

Introduction

Of all the major institutions and processes in contemporary American government, few have been as consistently controversial as the presidential nomination process. The basic rules governing delegate selection and convention decisionmaking were completely rewritten in the early 1970s, and from the moment the “reforms” first took effect, they faced a firestorm of criticism. The new rules were attacked from almost every conceivable angle: for producing candidates who were ideological extremists or not very experienced or just plain mediocre; for weakening the parties and empowering the news media; for making nomination campaigns longer and more expensive; for producing convention delegates who were unrepresentative of the party rank and file; for conferring disproportionate power on Iowa and New Hampshire; for emphasizing campaigning over governing; for almost entirely excluding party leaders and top elected officials from the decisionmaking process; for undermining the support that a president could expect to receive from members of his own party within Congress and the executive branch; and for accentuating potential sources of party division and thus making it more difficult for the parties to present a united front in the general election.¹

Three decades later, most of these criticisms have receded from the front burner of American politics. In some cases, the problem was perhaps not as serious as it initially appeared to be. The charge that the system favored candidates who were ideological extremists, for example, seemed quite credible in the late 1970s, when the Democrats had just recently

nominated George McGovern and the Republicans had almost denied their nomination to Gerald Ford, a conservative incumbent president, on the grounds that he was not conservative enough.² By 2003, however, this criticism would probably strike most observers as preposterous. Whatever else may be said of a system that, over the past four election cycles, has nominated Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore on the Democratic side and George Bush, Bob Dole, and George W. Bush on the Republican, it can hardly be accused of fielding candidates who are extreme ideologues.

In other cases, the parties recognized the problem and took corrective action. There is little doubt, for example, that the new rules did lead to a sharp decline in the number of Democratic governors, senators, and representatives who served as national convention delegates. In 1982, however, the Democrats “reformed the reforms” by adding a rule that conferred automatic delegate status on a substantial number of party leaders and elected officials. And, sad to say, in a fair number of instances—such as the extraordinary length of the nomination campaign, the disproportionate power of Iowa and New Hampshire, and the troubling role of the news media—we have lived with the problem so long and found it so difficult to change that we have simply grown inured to it.

The subject of this book is a relative latecomer to the list of faults and derelictions, but by the final years of the twentieth century, it had emerged as perhaps the single most criticized feature of the entire process. Front-loading—the concentration of primaries and caucuses at the beginning of the delegate selection season—is what might be called a “second-order” effect of the new nomination rules. It did not become a major problem until the new system had been in operation for two or three election cycles and its basic tendencies and incentives had started to become apparent. Unfortunately, this also means that front-loading has probably not yet run its course. Whereas most other features of the contemporary nomination process have now reached a point of stability, there are strong reasons to think that front-loading will only get worse.

The rules of the presidential nomination process are, as a general matter, a pretty arcane subject, of some concern to the party officials who must write them and the campaign managers who must live under them but not especially interesting to anyone else. By the mid-1990s, however, a large number of political commentators and observers had taken notice of front-loading and, with a singular degree of unanimity, deplored its effects on the presidential selection process. In 1996 the system that re-

sulted from front-loading was described as “madness,” “insane,” “warped and virtually mindless,” “absurdly accelerated,” “self-defeating,” “debilitating,” a “high-speed demolition derby,” and a “parody of participatory democracy” in which “candidates have rushed through the country like passengers late for a connection.”³ In 2000 various commentators called the nomination process “a sound-bite-saturated sprint,” a “stampede,” a “disaster for democracy,” “absurd,” a “mosh pit,” “terrible,” “dangerously irrational,” a “mutant game of hopscotch,” a “freight train,” and a “crazy-quilt system” that produced a “lemming-like rush.”⁴

The writings of political pundits and newspaper editorial boards are not always the most reliable basis for constructing public policy. In this case, however, the criticism is on target. Front-loading has had a variety of undesirable effects on the presidential nomination process. It deprives many early primary voters of deliberate choice and late primary voters of any meaningful choice at all. It degrades campaign quality, gives an unreasonable advantage to front-runners, and substantially reduces the field of viable candidates before a single vote is cast. In short, it makes the presidential nomination process less rational, less flexible, and more chaotic. At a time of domestic challenge and international peril, these are risks the country can ill afford to take.

By 2000 both the Democrats and Republicans were concerned enough about the problem that each party established a commission whose principal assignment was to see whether something could be done to halt or reverse the front-loading trend. Nothing concrete came of these efforts, however. As the 2004 nomination race gets under way, the front-loading problem is still with us, fundamentally unchanged from the last time around.

The purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive examination of the front-loading issue: what it is, why it developed, what consequences it has for the nomination process as a whole, and what, if anything, can be done about it.