

## PRIMARY ELECTIONS

The primary is a tool of the political parties to let them determine who their candidate will be in the general elections in case there are several persons who would like to run for the same office.

Primaries did not become a dominant factor in presidential nominations until the 1960s. Until then candidates were typically selected by party activists who attended the national conventions. The party then presented the candidates to the electorate. The rise of primaries involved voters more directly in the selection process, and in so doing it diminished the power of the major parties. Around the turn of the century, the reformers interested in making the nominating process more democratic began to press the state governments to provide more direct voter participation. The primary was the technique most of them favored. In 1901 Florida enacted the first presidential primary law. This gave party officials the option of holding a primary to choose delegates to the national presidential convention. Within a few years, a number of states took the next important step by establishing the "preferential" presidential primary. Oregon pioneered this new system, by which voters would cast a ballot for their preferred candidate and the delegates would be legally bound to that candidate at the national convention.

In 1912 preferential primaries were held in one-quarter of the states. The former President Theodore Roosevelt won the Republican vote in most of them. However, the Republican National Convention nominated the incumbent William Howard Taft. Indeed, until 1968, party leaders remained firmly in control of the nominating process.

In 1960 John Kennedy concentrated on two primaries—Wisconsin and West Virginia—and by winning them, convinced party leaders to support him at the convention. In 1964 and 1968 there were dramatic primary competitions among the major candidates. Barry Goldwater's victory over Nelson Rockefeller in the California Republican primary in 1964 assured him the nomination, and the emotional Democratic primaries of 1968 pitted Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and Hubert Humphrey against each other. Robert Kennedy's death at the hand of an assassin, following his dramatic victory in the California primary, clouded the primary vote that year. Humphrey went on to win the nomination at the strife-torn national convention in Chicago.

Before the 1972 convention, some Democrats (led by South Dakota Senator George McGovern) began to exert pressure aimed at changing the complex nominating rules to allow broader voter participation. The first beneficiary of the changed rules was McGovern himself, who used the primary process to win the nomination. In 1976 the little-known Jimmy Carter won the nomination by pursuing a skillful primary campaign, and in 1980 Carter and Ronald Reagan earned their parties' nominations by winning majority votes in more than 35 primaries. This was the high water mark for primaries.

After the defeat in the 1980 election, the Democrats began to wonder at the wisdom of the system that absorbed so much time (candidates beginning to run the year before the election and campaigning in primaries from March through June) and seemed to discourage members of

the party from running. By 1984 the number of primaries was reduced to 27. In 1988 the number was 25 for the Democrats and 28 for the Republicans, and nearly half of these were scheduled on the same date, March 8, "Super Tuesday."

Even so, the primary has remained the most important method of determining the major candidates for president. One of the consequences has been to diminish the role and influence of the political party in such matters. As a rule, party leaders interested in winning general elections seek moderate candidates who will appeal to coalitions of diverse voters. The primary process often demands that a candidate commit to groups with very specific political goals—the advocates, women's rights organizations, gay activists, ethnic minority groups—before these groups will grant their vote in a primary. By the time of the general election, these candidates may be seen as tools of special interests. Finally, the primary system is so cumbersome and so long that some major candidates simply cannot find the time, energy, or money to run. Some scholars now argue that reforms that would strengthen the primary system—shorten the campaign, diminish the influence of special interest groups, and control the spiraling expenditures necessary to run for the presidency—would benefit the country. But we should keep in mind that the expansion of the primary method was also intended to benefit the country.