

## INTRODUCTION

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# The Hidden Struggle: Reform Politics, Institutional Change, and the Circulation of Elites, 1968–1972

IN WHICH, the extent of the change in the mechanics of presidential selection as a result of reform politics is highlighted; the implications of this institutional change for the dominant groups within the dominant party in American national politics are emphasized; and the continuing consequences of what began as a conflict between opposing coalitions of Democratic elites are suggested. AND IN WHICH, the major chronological divisions within the historical narrative are outlined; the themes of the book—reform politics, institutional change, and the circulation of elites—are introduced; and the architecture of the chapters developing both this historical account and these basic themes is presented.

ON JANUARY 24, 1972, Iowa Democrats assembled in local precinct meetings to begin selecting a state delegation to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. In doing so, they inaugurated a new era in American presidential politics. The handful among the eligibles who turned out in a gradually intensifying snowstorm are not likely to enter the history books for their political clairvoyance. Their favorite, Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, was to be knocked from the nomination race almost exactly three months after they offered him his initial delegate support. But by virtue of their January date for delegate selection, Iowa Democrats did become the first participants in a revamped process of presidential nomination, a process which had undergone a collection of reforms so extensive as to be effectively unprecedented in American history.

The sheer amount of formal change in the mechanics of delegate selection between 1968 and 1972, quite apart from its practical impact on presidential

politics and on a crucial, continuing group of national political actors, marked this period as noteworthy. Not surprisingly, structural change of this magnitude did not progress in an orderly and methodical manner, with opponents bowing to a superior virtue and then rushing to join the cause. Instead, it had a politics all its own. This book is the story of that other politics, the politics of Democratic party reform.

The reform narrative which constitutes the largest single element of the book attempts a careful reconstruction of internal party politics between 1968 and 1972. But this chronicle is presented to explain the arrival of a revolutionary change in the mechanics of presidential selection, the greatest systematically planned and centrally imposed shift in the institutions of delegate selection in all of American history. This institutional change, in turn, is linked continually to the rise of a new coalition of Democratic elites and to the possibility that this aspiring coalition has replaced an older, established version as the dominant force in the majority party in American national politics. As a result, the book, at its maximum extension, is an effort to portray the reshaping of political life in modern America, the rise of the institutional arrangements and specialized actors which differentiate this politics from its predecessors and which characterize it into the foreseeable future.

The underlying chronicle divides almost naturally into a politics of recommendation, where the substance of party reform was at issue, and a politics of implementation, where the fate of recommended reforms was determined. The book, of course, follows this division. The bruising National Convention of 1968 confronted the Democrats with a crisis, to which a national reform commission was a plausible response (chapter 1). During what became the politics of recommendation, this commission provided a forum within which diverse individuals and organizations could contend over the proper definition of party reform (chapters 2–8). The framing of an aggressive reform document by the victors in this struggle then contributed an extended, intricate, and far more consequential politics of implementation—where these recommendations were successfully converted into real institutions of delegate selection, with the potential for altering not just presidential politics but national politics more generally (chapters 9–18).

The reconstruction of these developments proceeds month by month, week by week, and sometimes almost minute by minute. Several considerations prompted this approach. At bottom, the change itself—the shift in the institutions of presidential selection and in the associated circle of specialized actors for national politics—was so quiet, so nearly invisible, that most observers missed it as it arrived. In the absence of a detailed account, they can—perhaps—be excused for having overlooked its revolutionary character,

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although the absence of such an account also made it difficult to perceive the immediate implications of this change, which were rooted in the politics producing it. Beyond that, elite activities—conversations, memoranda, understandings, “deals”—necessarily constitute the facts of the case, and the accuracy of their interpretation can be judged only when they are presented in careful detail. The claims to be made for the impact of these (essentially elite) events are substantial, both theoretically and practically. The account supporting these claims must be dense enough, rich enough, and tightly enough organized to bear them out.

For many, this reform narrative itself will be of primary interest. For them, it is structured as a contemporary historical record, following important developments in recent American history and the forces and agents, publicized and obscure, which contributed to them. At the same time, this organized factual account—and numerous subaccounts—can surely be applied to the intellectual concerns of individual readers, over and above the applications suggested by the author. Finally, the central narrative attempts to share the inherent fascination of political maneuvers closely observed and the intermittent high drama of momentous events unfolding.

The book, however, aspires to more than that. For the narrative is developed not just around the stages of reform politics but around two other organizing concepts. The first is institutional change. The second is the circulation of elites. Both are elaborated, in part, to make the narrative more comprehensible and to emphasize the importance of the events which compose it. Even here, the near-invisibility of many of these events probably adds to the value of these two central concepts. But the two notions are utilized primarily to comment upon events as they unfold and to place their cumulative impact—this particular set of institutional changes, this particular example of elite circulation—in the context of similar grand shifts in the political lives of other societies.

The formal changes in the structure, rules, and procedures of delegate selection, and hence presidential nomination, resulting from reform politics within the Democratic party between 1968 and 1972 were themselves hidden from many observers. Yet they could be objectively cataloged, and the catalog possesses an undeniable—a historic—sweep. In turn, these formal changes promised to elicit extensively altered practical responses from major political actors. As a result, they constitute a rare case of concentrated, comprehensive, institutional change.

A student of the mechanics of major-party presidential nominations must look as far back as the early 1900s, when presidential primaries were introduced, to find procedural innovations that were at all comparable. Nothing in the interim rivals the main institutional creations of either period. Never-

theless, the raw number of new rules for delegate selection devised between 1968 and 1972 easily surpassed the counterpart number for 1908 to 1912, the last great burst of nomination reform.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, that same student must really look as far back as the 1830s, when national party conventions were themselves invented, to find changes of a comparable intensity, of a comparable institutional reach.

In preparation for the Democratic National Convention of 1831, every state needed to design a procedure for delegate selection, and most such designs differed sharply from previous state practice.<sup>2</sup> In preparation for the Democratic National Convention of 1972, every state was forced to amend the rules governing its delegate selection, and most did so in fundamental ways, to the point where half abandoned the basic institutional device which they had used only four years before.<sup>3</sup> No national convention in the interim, from 1831 to 1972, could have met these same standards for the scope of change in the matrix of institutions for delegate selection. No national convention, ever, could have met these standards for the scope of centrally planned, centrally initiated change, much less of self-conscious, deliberate "reform."

The general public perception of this change—that there were significantly more presidential primaries in 1972 than there had been in 1968—was accurate, but notably incomplete. The balance between primary and convention systems for selecting delegates had indeed shifted, but so had the types of primaries which were permitted or proscribed, the types of party conventions which were condoned or banned, the strictures under which presidential contenders could obtain delegates from either primaries or conventions, and even the desired characteristics of these delegates themselves. Along the way, and perhaps most crucially, the official party had been *erased* from what was still nominally the party's nomination process.

The successful implementation of a sweeping reform package—centrally planned and imposed, institutionally comprehensive and consistent, geographically comprehensive as well—almost guaranteed that the nomination process would *operate* differently afterward. The magnitude of this difference could not be described with certainty at the time these reforms were implemented. Actual political tests, subsequent and varied, would determine that. Nevertheless, the general areas where this new presidential politics would differ from the old were discernible by the time these structural reforms had been put into place; they were, indeed, inherent in the organizational character, as well as the breadth and depth, of these changes.

The critical resources for nomination politicking, for example, were sure to be revalued by reform rules with this much institutional reach. In consequence, the identity of those who held these resources, the key participants,

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would predictably be affected. The character of the public issues which could be useful to a nomination campaign was presumably responsive to the mechanics of the nomination process, and not just to the tenor of the times. The type of candidate who would emerge and prosper in this new environment would likely differ, too. In short, the entire fabric of presidential politics seemed fated, or doomed, to be reshaped in tandem with these more formal alterations.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even before these practical effects had been realized, the undeniable result—the irreducible core of this institutional change—was the imposition of extensive, externally generated, theoretically consistent reforms, inimical to the process of delegate selection and presidential nomination as it had previously been conducted by the official party. Moreover, what was thus a critical specific event in the history of American politics was also, in a more abstract sense, only one more example of a critical, recurring event in the lives of political societies generally: the circulation of elites, the replacement of one group of specialized political actors with another of noticeably different origins, values, and ways of pursuing politics.<sup>5</sup>

The period from 1968 to 1972 saw the rise of an alternative coalition of Democratic elites, different in social background, political experience, and policy preference from the coalition which had previously dominated the national Democratic party. The ability of this aspiring, alternative, Democratic coalition to use reform politics and institutional change to unseat and replace the traditional, established coalition, and the possibility that this substitution was a permanent feature of the political landscape, would, by themselves, have marked this period as worthy of investigation. Serious attempts at comprehensive replacement of political elites are rare. Successful attempts are rarer still. Realized, they constitute a special opportunity to examine the process of elite circulation.

Ranged on one side in this dispute was the orthodox Democratic coalition, composed of the regular party and its associated interests. The heart of the regular party was actually those state parties which still possessed old-fashioned party organization, but the regular coalition extended to the dominant faction within party officialdom in most states across the nation. The core of its associated interests was organized labor, although the coalition also included, more ambivalently, the major civil rights organizations.

Ranged on the other side was an alternative Democratic coalition, composed of party reformers old and new, and *their* associated interests. The heart of this reform movement was the new wave of party insurgents who had surfaced in the losing nomination campaigns of 1968, but its troops were the organized reform factions which existed within many regular parties across

the country, and the movement drew some significant support from the official party leadership in states with a more volunteer-based politics. The core of its associated interests were the liberal interest groups and the explicit reform organizations, although the alternative coalition came to include the major feminist organizations, too.

The triumph of this alternative coalition of Democratic elites over its orthodox, established counterpart—aided by the character of reform politics and by the institutional change which followed from it—was a major event in its own right. That triumph was clear and uncompromised; it occurred within the dominant party in American national politics; it resulted in part from a major change in political institutions and was in part “institutionalized” by it.

Yet there was reason to believe that this immediate and concrete victory would yield even broader consequences over the long run. For besides the specific social backgrounds, formative political experiences, and policy goals which separated the orthodox Democratic coalition from its aspiring replacement, there were additional differences of a still more fundamental sort, and these threatened to remain as long as the institutions which had arrived with them survived, that is, even if the alternative Democratic coalition, as constituted in the year of 1972, did not.

These differences could be summarized with the observation that the old coalition was based in blue-collar constituencies, while the newer version was white-collar from top to bottom. But that difference implied not just a different set of social attachments but a different set of practical skills, skills now necessary to succeed in politics. This meant, most fundamentally, that the elite replacement associated with this sweeping institutional change might not end with the triumph of this particular reform coalition but might go on to alter the continuing character of national Democratic elites and perhaps, if the institutions of reform spread, the character of national elites within the Republican party as well.

Even if these grand changes did not come to pass, the success of a sweeping movement for Democratic party reform in the period from 1968 to 1972, as consolidated over the succeeding decade, was both evidence that one cadre of party figures had been defeated by another *and* impetus for an extended replacement along the same lines. And because convention delegates and campaign staff are integral to the selection of American presidents and because presidents are able to influence the nature of the elites in the larger institutionalized presidency, in the federal executive branch, and even in the federal judiciary, the ramifications of this triumph were likely, in short order, to be felt throughout American government.

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Wide-ranging shifts in the practical character of presidential politics, and attendant shifts in critical elite strata, do not occur often in the life of any nation, and American political life proves no exception. But then, neither do formal changes of the magnitude occurring between 1968 and 1972 within the national Democratic party. Perhaps those facts alone are sufficient to justify a detailed chronicle of the reform politics behind them.

Almost all of this chronicle has been developed from extended interviews with the principal participants and from associated archival materials—memoranda, correspondence, drafts and counterdrafts. The participants were remarkably ready to talk, easily and at length; more than 120 of them contributed personal interviews. Their archival traces were unusually rich, thanks in part to their own concern with history and in part to serendipitous historical events. Whenever possible—and this proved feasible to a surprising extent—the principal actors, or at least their personal records, are permitted to speak for themselves. This is intended to provide a sense of their actions from the perspective of the participants, to contribute an additional basis for evaluating the outcome of those actions, and to conjure up the flavor, the emotional and contextual richness, of these events as they happened.

This account has, of course, been focused on the politics producing a revolutionary set of reform recommendations and on the politics leading to the concrete implementation of these abstract standards. Yet along the way, the story touches on matters as diverse as the means by which practical persons interpret abstract change, the way in which ideologies and even slogans can acquire concrete political influence, the reasons why the news media present an organizationally biased view of party politics, the role that social groups and social ties play in constructing political reality, and the possibility that differential patterns of attention to political affairs, almost alone, can produce a changed political world with changed prospects for most participants.

Such a book, combining the “report of record” for reform politics with an examination of larger concepts like institutional change and elite circulation, presents obvious problems of exposition. Too slight a concentration on the facts of the case diminishes the record and leaves the analysis undefended. Too great a concentration makes the record unapproachable and buries the analysis. The solution adopted here is architectural, with a parallel construction for each chapter. Each begins with an overview of narrative developments and major theoretical points. The narrative itself then follows in historical detail, in two or three titled subsections. A concluding section on implications summarizes narrative and extends analysis.

As a result, readers whose primary interest is these larger speculations can concentrate on the beginning and end of each chapter, dipping into the mid-

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dle as mood or necessity dictates. Readers who are interested in the political history of this period for its particular actors, organizations, or events can delve into the broad middle parts of relevant chapters, skipping the larger framework. And readers who are interested in the chronicle *and* its implications—as well as that continued practical fascination and intermittent high drama—can simply turn the page.