Presidential Elections and American Politics

Voters, Candidates, and Campaigns since 1952

Herbert B. Asher

Third Edition

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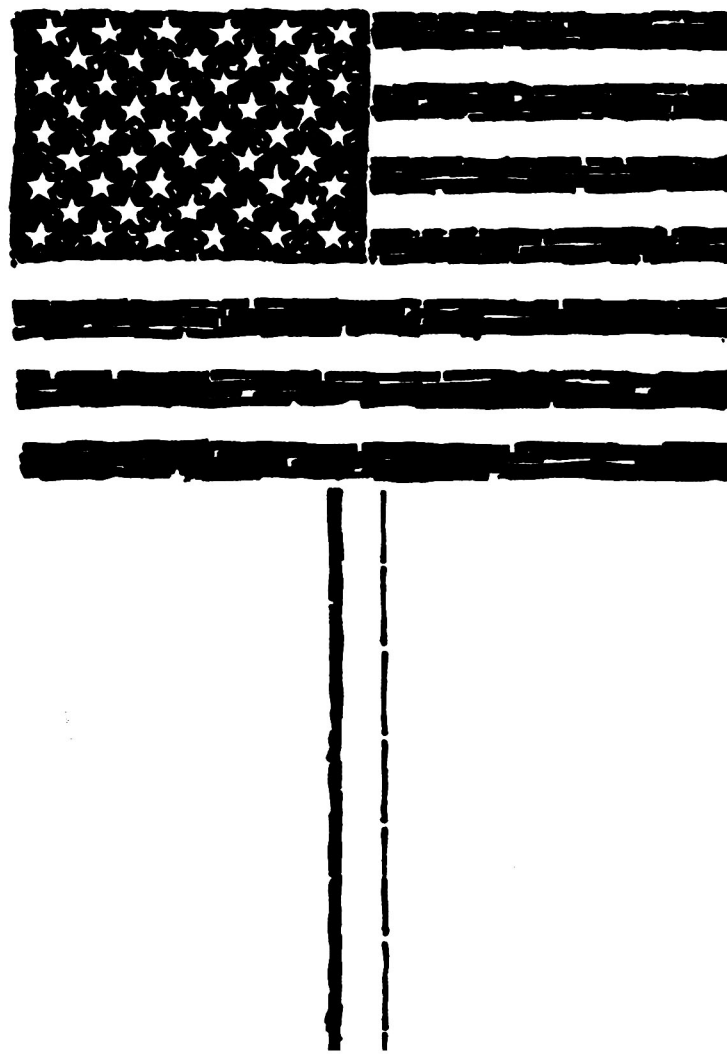

To the Memory of My Parents

PREFACE

The organizing framework used in this edition is the same as that employed in earlier versions of the book—namely, analyzing presidential elections from the dual perspective of citizens and candidates. Elections are viewed as the interplay between citizens and candidates, with each imposing constraints upon the behavior of the other. Hence, the book is organized into two major sections: the first part focuses on factors influencing citizens' voting choices, and the second focuses on conditions affecting candidates' strategic choices.

Throughout the book, I was guided by the belief that academic political scientists had a lot to say to students about the practical world of presidential politics. The presentation of the results of empirical political science research has been kept fairly straightforward, with figures and percentage tables being the most common modes of data presentation. In examining the finished product, I am quite confident that students will find the more quantitative sections readily understandable. Sections of Chapter 3, on party identification, and Chapter 4, on the issue voting controversy, may be overly detailed for some classroom purposes; thus, the instructor might selectively assign sections of these chapters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For each edition of the book, I owe a large debt to many people for their assistance. For the first edition, Susan Howell provided invaluable aid in the data analysis, while John Russell proved to be a master of the library and prepared a number of useful background papers. Other students who provided assistance at various stages of the project were Dean Lorimor, Janis Salis, Richard Schottenstein, Ronald Taylor, Jay Zenitsky, and Cliff Zukin.

The reviewers of the first edition—Donald B. Johnson, Michael R. King, Samuel C. Patterson, W. Phillips Shively, David A. Smeltzer, and Thomas Wolanin—made many significant contributions to the development of the

book, and I am pleased to acknowledge their assistance. Larry Baum, Richard Hofstetter, John Kessel, and Herb Weisberg, Ohio State colleagues, and Norman Ornstein of Catholic University served as patient and thoughtful sounding boards at a number of important points and made many helpful suggestions. Donald Van Meter, another Ohio State colleague, was a valuable source of advice about the technical aspects of writing a book. Michael Kagay and Greg Caldeira were extremely generous in providing me with their most recent results on the six partisan attitude components discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The Department of Political Science and the Polimetrics Laboratory at The Ohio State University provided numerous resources, including research assistance, computer time, Xeroxing, and typing that greatly facilitated the completion of the book.

On the second edition, Sandra Davis did a fine job helping with the data analysis and the preparation of background papers. Patti Kirst and Clyde Wilcox also assisted in the data analysis, and David Harding, Marcia Myers, and Jeff Spellerberg also prepared useful background materials. Marcia also assisted with many other aspects of the project. The Department of Political Science and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences of The Ohio State University provided many resources (some unbeknownst to them). Herb Weisberg read the revised manuscript and made numerous thoughtful suggestions. The reviewers of the first edition—Thomas Cronin, Hugh Bone, and Sam Patterson—made many recommendations about revisions from which I have profited.

For the third edition, Rusty Schussler and David Sweasey were highly competent data analysts. Other students, especially Jeff Gatten, Robin Buckley, and Michael Cover, prepared useful background materials. The Department of Political Science and the Office of the President of The Ohio State University provided many resources (some unbeknownst to them). The reviewers of the second edition—Sam Patterson, Bill Crotty, and Jim Hutter—made many insightful and informative suggestions from which I benefited tremendously.

Finally, in all three editions, I relied heavily on the national election studies conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. These studies and others were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, which, of course, bears no responsibilty for any of the analyses and interpretations presented herein.

Herbert B. Asher

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1 Presidential Elections and the American Political System

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION PROCESS

Many dates and events might be identified as the beginning of the 1984 presidential campaign. One could argue that the 1984 campaign began even before the 1980 election was held. For example, the short-lived presidential candidacies of Republican Senators Howard Baker and Robert Dole in 1980 might best be viewed as setting the stage for subsequent runs for the Presidency on their part, perhaps in 1984 or 1988.

One could also argue that the 1984 campaign began on election night in 1980 as the magnitude of the Republican victory and the Democratic defeat became known. Certainly there was ample speculation that night about which governors and senators had been elected or reelected by sufficiently impressive margins to propel them toward a presidential nomination effort in 1984. More importantly, the 1980 election results meant that the 1984 Democratic nomination would probably be a wide-open and hotly contested affair since there would be no Democratic incumbent seeking reelection and no incumbent Democratic Vice President seeking to move up to the Presidency. Likewise, the 1980 results indicated that the 1984 Republican nomination contest would be more cut-and-dried, assuming that incumbent President Ronald Reagan maintained a solid base of support in the electorate and indeed sought reelection.

Yet another starting date for the 1984 presidential race might be August 1981, a mere seven months after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan and a

time when the President's 1984 reelection plans were very much up in the air. One reason for selecting this date was that the President's program of budget and tax cuts was largely in place by then. Because the President was widely perceived as having gotten from Congress most of what he wanted in his economic program, the responsibility for the health of the economy had clearly passed into the hands of the Republican Party and its President. The Reagan economic record would most likely be a major factor shaping campaign strategies and appeals in 1984, just as the Carter economic record had been in 1980.

A second reason for selecting August 1981 as the start of the 1984 campaign was a column by David Broder published in the *Washington Post* in late August that discussed the political plans of Walter Mondale, Vice President during the Carter administration, and listed the early field of potential 1984 Democratic presidential nominees—Mondale; Senators Edward Kennedy, John Glenn, Gary Hart, and Joseph Biden; Governors Jerry Brown, John Y. Brown, and Hugh Carey; and former Carter cabinet officials Moon Landrieu, Reuben Askew, and Robert Strauss. Broder's column was important, for the press has been viewed by many as the "great mentioner," a term used by Broder himself. Being mentioned as a presidential aspirant in a column by a journalist as prestigious as David Broder provides a major boost to the credibility and viability of one's candidacy.

The point of this discussion is that the contest for the Presidency is an extremely drawn-out affair. Whereas incumbent Presidents may *formally* declare their candidacy for reelection a year to 15 months prior to the election and nonincumbents announce their candidacies up to two years before the election, the actual contest for the nomination begins even earlier, often three years before the election. Aspirants, particularly from the out party, need to test the waters early, raise funds, and build campaign organizations, particularly in such critical states as Iowa and New Hampshire, whose early delegation selection gives them disproportionate influence in determining the identity of the nominee. An illustration of the consensus that presidential candidates must start early is provided by reactions to John Glenn's efforts to capture the 1984 Democratic nomination. When Glenn announced his candidacy in April 1983, more than 18 months before the 1984 general election, many commentators and journalists speculated that Glenn had started too late and that his organizational efforts lagged dangerously behind those of his chief rivals. More importantly, these same complaints were being uttered about the Glenn campaign and its lack of a national organization back in 1982.

Hence, the presidential selection process is lengthy and seems destined to remain that way despite efforts by the political parties to compress the formal 1984 presidential primary season into a period of about three months. Candidate behavior, media emphases, state political party activities, the public opinion polls, and the characteristics of the presidential primary and caucus system seem to guarantee that the presidential race will remain a perpetual

activity even as the formal delegate selection period is shortened. This is well illustrated by the activities of the Democratic contestants for the 1984 presidential nomination.

As of mid-1983, six Democrats were seeking their party's nomination—Senator Alan Cranston of California, Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, former Vice President Walter Mondale of Minnesota, former Florida Governor Reuben Askew, Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, and Senator John Glenn of Ohio. The first four aspirants announced their candidacies in February 1983, and the last two the following April. Almost as important as the candidates who declared their candidacies were those who announced that they would not seek the nomination. Foremost among these was Senator Edward Kennedy, who disavowed a 1984 candidacy because of family obligations. As the expected front-runner, Kennedy opened up the field to the other contestants by withdrawing from the race. Also declining to run were Representative Morris Udall, a candidate for the 1976 Democratic nomination, who cited a lack of funds and a late start as his major reasons for staying out of the race, and Senator Dale Bumpers, who also cited a lack of organization and a shortage of money as the reasons for his decision.

Candidates must demonstrate their viability and credibility in a variety of ways. One such way is their ability to raise funds; as of mid-1983, Mondale and Glenn led their competition in raising money. Another indicator of credibility is one's standing in the national public opinion polls. Until April 1983, the national polls showed that Walter Mondale was the strong favorite among Democrats for their party's nomination, with John Glenn running a respectable second and the rest of the candidates lagging far behind. Polls taken after Glenn's announcement of his candidacy indicated slippage in Mondale's support and a growth in Glenn's backing, with some polls actually showing Glenn overtaking Mondale. Another poll-related measure of strength is how well one runs against likely general election opponents in trial heats, and again the polls in 1983 showed that Mondale and Glenn would run much more strongly against Reagan than would the other Democratic aspirants. Polls taken so far in advance of the primary season can fluctuate dramatically and hence are not very important in providing precise estimates of a candidate's support. However, these early polls are analyzed very closely by the media and political strategists for signs of how the presidential horse race is unfolding and for indications of which candidates are gaining or losing momentum and support. The widespread publicity given these early polls is particularly important for party activists, potential campaign contributors and volunteers, and other attentive publics who monitor the presidential campaign closely from the start.

Another measure of the early strength of candidates is endorsements. Picking up key political endorsements and the backing of major interest groups gives candidates a substantial boost, while the failure to receive certain endorsements is often viewed as a setback. Thus, when ten U.S. Representatives from California endorsed Walter Mondale in May 1983, this was widely

reported as a serious blow to Alan Cranston since he was unable to hold some of his home state support. Similarly, the intention of the AFL–CIO to adopt a unified front and endorse a candidate for the Democratic nomination early was expected to provide a major advantage for the recipient of the endorsement—presumably Walter Mondale.

There is another way in which candidates can demonstrate their strength, and that is their showing in various state party-sponsored straw polls, conventions, and the like. Typically, these events are nonbinding, with no convention delegates whatsoever being selected. Nevertheless, such events have become of great importance because of media coverage; indeed, they might quite accurately be called media events. Because of the horse race perspective that the media bring to their coverage of the presidential campaign, these early events receive much coverage as television and press personnel seek out early signs of who's ahead, who's behind, who's gaining, and who's trailing. Candidates participate in these events because the media will be there (as well as party leaders and activists from the state), and the media come because the candidates are there. Such events have increased in number since the 1976 and 1980 campaigns and have commonly been referred to as meat markets and cattle shows where puffery, narrow-based appeals to specific constituencies, and behind-the-scenes machinations dominate. Nevertheless, these pseudo-events become tests that a candidate must pass in his or her pursuit of the nomination.

For example, Massachusetts Democrats in April 1983 held a nonbinding straw poll at their state convention, at which Walter Mondale, as expected, finished first; an AFL–CIO-sponsored vote for "jobs" finished second; Alan Cranston edged out John Glenn for third; and Hart, Hollings, and Askew trailed behind. The most interesting aspect of this vote was the way in which it was reported. Mondale won, but since he was expected to win, his victory was not deemed particularly newsworthy. However, had he lost, this undoubtedly would have been viewed as a major setback for his campaign. Cranston received some press coverage for surpassing Glenn's performance, but for many observers the real loser was not John Glenn but instead Gary Hart, since Hart and Cranston were presumably vying for the same liberal voters, and Cranston had emerged victorious.

This reference to media reporting of the Massachusetts straw poll is simply one example of a more general phenomenon, namely the extensiveness and even intrusiveness of media involvement in the presidential selection process, a theme developed in Chapter 9. The presence of the media distorts the process in a variety of ways. Pseudo-events receive much more coverage than they merit. Even the formal aspects of the selection process—the caucuses and primaries that actually choose delegates—are distorted by patterns of media coverage. The early primaries and caucuses receive much more coverage than the later primaries and caucuses. Winning the Iowa caucus or the New Hampshire primary is worth much more in terms of television air time and newspaper and news magazine column inches than winning the Califor-

nia, Ohio, and New Jersey primaries, which in recent years have been held very late in the primary season.

The heavy importance given to the early states is recognized by the legislatures of these states themselves. The New Hampshire legislature regularly threatens to move its primary to one week before any other state's primary; New Hampshire does not want to lose the political and economic benefits it gains by its early primary. Likewise, the Iowa legislature in 1983 was considering a bill declaring that its precinct caucuses would be held at least eight days prior to any other state's primary or caucus. Thus, when the Democratic Party reformed its delegation selection procedures for the 1984 campaign, it granted exemptions for Iowa and New Hampshire to hold their early delegate selection, whereas all other states had to conduct their primaries and caucuses within a three-month period extending from the second Tuesday in March until the second Tuesday in June. Furthermore, as of mid-1983, many states were considering moving their primaries and caucuses to an earlier date in order to increase their influence in the process and/or to aid the candidacy of a native son. For example, the Ohio legislature was likely to change its primary date from June to May or even earlier in recognition of the fact that the nomination contest in recent years has effectively concluded before June and in the hope that an earlier primary would be beneficial to the candidacy of its home state favorite, John Glenn.

It may be the case that the early states will lose some of their importance in 1984 because of Democratic Party efforts to shorten the delegate selection season. Whereas in the past a candidate had a month between the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary to exploit gains in Iowa or to regroup after losses, in 1984 New Hampshire followed Iowa by a week and overall more than a third of the delegates were selected in the first weeks of the selection period. In the past the primaries unfolded in a more leisurely fashion, but in 1984 candidates had to be prepared early on to contest many states in rapid succession.

Thus, we now have a presidential selection system that is lengthy, exhausting, and overly media dependent. Moreover, the 1984 reforms may have exacerbated these characteristics. Although the reforms may serve to lessen the importance of Iowa and New Hampshire, they have forced candidates to begin even earlier so that they would be prepared in 1984 to contest a large number of states in a shorter period of time. We therefore have the paradoxical situation that a shortening of the formal delegation selection process has actually lengthened the contest for the Presidency.

Indeed, the 1984 nomination system may be less desirable than its predecessors in other ways. As much as observers complained about the pre-1984 system, most agreed that it had the virtue of allowing a relatively unknown candidate such as George McGovern in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 to emerge from the pack on the basis of strong early showings in Iowa, New Hampshire, and other states. The more leisurely pace of the pre-1984 system allowed dark horse candidates to devote most of their time and money to