political observer reported a notable change in campaign tactics whereby “the first thing sought is publicity” (Blair 1911, 428). States sought to curb runaway election expenses with corrupt practices acts and other legislation seeking to impose limits on campaign expenditures (Baker 2012). Whatever good these laws accomplished was undermined by the hard fact that candidates had to raise funds for two elections instead of one. The intractable problem of money in politics was arguably the most significant of the “unintended consequences” that attended the adoption of the direct primary.

## The Aftermath

While there was a palpable movement to revive the nominating conventions in a few states during the 1920s (Merriam et al. 1928, 95), the direct primary endured. It flourished because it allowed the “hustling candidates” coming to the fore in the 1890s to design a nominating process that best accommodated their more proactive style of electioneering. In later years scholars would blame the direct primary for fostering the more candidate-centered campaign style of the twentieth century. For better or worse, the focus on personalities rather than parties is regarded as one of the distinguishing features of the American electoral system. It is certainly true that the multi-tiered convention system of the nineteenth century made it more difficult for office seekers to dominate the nomination process. But the convention system was starting to break down well before Wisconsin did away with it. Various steps the parties took during the 1880s and 1890s to stamp out vote fraud and bring some order to their decentralized and disorderly nominating practices paved the way for intervention from the state. Given the control the major parties exercised over the governmental apparatus, state regulation amounted to little more than self-regulation in the interests of office holders or at least office seekers. The shift to the direct primary is best understood as an accommodation to an electoral environment where candidates for the most visible offices were taking center stage. The one group that clearly most benefitted by the new nomination system were incumbents – the very people who enacted the laws in the first place.

The direct primary was part of a broader restructuring of the electoral system that amounted to “cutting out the middle man.” The adoption of the official or Australian ballot around 1890 put an end to the small army of ticket peddlers who manned the polls on election day. The mobilization campaigns that called for a vast network of party committees to get out the vote would be replaced by “educational” or advertising campaigns relying instead on the mass media (McGerr 1986; Dinkin 1989, 95–126). Like the direct primary, the direct election of United States Senators starting in 1914 represented a transfer of power from the party elite (state legislators) to its electoral base. Civil service reform removed another incentive for lower level politicians to find employment for the party organization’s most loyal warriors. The consequence of these measures was to shift power from the party organization to its elected office holders. The roots the major parties had embedded in the electorate withered somewhat in the Progressive Era. Nonpartisan or independent political movements flourished. But thanks to the direct primary and similar legislation, the major parties and their candidates were now more deeply entrenched in the electoral apparatus than ever before.

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