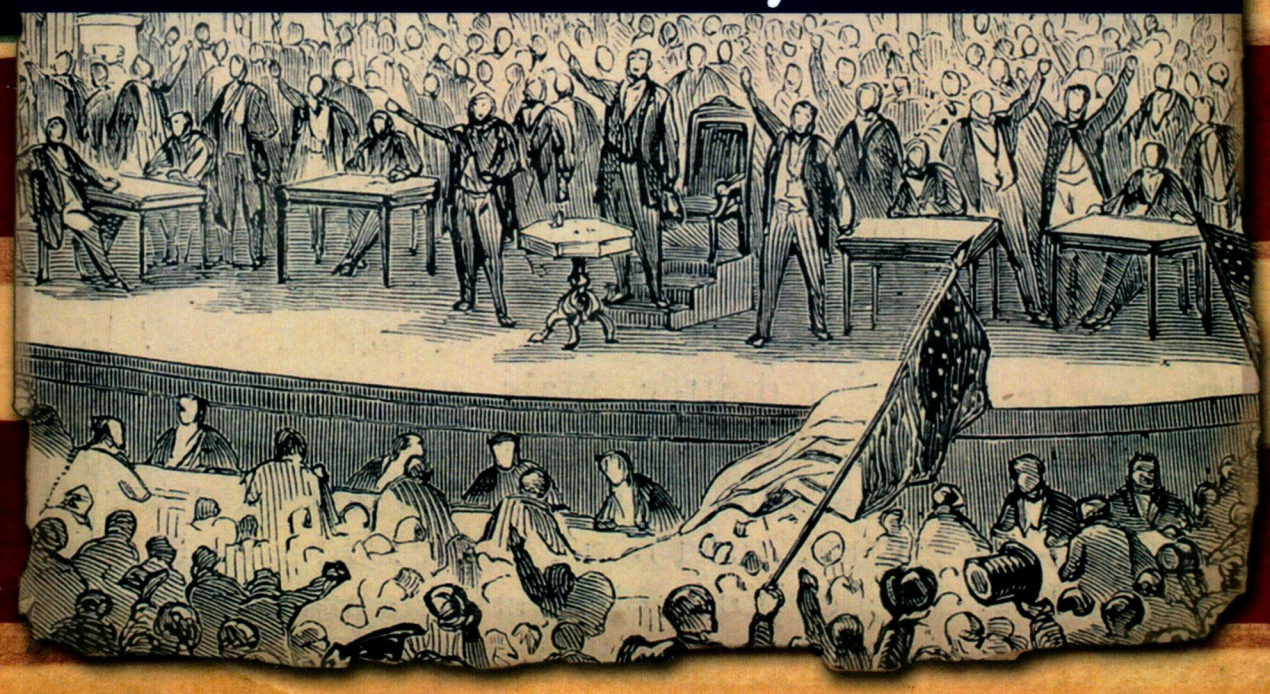
The First American Political Conventions

Transforming Presidential Nominations, 1832–1872

Stan M. Haynes



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The First American Political Conventions

To my wife, Beth, and my son, Nate,
who over the years have accompanied me on tours of
what we refer to as "DPHs" (dead presidents' houses)
and who have patiently explored with me
many other lesser known and almost forgotten places
where someone once did something of note.

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Stan M. Haynes • Ellicott City, Maryland

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Preface

I consider the true policy of the friends of republican principles to send delegates, fresh from the people, to a general convention, for the purpose of selecting candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency....— President Andrew Jackson, March 17, 1835

They are, in many ways, still the focal point of the modern American presidential campaign. Candidates work for months and years, for one purpose — to win delegates pledged to support them at their party's presidential nominating convention. They raise millions of dollars, flood the airwaves with campaign commercials, and travel incessantly from state to state to campaign in primaries and caucuses, all leading up to their party's midsummer moment in the spotlight. Party officials, officeholders, delegates, the media, and onlookers flood into the convention city. The modern convention is a four-day, carefully choreographed prime time television event designed to portray the party and its candidate for the presidency in the most favorable light. A dramatic roll call of the states seals the nomination, and the pinnacle of excitement is reached on the convention's last night with, hopefully, a spellbinding acceptance speech by the party's new standard-bearer. Balloons and confetti drop from the rafters of enormous convention arenas, falling on a sea of silly hats being worn by otherwise respectable-looking people. While a successful convention does not guarantee victory in the November general election, an unsuccessful one almost always guarantees a loss.

The orderly transfer of political power is necessary for the lasting existence of a democracy. For almost two centuries, in good times and in bad, Americans have relied upon political conventions to provide the nation with choices for new leadership. These gatherings, throughout their history, have exhibited both frivolity and weightiness. Delegates who dance in conga lines while blowing kazoos decide whose finger could launch nuclear weapons. As one commentator has noted, "It is hard not to wonder whether the American presidential nominating convention, by its very informality, by its confident and impromptu assumption of such awesome power, may not symbolize some larger and more ephemeral quality of the American experience than is contained within the diameter of simple politics."[1] Emotions at conventions run the gamut from boredom to excitement, from the routine to the unexpected. H. L. Mencken, a journalist and a critical observer of politics and life during the first half of the twentieth century, after sitting through many a convention, commented, that "There is something about a national convention that makes it as fascinating as a revival or a hanging....

One sits through long sessions wishing heartily that all the delegates and alternates were dead and in hell — and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginable, exhilarating and preposterous that one lives a glorious year in an hour."[2]

Where did these creatures, these conventions, come from? Who conceived them, where were they born, and how have they developed over time? This book will attempt to answer these questions. The short answer is that political conventions were created during the second generation of the young United States as a more democratic way of selecting nominees for the presidency. Surprisingly, it was not the major political parties of the era but an obscure and now largely forgotten third-party movement that held the first presidential nominating convention during the campaign of 1832. Since then, conventions have been a fixture of the American political process. Baltimore, Maryland, hosted the first conventions and had a virtual monopoly on these quadrennial gatherings for a generation. In the presidential elections held between 1832 and 1864, a dozen major party conventions were held in Baltimore, compared to only two each in Chicago and Philadelphia, and one each in Harrisburg, Cincinnati, and Charleston.

The story of the origin and development of America's political conventions is also the story of the generation that spanned the middle third of the nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln stand as two pillars at its beginning and near its end. Both were strong presidents, some would say too strong, and both were reelected to second terms. In between them, eight men sat in the presidential chair, each serving only partial or single terms. Two, William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor, died in office and their terms were completed by their respective vice presidents, John Tyler and Millard Fillmore, who were not elected in their own right. The four others — Martin Van Buren, James K. Polk, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan — served their four-year terms and were out of office, with only Van Buren winning his party's nomination to seek a second term. There is not a candidate for Mount Rushmore among them. Likewise, the two presidents immediately following the Civil War, Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant, did not fare much better. Of these ten, arguably only Polk had a successful presidency, but his was one which many believe created more problems than it solved.

These were the first men who took office as the products of the new system for selecting presidential candidates that began in the 1830s, the presidential nominating convention. By this time, the first American party system, the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists, had dissolved. The second party system can properly be termed the Jacksonians versus the Anti-Jacksonians, as Andrew Jackson's Democratic Party became the dominant political force of the era, opposed first by the National Republicans, then by the Whigs and, finally, by the Republican Party. Analysis of the political conventions of this generation reveals, not only the origin and development of the process by which America has, for nearly two hundred years, picked the men who would be president, but also sheds light on the political issues that dominated one of the least studied eras of American history.

At the beginning of this era, presidential elections were fought mainly over economic issues and the scope of power of the federal government. The National Republicans and, later, the Whigs, favored federal expenditures for internal improvements, such as roads and canals, and a national bank to foster economic development. The Democrats opposed both internal improvements and a national bank as being unconstitutional. Slavery was always an area of disagreement between North and South, but both major parties had cross-sectional appeal and neither was interested in changing the status quo of slavery in the existing states. After

the massive additional territory that the United States gained in the 1840s as a result of the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War, however, the issue of whether or not to expand slavery into the new territories came to dominate political debate and presidential campaigns. The nominating conventions of both political parties came to focus on slavery-related issues — support for or opposition to Texas annexation, the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and popular sovereignty. So long as the nation's major political parties drew their support from both the North and South, the nation survived. When the bonds between the Northern and Southern wings of the major parties dissolved, so did the nation.

As with the making of laws and sausages, the process of making a president is often not pretty. As the procedures of the presidential nominating conventions were created and became standardized over a generation, these gatherings of the nation's political activists showed the best and worst of men. There was great oratory and not-so-great oratory. Unwise rules were adopted, which later came to be honored as precedent. The conventions at times demonstrated compromise for the sake of country and party, but also had their share of political dirty tricks and double-crossing. There were grand processions through the streets of the convention cities, and there was tragedy on the same streets. Delegates from different sections of the country sometimes came to work together as brothers; sometimes they physically assaulted one another. Crowds gathered; pickpockets thrived. There were outdoor evening rallies held on elaborate stages drenched in gaslight, with speeches being drowned out by supporters of rival candidates. There was action, drama, and conflict. For anyone who loves history, or who loves politics, the story of the nation's first generation of political conventions is a fascinating one.

Chapter 1

From Caucuses to Conventions

I would rather learn that the halls of congress were converted into common brothels, than that caucuses of the description stated should be held in them.—Hezekiah Niles, 1822

Since the Bush-Gore election of 2000, most Americans know that the president of the United States is not elected by the popular vote of the people but, rather, is elected by a majority vote of the Electoral College. Today, all the electoral votes of a state are cast for the candidate who wins the majority of the popular vote in that state.[1] What is less known is that the tying of a state's Electoral College votes to the popular vote of the people in that state, as well as the majority-takes-all rule, is nowhere contained in the Constitution of the United States. The states, using the discretion given to them under the Constitution, have chosen to use the popular vote as the method of selecting electors to the Electoral College and have adopted the majority-takes-all rule as a way to increase their power by casting their electoral votes as a block.[2] The system that we operate under today for electing the president is far different from the one envisioned by the founding fathers. Under the Constitution, a presidential election, as we know it, is not required, or necessary, and was likely never anticipated by the founding fathers.

The Constitution provides that "each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature there of may direct, a Number of Electors" equal to that state's total number of members in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. The electors are to meet in their respective states, and are given two votes each, of which "one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves."[3] The person receiving the votes of the majority of the electors becomes the president. The only other requirement under the Constitution is that Congress can determine the time frame for the states to choose their electors, but the day on which their votes are counted shall be the same throughout the country.[4] Despite well-deserved reverence for the Constitution, its provisions for the election of the president have not escaped criticism. It has been said that "no other part of the great charter of the country has failed so completely to fulfill the intention of the fathers; has by its ambiguity of language, given rise to more, or more perplexing disputes; or been the occasion of more numerous and varied attempts at amendment."[5]

The choice of George Washington as the first president of the United States was easy. The man who was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen"[6] was

the unanimous choice of the Electoral College for president in 1789 and again in 1792. When Washington decided to voluntarily relinquish power after two four-year terms (one of his greatest legacies), there was no formal process to choose candidates as his successor. The Constitution prescribed only the last stage of this process, the election of the president by the casting of votes in the Electoral College. The process of nominating candidates whose names would be before the Electoral College was not specified and was open to interpretation.

The system likely envisioned by the founding fathers was that the two processes — nominating and electing — would be merged and that both would be performed by the Electoral College. Although the Constitution gave each elector two votes, one of their votes had to be for someone from a different state than the elector. Anticipating that many electors would cast one of their votes for a "favorite son" candidate from their own state, the founding fathers likely intended this process to result in the person receiving the most "second choice" votes becoming the president. The idea of the framers of the Constitution was that each state would select its "most capable individuals" as electors, who would meet and choose "the wisest and most virtuous member of the natural aristocracy ... who should serve as president." The runner-up in this talent search for wisdom and virtuosity would become the vice president.[7] But the founding fathers did not foresee the rise of political parties. With the development of political parties, a systematic method of nomination of a single candidate by the party was needed. Otherwise, votes in the Electoral College would be scattered among several candidates and it would be unlikely that one could attain the majority vote of electors required to win the presidency.

Into this void jumped members of Congress, and the congressional caucus system for nominating presidential candidates was created. The caucus consisted of each party's elected members of Congress in the House of Representatives and in the Senate gathered together for a single meeting held at the end of the congressional session in the spring of the presidential election year. A vote was taken and the winner became the party's presidential candidate. It was a simple and easy way to pick a nominee, but gave the people no voice in the selection of presidential candidates. This system lasted for a generation after George Washington left the presidency.

The first congressional nominating caucus was held in 1796 by the Anti-Federalists, or Republicans, and they nominated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr as their two candidates for the Electoral College. The Federalists did not hold a formal caucus that year but, through various meetings, it was decided that their candidates would be John Adams and Thomas Pinckney. Of the sixteen states in the Union in 1796, half gave the people no direct vote in choosing electors. In those states, the electors were chosen by the state legislatures. This number varied with each election but, for the first generation of American presidential elections, a substantial number of states, sometimes a majority, had their presidential electors chosen by their state legislatures, rather than by a majority vote of the people.[8] In 1796, Adams won in the Electoral College with 71 electoral votes, to 68 for Jefferson, 59 for Pinckney, 30 for Burr, and various scattered votes.[9] Under the Constitution, Adams became the president and the second-place finisher, Jefferson, became the vice president.

The next election in 1800 showed the fundamental flaws of the Electoral College system as established by the founding fathers when operating in the context of political parties. In that year, the Republicans, through their party's congressional caucus, again nominated Jefferson and Burr as their candidates. A similar caucus of the Federalist members of Congress nominated the incumbent president, John Adams, and Charles Pinckney of South Carolina. While it was clear to all that Adams and Jefferson were the candidates for the presidency, and

that Burr and Pinckney were the candidates for the vice presidency, there was nothing in the Constitution allowing electors to cast their two votes for specific offices.[10] Of the sixteen states in the Union in 1800, only five (Rhode Island, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky) held popular elections to choose electors; electors were chosen by the state legislatures in the remaining eleven states. The result was an electoral fiasco. The two Republican candidates, Jefferson and Burr, tied for the lead with 73 electoral votes each. The Federalists apparently foresaw the likelihood of a tie if all of their electors voted for their two caucus-nominated candidates and had one of their electors cast a vote for John Jay of New York, which gave Adams, with 65 electoral votes, one more than his would-be vice president, Pinckney.[11] The tied election was then moved, under the Constitution, to the House of Representatives where, after thirty-six ballots, Jefferson finally prevailed over the scheming Burr and only after Jefferson's political archenemy, Alexander Hamilton, an ardent Federalist, let it be known that he favored the Virginian over the character-challenged New Yorker. Burr did not forget this intervention by Hamilton. Within four years, he would kill Hamilton in a duel.

After the election of 1800, both the Electoral College system and the congressional caucus system came under attack. With respect to the Electoral College, Congress passed, and the states ratified, the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution. It was enacted in June 1804, in time for the next election. This amendment fixed the electoral tie problem among candidates of the same party that occurred with Jefferson and Burr. Henceforth, each elector was required to designate which of his two votes was for president and which was for vice president.[12] The problems with the caucus system were not so readily changed, although calls for reform began to be heard. Who gave a party's members of Congress the right to select its nominees for the presidency? There was no constitutional basis for the system. It was, in a word, un–American. The caucus system gave the people no direct role in choosing candidates for the presidency and created presidents who, once in office, were totally beholden to their party's members of Congress for their nomination and election.[13] Citizens who lived in congressional districts with a congressman from the political party opposing their own had no representation in the process. Why should members of the national legislature be permitted to choose nominees for the national executive? Was not the Constitution intended to establish a system of checks and balances, and of separation of powers? Moreover, attendance at caucuses by members of Congress was never overwhelming, with an average turnout of less than seventy-five percent. Frequently, a caucus was called by, and run by, the friends and colleagues of the perceived front-runner for the nomination, and supporters of the other candidates would simply boycott the caucus to show their displeasure.[14] As one critic of the caucus system queried:

> Under what authority did these men pretend to dictate their nominations? ... Did they receive six dollars per day [the daily rate of pay for members of Congress] for the double purpose of caucusing and legislating? Do we send members of Congress to cabal once every four years for president? Or are we arrived at such a pitch of Congressional influence that what they decide is binding in the United States? Is there any paragraph in the Constitution which gives them such an authority, or even countenances such a proceeding? After Congress have accomplished their legislative business, have they a right to dictate the choice of an executive?[15]

Throughout the country, the caucus system came to be viewed as Washington insiders picking the president with no regard for the views of the people. Hezekiah Niles of the *Niles Weekly Register*, a weekly newspaper published in Baltimore that was a compendium of the nation's news, editorialized that it would be preferable to have the halls of Congress "converted into common brothels" than for them to be used for the tainted caucuses.[16]

Despite criticism, the caucus system continued over the next several elections. In 1816,

calls for reform increased after an extremely close vote in the Republican caucus. James Monroe of Virginia received sixty-five votes, while William Crawford of Georgia received fifty-four. Monroe, the sitting secretary of state, was far more popular and well known nationally, and many believed that the supporters of Crawford in Congress had manipulated the calling and timing of the caucus in a nearly successful attempt to steal the nomination.[17] Monroe won the election and proved to be such a popular president that, in 1820, he had competition neither inside nor outside of his party and he ran unopposed for reelection. No formal caucus was held, nor needed, that year. Monroe became, and still is, the only president other than Washington to run unopposed for reelection.

In 1824, Crawford finally won the nomination of the Republican caucus for president but by then the process was so discredited that it was a pyrrhic victory. Supporters of rival candidates John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay boycotted the caucus and, of the approximately 260 Republican members of Congress, only about twenty-five percent attended the caucus meeting, where Crawford won sixty of the sixty-eight votes cast. In the week following the caucus, a Baltimore newspaper expressed its disdain:

> The poor little political bird of ominous note and plumage, denominated a CAUCUS, was hatched at Washington on Saturday last.... It is now running around like a pullet, in a forlorn and sickly state. Reader, have you ever seen a chicken directly after it was hatched, creeping about with a bit of egg shell sticking to its back? This is a just representation of this poor forlorn Congressional caucus. The sickly thing is to be fed, cherished, pampered for a week, when it is fondly hoped that it will be enabled to cry the name of Crawford, Crawford, Crawford.[18]

As a result, what was then referred to as the Democratic-Republican Party fielded three candidates in the election of 1824 — Crawford, Adams and Clay — who competed against Andrew Jackson, the candidate of the emerging Democratic Party. The trio split their party's votes. Jackson won a plurality of the popular votes, but did not gain a majority in the Electoral College. As in the election of 1800, under the Constitution, the election went to the House of Representatives, where each state was given one vote.[19] There, Adams prevailed, over outraged cries by Jackson and his supporters that a "corrupt bargain" had been struck between Adams and Clay — an endorsement in exchange for an alleged promise of the top cabinet post. Clay had thrown his support to Adams and, within weeks, was named the latter's secretary of state, the office which was then perceived as the stepping-stone to the presidency.

After the fiasco of 1824, the caucus system was dead. But what to replace it with? There began to be calls for national conventions to nominate candidates for the presidency. In 1822, a leading newspaper promoted a new system whereby the people would:

> [C]hoose delegates in all the States, to meet at some central place ... to select and recommend some suitable person for the Presidency.
>
> The delegates so chosen, must be specifically instructed by their respective States, whom to support; and the delegates so chosen must, in no case, be incumbents (or expectants) of office.
>
> That the result of the meeting of delegates be published for the consideration of the American people.
>
> That, notwithstanding any selection or recommendation by a convention of delegates, the electors when chosen, must vote independently of any previous recommendation or selection.
>
> That, from this combined expression of the public sentiment, first by delegates chosen to select and recommend, and, second by electors chosen to elect, no doubt the best and most honest selection and election would result.[20]

After a brief experiment with nominations of presidential candidates being made by various state legislatures, which Andrew Jackson used to his advantage in 1828, the era of national

conventions for the nomination of candidates for the presidency began in the election cycle of 1832 and has continued ever since. This new process, unlike the congressional caucuses, would not be played out in Washington, the seat of the federal government. Interestingly, in what has now been almost two centuries of American presidential nominating conventions, no major political party has ever held its convention in Washington. The concept of "running against Washington" and playing to the country's anti–"inside the Beltway" mentality existed long before there was a paved Capital Beltway ringing the Federal City. Still, Washington politicians of the 1830s were not about to totally relinquish their control over president-making. They were, "like their species in all times, quick to detect the trend of popular sentiment and to get in step with it. While professedly yielding to the people's desires, they were already planning to get control of the new system for their own purposes."[21] If not in Washington, where would these conventions be held?

The first political conventions would not be held in New York City, the nation's most populous city and its financial center, nor would they be held in Philadelphia, the birthplace of the nation and of the Constitution. They would not be held in Boston, which had been the political powder keg of the country and where the first shots of the American Revolution had been fired. They would not rotate from city to city. Instead, with very few exceptions, the new process for selecting the president of the United States would be developed and played out in the meeting halls, hotels, taverns, and streets of Baltimore, a city that, theretofore, had been a mere onlooker to the national political scene. Beginning with the 1832 election and continuing for the next generation, every four years the nation's attention focused on Maryland, "the Old Line State," and the road to the White House passed through Baltimore.

Chapter 2

The Monumental City

To Baltimore — the Monumental City — may the days of her safety be as prosperous and happy as the days of her danger have been trying and triumphant!
—President John Quincy Adams, 1827

As the 1830s dawned, Baltimore, with a population of approximately 80,000, was the third largest city in the still young United States, ranking behind New York and Philadelphia and just ahead of Boston. New York was more than twice as large as Baltimore, with just over 200,000 people. To a large extent, the city's economy at the time was based on the processing of grain into flour and in exporting flour by sea to the rest of the country and to Europe.[1] It has been said that Baltimore "was built by flour and war."[2] Baltimore was well known and respected throughout the country for successfully repelling the British army during the War of 1812. Still, it is surprising that Baltimore in the early 1830s was about to become the political center of the nation in selecting its president. Baltimore and, for that matter, the state of Maryland, had not been at the forefront of political discussion and debate in the first generation of the new republic. No national political leaders had emerged from Maryland and the state was not closely identified with a particular political party.

What Baltimore lacked in not being at the center of political activity it made up for by being at the geographic center of the country and by its proximity to Washington, D.C., located only forty miles to its south. It also had ease of transportation, both by land and by sea. As a large city, Baltimore had the hotels and meeting halls necessary to support a political convention. Despite this, the choice of Baltimore for political conventions was not a foregone conclusion. Philadelphia was also centrally located and had many of the same advantages as Baltimore. If proximity to Washington was the main criterion for the location of presidential nominating conventions, other cities, such as Wilmington, Richmond, and Harrisburg, all qualified. Each of these cities lacked, however, the combination of location, transportation, and facilities that made Baltimore America's first city of choice for conventions.

Known then and now as the "Monumental City," Baltimore acquired its famous nickname during a visit by the sixth president of the United States, John Quincy Adams. The year 1827 had not been a good one for the dour and disciplined New Englander, neither professionally nor personally. His proposals for federally financed internal improvements and other policy initiatives were blocked in Congress by the increasingly powerful and vocal supporters of