

## **National Nominating Conventions and the Media**

The term “media” has several meanings. In this context it refers to means of communication other than direct speech or bodily gestures. Television, radio, and Internet are common examples of media. The role of media in the national nominating convention has changed both with the advance of technology and the shift in the function of the convention. Nearly every technological advance in media has influenced the convention at one time: written publications, radio, telephone, television, and most recently the Internet. Since the creation of the national nominating convention in the mid-1800s, numerous forces have shifted its primary function from nominating party candidates and voting on party policy to showcasing the candidate and bolstering the party around the policy.

Media technology and the national nominating conventions have undergone extreme changes almost in parallel since the 19th century. The intersection of these changes is a complex and interesting phenomenon. Changes in media have helped influence the form and function of conventions, which in turn influences how media treats the conventions. This reciprocal dynamic is illustrated by the media’s involvement in the 1968 Democratic Convention, leading to a reform in the nomination process and a corresponding shift in media attention.

### *Past Practices*

During the 19th century, the roles of the delegates and journalists at conventions overlapped. Objective journalism gained more prominence approaching the 20th century, giving rise to formal schools of thought and the notion that reporters should be non-participatory. This new identity of the journalist as narrator of live drama led to competition between different media organizations. The type of national nominating convention held in the 1800s differs dramatically from the contemporary events. For instance, in 1924 the Democratic Party took 17 days and 103 ballots to elect John William

Davis as the presidential nominee.<sup>1</sup> Sixteen years later, America viewed the first televised political convention. It was aired by New York City's National Broadcasting Company (NBC), when the Republican Party nominated Wendell Willkie as their dark horse candidate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (US Embassy). Willkie also enjoyed a boost from publisher Henry Luce, who decided to use his magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* to advertise the candidate's merits (Patterson, 194). This was only the beginning of media involvement in the convention. Television coverage was still not yet the dominant media source, and the essential political apparatus was still happening within the convention.<sup>2</sup> For a long time, the events that occurred remained opaque to the general public.

The first color telecast aired in 1968, when NBC and the Columbia Broadcasting System (now CBS) covered the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida (US Embassy). The 1968 convention riots caused several backlash reforms in the Democratic Party's presidential nomination process. Prior to 1968, the Democratic Party operated with a mixed system consisting of one-third primary states and two-thirds convention states that were controlled by party elites (Patterson 194). In 1969, the McGovern-Fraser Commission adopted a set of rules for the states to follow in selecting convention delegates. The reforms led the majority of states to adopt laws requiring primary elections to select delegates. After 1968, the only way to win the party's presidential nomination was through the primary process. Humphrey was the last nominee from either the Republican or Democratic Party to win a party's nomination without having directly competed in the primaries.<sup>3</sup> The rise of the lengthy primary election process has led to new media

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<sup>1</sup> Elving, R., Lynch, D. and Schaffner, B. *Role of Media at National Party Conventions*. Panel presented at the American University Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies. 2 April 2008. Last accessed 12 July 2012. <<http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/204677-2>>.

<sup>2</sup> Elving et al.

<sup>3</sup> Satterthwaite, Shad. "How did party conventions come about and what purpose do they serve?" *ThisNation*. Last accessed 12 July 2012. <<http://www.thisnation.com/question/038>>.

practices and the metamorphosis of the national nominating convention into a grand ceremony.

The role of the media changed correspondingly in the post-McGovern-Fraser conventions. The decline of the party apparatus marked the beginning of the current “ratifying and advertising” era of conventions. The primary role of the contemporary convention is to give validity to their predetermined nominee and advertise his or her platform.<sup>4</sup> The media shifted from its former role of gatekeeper to its new role of guide, helping the American public to make an informed decision by critiquing the candidates’ platforms and competencies (Patterson, 195). During the presidential nominating process, voters often face little known (or “dark-horse”) candidates and are unable to rely on partisan cues to differentiate between these same-party individuals.<sup>5</sup> The shift in roles also increased the power of the media; regarding the elections of the 1970s, William Crotty and John S. Jackson asserted that, “the new party system has witnessed a collapse in party control over its own nominating process . . . the new power center is the media, especially television.”<sup>6</sup> The statement illuminates the questions of the exact function and intent of the media.

Jimmy Carter’s run for president in 1976 exemplified the increasingly public convention and media roles. Rather than exclusively meeting with party leaders, Carter traveled around the nation to meet with journalists. Though he was a little-known Democratic candidate from Georgia, his prospects brightened considerably after R.W. Apple of the *New York Times* wrote about him in a front-page story in October of 1975 (Patterson, 195). On the Republican side, Ronald Reagan nearly defeated the incumbent President Ford, who was generally

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<sup>4</sup> Elving et al.

<sup>5</sup> Farnsworth, Steven J. “How Television Covers the Presidential Nomination Process.” In *The Making of the Presidential Candidates: 2012*. Eds. William G. Mayer and Jonathan Bernstein. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012. 133 – 153. 133.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller. “The Invisible Primary in Presidential Nominations, 1980-2004.” In *The Making of Presidential Candidates: 2008*. Ed. William G. Mayer. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. 1 – 31. 3.

popular within his party's inner circle. In the system prior to the McGovern-Fraser Commission, Ford's re-nomination would have been automatic.<sup>7</sup> The media could now influence the popular vote to nominate unknown candidates who would eventually become president.

Media influence could not only secure nominations to favored candidates but also deny nominations to disfavored candidates. A candidate who appeals the media is guaranteed more success. It is improbable that a candidate who ignores the media will receive the nomination. For this reason, establishment-backed candidates with greater name recognition usually become the nominee.<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that all media attention is positive though. In 2004, presidential hopeful Howard Dean did much worse in the New Hampshire primary than anticipated. This poor performance was generally attributed to his screaming in a fit of excitement after finishing third in the Iowa primary. Widely circulated in the media, this outburst was used as proof that Dean was too unstable for the presidential role. The incident truly exhibits how negative media attention can destroy a presidential bid.

With this newfound positive and negative influence, the traditional media of the day—newspapers, radio, and eventually television—bypassed the party apparatus. In 1987, political consultant Doug Bailey's news service, The Hotline, became a daily digest for mass media entries sent over fax to subscribers. By the 1990s, Hotline, initially available via fax, inspired a number of imitators. In the Internet era, daily e-mails full of political information have become the norm (Playbook, First Read). Journalists were no longer the only publishers of political opinion. They were joined by lay people, their blogs, and other forms of social media.<sup>9</sup> This population of observers has led to a mass densification of political discourse by increasing the

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, et al., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Farnsworth, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Cornfield 109.

number of voices making remarks, increasing the number of remarks per voice, making remarks consistently available, and creating whole new categories of political observation.<sup>10</sup> This increase in communication is the direct result of a complex shift in political practices and technological advancements.

### *Current Practices*

The contemporary nominating process has settled into a distinct pattern. A front-runner emerges in the “invisible primary” period that takes place prior to primary balloting and then parlays this success into victories during the actual primaries. This candidate is then ratified, rather than selected, during the national party conventions.<sup>11</sup> This ratification is a rallying point for the party. For a while following the new function of the nominating convention, the media gave it an intense amount of attention.

Convention coverage and corresponding ratings have decreased over time. Current trends indicate that decreased coverage indicates decreased viewership. Broadcast networks have decreased campaign coverage from 100 primetime hours in 1976 to only 23 hours by the year 2000 (US Embassy Doc). In 2004, each major network covered roughly an hour of the conventions per night. Brian Schaffner of American University attributes this to the shift of convention coverage to cable networks.<sup>12</sup> But even the cable outlets did not focus on the convention content. Rather, the convention became the backdrop for regularly scheduled programming on those networks. Since the party candidate is known prior to the convention, some question the necessity of a four-day and four-night media-covered convention. Ron Elving, the Senior Washington Editor for NPR, believes that the convention persists because of inertia: for

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid 110.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen et al., 3.

<sup>12</sup> Elving et al.

media people, conventions are the “place to be.”<sup>13</sup> For news organizations to be taken seriously, they must attend the conventions. Whenever masses of people get together, they will produce news, and with that production they will create a market for convention coverage. Elving also credits the perpetuation of convention media coverage to “peer fear” (major news organizations not wanting to fall behind the competition), public perception, and a sense of public service.

Declining network television coverage has been accompanied by a jump in untraditional media coverage. According to Dotty Lynch of American University, the 2004 Democratic National Convention invited authors of state blogs to attend the convention, bringing their commentary from the fringes to mainstream coverage.<sup>14</sup> Today, every major news organization has a blogger on staff. This allows the organization to bring events to public attention that wouldn’t otherwise be covered in their traditional reporting. The 2004 convention also featured “talk show row,” specifically designed to host radio interviews (US Embassy Doc). While alternative media sources are becoming more and more relevant, most citizens still rely on television for their campaign news. During the 2000 nomination season, 63,903 television advertising spots were aired. This figure increased to 70,206 in the 2004 nomination season.<sup>15</sup> At the very beginning of the millennium, television still dominated media coverage of national nominating conventions. However, the most recent research indicates that people are beginning to trend away from this and increasingly use the Internet. It is not surprising that the Obama and Romney campaigns have introduced iPad apps in 2012.

The 2008 campaign was the first presidential election cycle since 1952 when neither party’s prospective nominees were sitting

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ridout, Travis N. “Television Advertising during the Presidential Nomination Season.” *The Making of Presidential Candidates: 2008*. Ed. William G. Mayer. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. 99 – 116. 103.

presidents or vice presidents. The two Democratic front-runners throughout the primary process and into the convention season were also members of minority groups, which added fervor to the media coverage. Fittingly, the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC included more than 22 hours of campaign news.<sup>16</sup> This amount of coverage may also be attributed to the relatively stable political environment in America in 2007, which freed up airtime and the public's interest to be occupied by campaign information. The first Gulf War in 1991 may have caused an inordinately low amount of pre-season campaign coverage.<sup>17</sup>

But the media hasn't entirely emulated the party apparatus in its new political role. Whereas the parties are motivated by the incentive of political power, which allows them to give merit to their traditions and constituent interests, the media is more sensationalist and is forever shifting its agenda based on events of the day. (Patterson p.196) The press also lacks the political accountability of a party; whereas elections make parties accountable to the public, the public has no comparable control over the press. (Patterson p.197) Thus the rise of media since the downfall of conventions controlled by party elites is a two-sided phenomenon, enhancing democracy in some ways and potentially inhibiting it in others.

### *Technology*

While the Pew Research Center survey conducted shortly after the 2008 election found that the majority of Americans still rely on conventional media sources for their campaign information, advances in technology are rapidly making new media into communication giants.<sup>18</sup> The development of the high-speed rotary press, coupled with widespread urbanization, allowed for the rise of self-supporting

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<sup>16</sup> Farnsworth 135.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>18</sup> Farnsworth 134.

newspapers. The invention of the telegraph in 1840 allowed news to be sent across the country, providing even remote local papers with the latest Washington news. The creation of the Associated Press eight years later allowed for the systematic dissemination of this information while removing partisan biases (Journalism in American Political History, 301). Availability breeds competition and soon sensationalism became the marketing tool of choice.

Strong-willed publishers could use their clout to further a political agenda. William Randolph Hearst used his papers to advocate for war against Spain in 1898. American publishers were also beginning to develop and circulate magazines, including such well-known names as *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Nation*. Papers and magazines allowed for individual writers to grow in following and influence (Journalism in American Political History, 302). The creation of the radio changed the established clout of print.

Radio created an opportunity for political candidates to market themselves rather than just their party or platform. They also could reach the national audience without the help of parties or friendly editors (Journalism in American Political History, 302). The introduction of television to the convention was in 1940 when New York City's National Broadcasting Company televised the Pennsylvania convention (US Embassy Doc). The conventions' first color telecast occurred 28 years later and marked a transition to conventions that merely ratified candidates that were selected after much media exposure and tough primary battles (Patterson, 194).

Until the 1990s, the "Big Three" networks ABC, NBC, and CBS claimed approximately 80% of viewers. These sources monopolized television presidential coverage, especially during the primaries and conventions. Television outlets have since diversified to new formats, such as cable television or early-morning news programs. New media sources such as the Internet and smartphones have also helped to increase the number of voices citizens can choose to listen

to about national nominating conventions (Journalism in American Political History, 303). Diversification of voices is important in an informed democratic republic.

Internet coverage of conventions began in 1996.<sup>19</sup> During the midterm elections of 2010, more than half of Americans used the Internet to get their political news, through social media such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other sites (Journalism in American Political History, 304). The arrival of the Internet into mainstream America has marked a complete transformation in American political coverage. During the days of party press, only an elite population could receive access to newspapers. When mass circulation of newspapers became possible, so did mass politics. The development of opinion magazines grew with the existence and clout of interest groups. Radio and television allowed political candidates to reach out directly to the public. Now the Internet allows for the interaction between a candidate, their campaign, and the average American (Journalism in American Political History, 304). This unprecedented interaction is highly beneficial to the political process.

Candidates that top the polls and fundraising efforts receive the majority of media and public attention. Because of this, candidates who start off as front-runners tend to receive nominations. New media is one reprieve for those who wish to be nominees but have not emerged at the front of the pack. The online news environment lacks the intentional and unintentional restrictions of traditional media and so is much more accessible to secondary candidates.<sup>20</sup> A prime example of the power of Internet media is in the case of Howard Dean in 2004. The former Vermont governor went outside of party control to attack his party's leadership in matters such as the Iraq War. Despite straying from party lines, Dean went on to lead in national polls and fundraising up until the primaries. Through the Internet he had raised nearly \$50 million in contributions and

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<sup>19</sup> Elving et al.

<sup>20</sup> Farnsworth 152.

generated considerable name recognition for a candidate that would have otherwise been overlooked by mainstream media.<sup>21</sup> Dean's performance on the Internet illustrates the egalitarian nature of media diversification and the increased public perception of political processes. National nominating conventions, which used to be secret meetings of party bosses to nominate presidential candidates, are now diversely covered events aimed at public participation and education.

Other Sources:

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen et al. 27.