

## **19. REFORMING THE NATIONAL CONVENTIONS:**

### **THE PRE-PRIMARY NATIONAL MINI-CONVENTION**

There is no question that the Democratic and Republican national conventions are now “coronations” and have no effect whatsoever on the presidential nominating process. But that does not mean that the national conventions are likely to disappear anytime soon. The two political parties value the conventions highly as free national advertising for the party candidate for President and the political party’s history, traditions, and ideals.

The major national television networks are cutting back on convention coverage, but newly emerging news sources, such as 24-hour cable news and internet news pages, continue to cover the national conventions in depth. And even the TV networks will want to give evening prime time coverage to the highlights of each national convention, such as the balloting for president and, most important of all, the officially nominated presidential candidate’s acceptance speech.

The party national conventions thus are vestigial political institutions that no longer serve their original purpose - nominating candidates for President - but which are going to be sticking around for awhile. That means that, if the nominating system in the United States is to be reformed, some new version of the

national convention must be developed that does not remove or change significantly the existing national conventions.

Under the present nominating system, the most chaotic and unstructured part of the process occurs in the extended period prior to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. Candidates announce their intention to run for President and then spend a year or more bouncing around the country, shaking hands, chatting in diners, holding town halls, and giving speeches. This is done in an effort to attract the attention of the news media and, above all, convince leading newspaper reporters and television pundits that a particular candidate is a serious and possibly successful contender for the nomination. The news media further increase their influence over the process by conducting and publishing public opinion polls that rate one candidate against another, giving momentum to those who do well in the polls and weakening the chances of those who fare poorly.

Therefore, under the existing system, the newspaper reporters and television pundits have the most influence over which candidates surge ahead and which candidates fall to the rear during the lengthy but crucial period prior to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. So powerful are the political commentators during this pre-caucus, pre-primary period that it might best be referred to as the “News Media Candidate Evaluation And Promotion Period.”

How could one structure a political party national convention that is relevant to and improves the nominating system as it currently operates? The answer would be to hold this new national convention prior to the presidential caucuses and primaries rather than after them. Just before the Iowa caucuses, and just at the end of the News Media Candidate Evaluation and Promotion Period, a party national convention could gather for the purpose of ranking the various candidates for the party presidential nomination. The persons who will do the ranking will not be news personnel, which is what happens in an ad hoc fashion under the present system. The persons doing the ranking will be the leading elected officials of the political party from throughout the nation.

This gathering of party elected officials could be called the “Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention.” It will be held early in January of each presidential election year. Instead of replacing the existing party national convention, this new pre-primary mini-convention will be held in addition to it.

Who could attend this proposed Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention? It will be a gathering of those members of the political party who hold major elected offices in the various states and cities of the United States. Party members who sit in the United States Senate and the United States House of Representatives will attend, as will party members who are state governors. Also present and voting

will be the top two party leaders in each house of the 50 state legislatures, plus the party members who are mayors of the 100 most populous cities in the United States. If the President of the United States was a member of the political party, he or she would attend and cast one vote.

The two major political parties in the United States - the Democrats and the Republicans - are rarely in equal balance in terms of electoral offices won across the nation at any one given time. But each party always has a considerable number of elected officials in office throughout the country. On average, therefore, the delegates to a typical Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention will attend and vote in these approximate numbers:

* U.S. Senators	50
* U.S. Representatives	218
* State Governors	25
* State Legislative Leaders	200
* Mayors	50
Total:	543

The actual number of persons attending and voting at the Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention will vary with the success or failure of the particular political party at electing its candidates to office. For instance, the number of U.S.

senators present would rise and fall with the political party's success at electing U.S. senators. The same would be true for the number of U.S. representatives, the number of governors, and the number of mayors. The number of state legislative leaders would remain relatively constant, however, because a political party always has state legislative leaders no matter how poorly it fared in previous elections.

What will be the order of business at the Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention? The agenda will be brief and to the point. There will be two nominating speeches for each candidate for president followed by a short floor demonstration. The nominating speeches each should be about five to ten minutes long. Taken together, the nominating speeches and the demonstration for a particular candidate should not exceed 30 minutes.

The floor demonstrations could harken back to national conventions of yore when, following the nominating speeches, a candidate's supporters would yell and cheer and march up and down the aisles of the convention hall. A hired marching band and waving banners could be added to the festivities. In the contemporary media age, however, a candidate might want to enhance the demonstration with a short video program reviewing the candidate's political career and accomplishments. Or the candidate might conclude his or her 30 minutes of nomination time with a short speech outlining issue positions and reasons for

voting for the candidate.

This schedule is media driven. Each candidate is limited to 30 minutes of mini-convention time in order to keep things moving along quickly and in hopes of holding the attention of a reasonably large television audience. The various candidates will make their presentations one after the other, the order being determined by lot.

In order to prevent totally unqualified persons from announcing for President and trying to speak at the mini-convention, the number of candidates being presented at the mini-convention must be limited. The best method for accomplishing this will be to require that each candidate nominated at the mini-convention submit a petition signed by at least 10 percent of the mini-convention delegates.

Once the nominating speeches and the demonstrations for each candidate are completed, the actual balloting will begin. There will be one vote for each mini-convention delegate. The roster of the 50 states and the District of Columbia will be called in alphabetical order. The leader of the delegation from each state and the District would report the vote from the state or the District for the various candidates.

At the end of the balloting, the results will be announced with the candidates

ranked according to the number of votes each received. There will then be a second ballot with only the top four finishers in the running. Mini-convention delegates who voted for the less popular candidates on the first ballot will thus have a chance to vote for one of the top four finishers on the second ballot. After the results of the second ballot are known, the top four finishers will each give a short “acceptance” speech a maximum of ten minutes long.

Of the top four finishers, the candidate with the lowest number of votes will give his or her acceptance speech first. The candidate with the next highest number of votes will speak second. The next highest vote-getter will speak third. The candidate with the highest number of votes, the mini-convention winner, will speak fourth and last.

As soon as the acceptance speeches are completed, the mini-convention will adjourn and the delegates will go home.

The goal of the Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention is to have party elected officials take the first step in the process of narrowing the field of party presidential candidates. Note that the mini-convention determines the top four candidates for the party nomination instead of giving all the hype and publicity to just one candidate.

A point to keep in mind is this. Candidates who fail to get enough

signatures to be considered at the mini-convention are in no way prevented from running in the party caucuses and party primaries for President. The mini-convention provides valuable information about the presidential candidates to party members but does not eliminate any candidate from the caucuses and primaries competition.

The results of the second ballot at the Pre-Primary national Mini-Convention will give party members a clear picture of which candidates for President the party's elected officials recommend and support. The opinions of the party's elected government officials are particularly important in the process of selecting a party presidential candidate. It is these elected officials - governors, mayors, state legislators - who have gone to the voters for support and have won elections. These elected government officials have a clearer picture than the average citizen of what the public is currently thinking and how the various candidates might fare in a presidential election. If any group is qualified to make the "first cut" among the political party's presidential candidates, it is surely the elected government officials of the political party.

The Pre-Primary National Mini-Convention will only slightly diminish the tremendous influence which news reporters and television commentators have over the presidential nominating process. The lengthy period of time prior to the first



presidential caucuses and presidential primaries will remain predominantly the News Media Evaluation and Promotion Period. But the mini-convention will challenge the overweening influence of the national press corps at a crucial moment - the moment just before the first real votes are cast in the first presidential caucuses and primaries. In addition to the opinions of the news media, presidential caucuses and primaries voters also will have an official ranking of their party's presidential candidates by their fellow party members who have been elected to major governmental offices.