The Presidential Nomination Process: Historical Development

I. “King” Caucus (1789 – early 1800s)

A. The Constitution outlines a system of electing the president -- the Electoral College -- but it does not identify how presidential candidates are to be nominated.

It was assumed that the members of the Electoral College, themselves forbidden from holding national office and thus, in theory, not tied to national interests, would choose the best presidential candidate.

B. In the first two elections, the system worked as the authors’ of the Constitution intended, and George Washington was the unanimous choice of the Electoral College.

When Washington declined to serve a third term, however, there was not anyone comparable that was seen as a unanimous choice.

C. Politics in the Congress were becoming increasingly partisan, and Federalists and Democratic-Republicans met separately to recommend a presidential candidate. Not surprisingly, their choices were different, reflecting partisan interests.

D. Recall -- members of the Electoral College are chosen as specified by the state legislature. In the early years of the nation, most state legislatures directly chose the members of the Electoral College.

As political parties developed both nationally and in the states, the selection of electors came to depend on the partisan control of the state legislature. And members of the state legislatures expected electors to vote based on their partisan views.

E. The resulting system of presidential nominations, whereby members of Congress met in party caucuses to choose a presidential nominee, and then partisan electors from the states ratified the party nominee in the general election, is known as the king caucus.

F. Problems of the king caucus

1. Violated the spirit of the Constitution: effectively, the Congress chose the President -- violation of separation of powers principle

2. Dissension within party caucuses

   a. Party members could not always agree on a nominee.

   b. Not everyone participated, some disagreed with who would be nominated, others stayed away on principle (believing that the king caucus violated the spirit of the Constitution)
G. Advantages of the King caucus

1. Members of the caucus were likely to choose someone who had national political experience, someone they had observed in the Congress, which could be seen as a wise choice.

2. Members were likely to choose someone who was nationally known and liked, thus gaining public support.

II. Decline of the King Caucus and Development of Decentralized Process of Nomination (early 1800s)

A. In the early years of the nation, a relatively small group of people dominated national politics. They had common experiences in terms of the Revolution, the Constitutional Convention, and their involvement in national government.

B. The generation of politicians that followed this group, however, did not have the same national focus and experience: they were more likely to owe their political prominence and power to state and regional areas.

C. These state and regional ties led to a decentralized mode of presidential nomination, with different states and regions nominating different candidates that represented state or regional interests.

D. The central problem with the decentralized nomination process was that there were too many candidates, and it was difficult to get different regions to mobilize around a single candidate.

Whereas the king caucus had become unrepresentative, the decentralized process attempted to represent too many diverse interests.

E. The results of the decentralized process are seen in the election of 1824, when Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, William Crawford and Henry Clay divided the Electoral College vote and no candidate received a majority.

III. Development of National Nominating Conventions (1832)

A. National nominating conventions arose as a means of nomination that provided broader representation than the king caucus had, at the same time providing a forum to unite diverse interests within the party around a single candidate.

The convention was designed to allow the party to unite behind a single presidential candidate that would gain the majority of the Electoral College votes in the general
election, rather than splitting the votes of party members among different candidates and endangering the party’s chance of winning the presidency.

B. The first national convention was held in 1831 by the Anti-Masons. This was a small third party that did not have much congressional representation, so it really used the national convention because it did not have enough influence in the Congress relative to the major parties of the time, the Democratic Republicans (who became the modern Democratic party) or the National Republicans (who became the Whigs).

C. Three months after the Anti-Mason convention, the National Republicans met to join in opposition to then-President Andrew Jackson. Like the Anti-Masons had done, the National Republicans nominated presidential and vice-presidential candidates, and they agreed on a party platform.

D. In 1832, Andrew Jackson called a national convention of the Democratic Republicans. Jackson wanted to demonstrate popular support for his presidency, and he wanted to make sure that Martin Van Buren was nominated as his running mate in the 1832 election.

E. In 1836, Jackson held a similar national convention, designed to ensure that Van Buren was nominated as his successor.

F. The Whigs did not think they had a chance to beat Van Buren in 1836, and they did not hold a national convention.

G. Since 1840, however, the Democrats and the other major party (first the Whigs and then the Republicans) have held national nominating conventions to select party nominees in presidential election years.

IV. Boss-Dominated Nominating Conventions (1836-1968)

A. Delegate selection left up to the states, with states generally accorded the same number of votes as their congressional representation.

By and large, delegates were chosen by local and state conventions, caucuses, or party committees.

B. The public, and even most party members, played no direct role in how delegates to the national convention were chosen.

C. It was essentially party leaders within each state who chose the delegates to the national convention. The effect of this was that state party leaders essentially controlled the nomination process, at the expense of rank-and-file party members or the broader public.
D. This period includes the era of party machines and bosses, often symbolized by men in smoke-filled rooms deciding who would get the nomination.

V. Progressive Reforms and Early Development (and Decline) of the Primary System (1904-1920s)

A. At the beginning of the 20th century, demands for reform of the nomination process began to be made by members of the Progressive movement, led by Robert La Follette of Wisconsin.

The Progressives wanted to take power from party bosses by having direct election of convention delegates or by having the public vote in a statewide election for party nominees.

B. In 1904, Florida became the first state to hold a statewide election for convention delegates.

By 1916, 20 states were holding primary elections to elect either the party nominees or the convention delegates.

C. After WWI, however, the number of primaries declined.

1. State party leaders had never wanted primaries because they weakened the political power of the leadership.

2. State party leaders could also criticize primaries as expensive and unsuccessful at achieving the goals of reform.

   a. Turnout in the primaries was never more than 50%, and typically it was much less, largely defeating the purpose of rank-and-file participation in the nomination process.

   b. Candidates who did not think they would do well avoided the primary process. If a candidate did not think he could win in a state, he simply did not enter the state’s primary. Conversely, if he thought he could win, he would run. This served largely to confirm the status of party front-runner -- with little actual competition for party nomination in the primaries.

3. As a consequence, the number of primaries declined. From 1936 to 1956, fewer than 40% of the convention delegates were chosen by means of primary elections.

VI. The 1968 Democratic Convention, the Beginning of Candidate-Dominated Nominating Conventions, and the Resurgence of the Primary Process (1972-present)
A. The 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago witnessed the nomination of Hubert Humphrey as the party nominee.

This was during the time of the Vietnam War, and Lyndon Johnson had decided not to run for reelection because of protest against the war, which was coming largely from members of his own party.

Humphrey, Johnson’s VP, also supported the war, and he avoided participating in state primaries because they turned out largely to be vehicles for party members to protest the war.

Humphrey was the favorite of party leaders, and while Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy (before his death), followed by George McGovern, had grass roots support among those protesting the war, this support was not sufficiently cohesive or organized to deny Humphrey the nomination.

B. There was division within the convention, and there was anti-war rioting in the streets outside.

The rioting, and the ensuing violence between police and protesters, was viewed by the national television audience tuned in to watch the convention.

C. The events at the 1968 convention led to calls for reform in the Democratic party’s process of delegate selection.

D. The McGovern-Fraser Commission was set up to undertake these reforms -- reforms largely aimed at decreasing the influence of party leaders in the process and increasing the influence of rank-and-file party members.

E. Elements of reforms:

1. Closed primaries and attempts to impose closed primaries (Note: this led to a Supreme Court case -- Democratic Party of the U.S. v. Wisconsin ex. rel. La Follette -- whereby the Court, citing the precedent of Cousins v. Wigoda, said that a state could not interfere with the national party's delegate selection process unless it demonstrated a compelling reason to do so.

In 1984, the Wisconsin Democratic party was forced to adopt a caucus system of choosing delegates. Turnout declined, and the Democrats have since exempted Wisconsin (along with Montana) from the closed primary rule. Other states, however, are not allowed to switch to open primaries.

The goal of closed primaries was to ensure that delegate selection accurately reflect the breadth of Democratic sentiment within the state -- not just the sentiment of party leaders or those who would thwart the party's success.
2. Make convention delegations more representative of party members

African Americans, women, and young people were particularly vocal in protesting underrepresentation on party councils and at the convention.

Initially, the Democratic party adopted a quota policy, whereby a delegation had to proportionally match the state population. Soon, however, the quota system was modified.

Beginning in 1980, the Democratic delegation from each state is required to be 50% women, but with respect to other groups, the only requirement is that there is an affirmative action plan in states where particular groups have been discriminated against in the past.

NOTE: states moved toward primaries because these were less likely to be challenged as being unrepresentative in the delegate selection process.

3. More open caucuses

In states using caucuses rather than primaries, there were attempts to make these caucuses much more open, e.g. public announcement of caucuses and 3/4 of delegates chosen from districts no larger than congressional districts.

F. Unintended consequences of reforms

1. Proliferation of primaries

2. Party divisiveness

3. Failure to nominate electable candidates

G. Principal changes since Post-1968 Reforms

1. Since 1972, convention delegates have voted for the presidential candidate who was chosen in their state caucus or primary.

2. Addition of Superdelegates to the Democratic Party national convention

a. Since 1984, Superdelegates have included:

   Most Democratic members of the House and Senate
   DNC members

b. The Superdelegates are pledged to no particular candidate, with the goal of restoring some element of professional peer review.
c. In theory, if no candidate had a majority of votes coming to the election, the Superdelegates could hold the balance of power.

In fact, Superdelegates have tended to vote heavily in favor of the front-runner.

d. In 1992, the Democratic party passed a rule that state party officials serving as delegates would vote to reflect their state's primary or caucus results, though they would remain nominally uncommitted.

e. In 1984, Superdelegates were 14% of the Democratic convention delegates. In 1992, they were 18%.

H. Frontloading and the Importance of Early Primaries

1. Given the importance of early outcomes in the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucus, with early winners gaining “momentum,” many states have moved their primaries earlier in the process in an attempt to gain greater influence over the party’s choice of presidential nominee.

2. As states move primaries ahead, candidates focus greatest resources on winning early primaries and attempt to win the nomination as early in the primary season as possible.

3. In January of 2002, at a meeting of the Democratic National Committee, the party voted to allow states to hold primaries as early as February 3, five weeks earlier than the party allowed in 2000. New Hampshire and Iowa would maintain the distinction of holding the first presidential primary and caucus, but other states could follow very quickly. The expectation is that 2004 will be the closest thing to a national primary that the nation has seen.

VII. Goals of the Nomination Process

A. Empower and inform voters

B. Prepare voters to vote based on adequate and accurate information

C. Produce (within each party) a single, well-qualified candidate for the general election

D. Set the stage (within each party) for a consensus-building general election campaign

E. Contribute to the quality and effectiveness of presidential leadership
F. Maintain a balance between 2 potentially conflicting goals: to be both democratic and to ensure the best choice as the leader of the nation.

Note: This outline focuses primarily on changes in the Democratic party’s nomination process since 1968 – this is because most states had Democratic party majorities in their legislatures (although this has changed, with an increase in Republican state majorities), so that state laws regarding nominations were consistent with Democratic party reforms and influenced Republican nomination procedures as well.