Introduction—The Long, Complicated Road to the White House: The Presidential Nomination Process in 2004

by
William G. Mayer,
Northeastern University

There is no simple way to determine how many people run for president every four years, but the number is surely substantial. Perhaps the closest thing in American politics to an official registry of presidential candidates is maintained by the Federal Election Commission (FEC). In every recent election cycle, more than 230 individuals have filed a statement of candidacy with the FEC. The majority of these people, of course, are not what most observers would regard as serious candidates. They are perhaps best described as nice, well-meaning individuals who think they would make a great president, even though they have no obvious qualifications for the job and little or no previous experience in government or politics. But if even we limit our attention to "serious" or "major" candidates, most election cycles produce between 10 and 15 declared presidential candidates. (One could also make a good case for adding in another five or 10 names per election cycle, to take account of all the people who conduct preliminary or "exploratory" campaigns but then shut them down once it becomes apparent that there is no particular demand or support for their candidacy.)

However large the initial field of possibilities, the reality is that by late August of the election year—and probably a lot earlier—most Americans will be trying to decide between just two persons: a Democrat and a Republican. Such, in a nutshell, is the purpose and effect of party nominations: they define and limit the effective choices of the voters. The purpose of this Symposium is to examine how that delimiting process takes place.

The significance of the presidential nomination process is easy to overlook. Historians and election scholars have frequently dwelt upon the fateful nature of the elections that chose, for example, Franklin Roosevelt over Herbert Hoover in 1932, or Abraham Lincoln over Stephen Douglas in 1860. Yet, surely it was just as important that the Democrats nominated Roosevelt rather than, say, John Nance Garner or Al Smith, or that the then-six-year-old Republican Party selected Lincoln as its standard bearer over William Seward and Salmon P. Chase.

Whatever else may be said of the contemporary American presidential nomination process, it is undeniably long. In the 1950s and 1960s, most presidential aspirants didn't officially launch their candidacies until the beginning of the election year or the final months of the preceding year (for data on this point, see Hagen and Mayer 2000, 21–26). In the early 1970s, however, the rules of the nomination process were substantially rewritten, the net effect of which has been to usher in a new and very different era in presidential nominations. Today, most presidential campaigns begin to gear up shortly after the midterm elections have concluded. In mid-January, 2003, for example, I have seen several articles claiming that the possible presidential candidacy of Senator Bob Graham (D-FL) may be hurt by the fact that he is getting into the race too late—even though the first primary is still a year away and the general election twenty-two months off.

By the time this Symposium is published, then, the 2004 nomination race(s) will already be in full swing. We hope that these articles help contribute to a better understanding of this complicated, occasionally exciting, frequently frustrating, but vitally important aspect of American national government.

Reference

Hagen, Michael G., and William G. Mayer. 2000. "The Modern Politics of Presidential Selection: How Changing the Rules Really Did Change the Game." In *In Pursuit of the White House 2000: How We Select Our Presidential Nominees,* ed. William G. Mayer. New York: Chatham House.

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Jonathan Bernstein *is a professor of political science at the University of Texas, San Antonio. He is currently involved in several projects related to contemporary political parties. He is researching the Expanded Party in presidential politics, showing how personal politics and party factions interacted in the 2000 nomination campaigns.*

Andrew E. Busch *is an associate professor of political science at the University of Denver, where he teaches American government. He is author or co-author of seven books on American politics, including* The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations *(with William G. Mayer, Brookings, forthcoming),* The Perfect Tie: The True Story of the 2000 Presidential Election *(with James W. Ceaser), and* Outsiders and Openness in the Presidential Nominating System.

Casey B. K. Dominguez *is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation title is "Before the Primary: Party Elite Participation in Congressional Nominations." Her research interests include the American presidency, political parties, Congress, and political behavior.*

Linda L. Fowler *is director of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for the Social Sciences and holds the Frank J. Reagan '09 Chair in Policy Studies at Dartmouth College. The author of two books on ambition and political recruitment to Congress, she has published a variety of articles on American politics. Fowler's research focuses on campaign effects in the New Hampshire primary and restrictive rules in the U.S. House.*

Paul-Henri Gurian *is an associate professor of political science at the University of Georgia. He can be reached at phgurian@uga.edu.*

Audrey A. Haynes *is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on the nexus of candidate communication strategy and the news media within the context of presidential nomination campaigns.*

William G. Mayer *is an associate professor of political science at Northeastern University. In each of the last two election cycles, he has edited a volume of essays on various aspects of the presidential nomination process. The third volume in that series,* The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2004, *will be published later this year.*

Barbara Norrander *is a professor of political science at the University of Arizona. Her coauthored book with Michael Corbett,* American Government: Using MicroCase ExplorIt, 7th edition *(Wadsworth 2002), is the leading computer-based workbook for courses on American government.*

Philip Paolino *is an associate professor of political science at the University of North Texas. He has authored several publications and manuscripts on the presidential nomination process.*

Dante J. Scala *is an assistant professor of politics at Saint Anselm College (NH), and a research coordinator at the college's New Hampshire Institute of Politics. This article is part of the author's forthcoming book on the history of the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary, to be published this year by Palgrave MacMillan.*

Daron R. Shaw *is an associate professor in the government department at the University of Texas, Austin. He specializes in public opinion and voting behavior, campaigns and elections, and political parties. He has worked in several political campaigns as a pollster and data analyst.*

Constantine J. Spiliotes *is an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College. His research focuses on presidential politics, political economy, and campaigns and elections. He is the author of* Vicious Cycle: Presidential Decision Making in the American Political Economy *(Texas A&M, 2002).*

Kathryn Dunn Tenpas *is a guest scholar at The Brookings Institution, associate director of the University of Pennsylvania's Washington Semester Program, and author of* Presidents as Candidates: Inside the White House for the Presidential Campaign. *Her articles have appeared in the Journal of Politics, Presidential Studies Quarterly and Political Science Quarterly.*

Lynn Vavreck *is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her interests include the ways that candidate behavior in campaigns affect voters in elections. Some of her other work on campaign effects can be read in the* British Journal of Political Science, American Journal of Political Science, *and Journal of Politics.*

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