NOMINATING PRESIDENTS has undergone strange twists and turns ever since the Framers established the Electoral College as the initial means of choosing presidents. Over the years, two questions have guided reforms to the nomination process: what kind of presidents do we want, and what type of nomination process is most likely to produce them. The varied answers to these questions have revolved around Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian perspectives on presidential selection. Should choosing a party’s presidential nominee be a national decision? This would be the preferred Hamiltonian method. Or should the presidential nominee be a consensual choice, with the decision left to those representing diverse regions of the country? Jefferson’s emphasis on the country’s diversity suggests this is the best approach.

In 1912, former president and presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt summarized the Hamilton/Jefferson debate over choosing presidents, indicating his preference for a Hamilton method, which he believed would produce his preferred type of president—a “leader”—and minimize the risk of producing his least-preferred type, a “boss”:

The leader leads the people; the boss drives the people. The leader gets his hold by open appeal to the reasons and conscience of his followers. The boss keeps his hold by manipulation, intrigue, by secret and furtive appeals to the very base forms of self-interest. . . . Leadership is carried on in the open light of day; bossism derives its main strength from what is done under the cover of darkness.

Those who subscribe to a Jeffersonian approach hold a very different view. For them, the selection of a presidential nominee must be consensual, and to accomplish this the deliberations must necessarily be private. Candidates should be judged by their peers, even if that verdict is rendered in closed “smoke-filled” rooms by other elites. From these deliberations a nominee will emerge with
sufficient institutional party backing to mount a winning campaign and form a successful administration.

Over the centuries, presidential selection has transformed from a Jeffersonian model in which states and localities led by party bosses were key to winning presidential nominations to a Hamiltonian approach that places the choice in the hands of primary voters who make a national decision absent many local concerns. The story of this evolution is the main topic of this chapter. To give context to this history, we will begin at the end, with the most recent presidential election, when a global pandemic upended the rules of campaigning and forced the parties to rethink their campaign practices.

The Strange Case of 2020

There was nothing unusual at first about the 2020 presidential primary season. An incumbent president with no serious intra-party challengers faced an out-party with a long list of candidates vying to replace him, many of whom were present or former senators and representatives or governors and mayors with executive experience. Democrats sensed that Donald Trump was vulnerable, so a large field of would-be opponents got to work building organizations and raising money long before the first primary or caucus vote was held. This is how contemporary presidential party politics works. The process of running for president has become so expensive and complex that potential candidacies require years of planning. In fact, Trump announced his intention to run for reelection earlier than any previous incumbent—on the day of his inauguration. Democrats quickly lined up to oppose him, starting with longshot candidate congressman John Delaney in July 2017. Twenty-seven others would eventually follow.

It was the most diverse field in history, featuring six women, three Black candidates, three candidates of Asian ancestry, a Latino candidate, and an openly gay candidate. There were philosophical divisions between candidates who represented the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and those who were more traditionally liberal. At the front of the pack were Biden, the best-known candidate in the field, and his most consequential challenger, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, the runner-up for the 2016 Democratic nomination. Behind them were a half-dozen or so others who were getting serious attention from voters. As 2019 turned to 2020, it appeared possible that primary voters would not be able to coalesce behind a candidate before that summer’s nominating convention.
Then the global pandemic struck and upended everything. In-person campaigning abruptly stopped in March 2020 and was replaced by virtual events. In this vastly altered environment and with the nation in crisis, Democrats quickly brought their contest to an unexpected and unprecedented resolution.

Joe Biden was the unlikely beneficiary of this sudden denouement. He had stumbled badly in the first caucuses in Iowa and Nevada and in the first primary in New Hampshire—so badly, in fact, that no previous candidate had performed as poorly in the early contests and survived to win the nomination. The victor in these early contests was Bernie Sanders, whose favored position in the race concerned some party leaders who feared that a self-described democratic socialist could not win a national election. Then, with the country on the verge of shutting down, Biden pulled off one of the most unlikely comebacks ever recorded. Bolstered by overwhelming support from Black voters and viewed by rank-and-file Democrats as the most likely candidate to defeat Trump, Biden staged a blowout win in the South Carolina primary that gave him the momentum he needed to dominate primaries on what is termed “Super Tuesday,” when a host of states from California to Massachusetts held their contests.

These victories permitted Biden to surpass Sanders in the number of convention delegates pledged to his candidacy. His lead soon became insurmountable, and what had been shaping up to be a drawn-out contest came to a sudden halt. In rapid succession, Biden’s main challengers dropped out and endorsed him—just in time for Biden to claim the mantle of presumptive nominee before the campaign went dark. The greatest public health crisis in more than a century forced state after state to postpone their primaries during the spring and summer months, and the campaign entered a long, eerie intermission before Sanders bowed to the inevitable and dropped out.

General election campaigning was significantly altered by the pandemic as well. Like William McKinley in 1896, who “stood” for election by campaigning from the front porch of his house, Biden and Trump were initially forced to forego large rallies and dramatically scale down their efforts. Social media events replaced large in-person gatherings, and virtual organizing replaced knocking on doors. Even the lavish quadrennial national conventions were replaced by largely prerecorded television productions. Although Trump resumed campaign rallies in August, Biden continued to avoid large crowds. Drive-in campaign events and virtual fundraising became creative new ways to appeal to supporters. The virtual Democratic Convention presented celebrities and ordinary citizens in short, scripted videos designed to reinforce the party’s general election message and
was the first national convention to be nominated for an Emmy. Anita Dunn, a senior adviser to President Biden who had a prominent role in Biden’s 2020 campaign, speculated that “we will never go back to a traditional convention.” In a post-pandemic world, it remains to be seen if virtual campaigning and fund-raising will remain commonplace.

Viewed from a historical perspective, uncertainty caused by the disruptions of 2020 is just a new twist in an evolving presidential nomination process that is a centuries-old work in progress. There was a period in which Congress, after briefly relying on the flawed Electoral College to select nominees, ran the nomination process. This was followed by a convention system where party leaders exercised decision-making power, then a primary-based system that emerged out of reforms designed to empower rank-and-file partisans. The primary system itself has been the subject of perpetual tinkering. These changes determined whether presidential nominees would be chosen by national party leaders responding to national problems, by state leaders responding to local issues, or by rank-and-file voters responding to a combination of both.

At every turn, party reformers have been guided by the twin questions of what kind of presidents we want and what sort of nomination system is likely to produce them. The way the parties answered these questions shaped the kind of candidates produced by the nomination process. And as every set of rules has unintended consequences, subsequent generations of reformers were often left to tinker with the adverse effects of their predecessors’ efforts.

What It Takes to Be Nominated

In 1962, a reporter asked President John F. Kennedy what advice he would give to a future president. Kennedy responded, “know the country you seek to lead,” adding, “If you find the opportunity to know and work with Americans of diverse backgrounds, occupations, and beliefs, then I would urge you to take eagerly that opportunity to enrich yourself.” Six decades later, Americans might still agree with Kennedy’s assessment but, unsurprisingly, they have added even more qualifications to his short list. These include having some prior executive experience (such as serving as a vice president, governor, or mayor), being of sound character, and being an effective advocate of policies deemed to be in the public interest. But how to find such persons remains elusive given the marathon nature of today’s nomination process. In the sixty years since John F. Kennedy issued his job description, would-be presidents have bemoaned the
fact that to be a successful candidate one must forego any other occupation, abandon one’s family, and single-mindedly devote most waking hours to raising money—requirements that have nothing to do with being a successful president.

Time. The 2020 Democratic candidates knew that campaigning would be their new full-time job. Joe Biden could undertake the task because he had no other responsibilities. Senators and representatives who sought the nomination were generally able to take time away from their day jobs. The private citizens who sought to win the party’s nod—including entrepreneur Andrew Yang, hedge fund manager Tom Steyer, and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg—were independently wealthy. But those who had executive responsibilities were at a disadvantage because they found it difficult to leave their full-time obligations. Washington State governor Jay Inslee, Montana governor Steve Bullock, and New York City mayor Bill de Blasio all departed the race shortly after they entered. Each discovered that running for president was incompatible with the everyday demands of running a state or large city.

For his part, Donald Trump had been running for president for many years with the help of the media platform afforded him through his starring role as a reality television mogul on The Apprentice. In 2000, Trump made an abortive bid for the nomination of the Reform Party (a short-lived third party created by businessman Ross Perot after his unsuccessful 1992 independent presidential campaign). Trump later contemplated a run for the 2012 Republican nomination, eventually bowing out and reluctantly endorsing Mitt Romney. Soon after Romney lost, Trump copyrighted his 2016 slogan “Make America Great Again”—a sign he would spend the next four years seeking to try again. In 2016, Trump was joined by sixteen other Republican aspirants who, like many of the 2020 Democrats, often had the word “former” affixed to their titles.

Commitment. Time is not the only thing that keeps prospective presidents from running. Candidates need to be willing to sacrifice their families and devote four, eight, or more years of their lives to seeking the presidency. They need to be willing to do whatever it takes to raise the large sums of money required to run in a marathon contest. They need the determination to compete in a grueling process, a willingness to cede their privacy to cameras and reporters, and the wherewithal to subject themselves to round-the-clock Secret Service protection.

In a meeting with then senator Barack Obama prior to his 2008 presidential run, David Plouffe, who would become Obama’s campaign manager, told the putative candidate he had two stark choices: “You can stay in the Senate, enjoy your weekends at home, take regular vacations, and have a lovely time with your family. Or you can run for president, have your whole life poked at and pried
into, almost never see your family, travel incessantly, bang your tin cup for donations like some street-corner beggar, lead a lonely, miserable life.”

To have a chance of victory, first-time candidates must invest vast quantities of time and money introducing themselves to the party faithful. In 2020, Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar and California senator Kamala Harris essentially moved to Iowa, the first caucus state, but achieved little success breaking through with voters. South Bend, Indiana, mayor Pete Buttigieg and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren planted themselves in Iowa as well. Bernie Sanders had the luxury of rebooting his 2016 organization, but he still needed to devote considerable attention to the early primary states.

Too Much Money. In 2020, Joe Biden raised $1.625 billion, and Donald Trump raised $1.094 billion—astronomical sums necessary to run for president in the current system, a good portion of which comes from special interest groups. Apart from the time and commitment required of the candidates to raise such outsized sums, the amount of money that floods the process can cast doubts on the system itself. Americans especially resent the influence exercised by special interests over the presidential campaign process. In 2015, majorities thought it would be “effective” to reduce the “influence of money in politics” by placing limits on how much an outside group could spend on a candidate’s campaign, how much a political party could spend, or how much an individual candidate could spend regardless of where the money came from.

This has not been easy to accomplish. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission that political speech and money went hand-in-hand, and that both are protected by the First Amendment. The impact of this decision was fully evident in the 2020 race, as outside sources spent $582 million on behalf of Biden and $320 million supporting Trump. Other wealthy individuals contributed vast sums through what is termed “dark money” by creating ostensibly non-profit organizations and contributing millions to them for the purpose of advancing the interests of a particular candidate.

Expenditures of this size and nature are unpopular with the public. Bernie Sanders premised his two presidential bids on the notion that Wall Street wields too much power and makes elected officials beholden to big contributors. In his 2015 announcement speech, Sanders declared: “Today, we stand here and say loudly and clearly that enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACs, and their lobbyists.” In 2020, Sanders continued to renounce corporate money while raising an astonishing $211 million, most of it in small dollar increments.
Meanwhile, Donald Trump premised part of his 2016 appeal on the notion that he couldn’t be bought because of his personal wealth.\textsuperscript{17}

The vast amounts of money required to become president have created a strong public impression that the presidential selection system is broken. This is reinforced by the interminable length of the nominating campaign. When it comes to selecting a chief executive, Americans want the process to be fair, yet provide for majority rule; deliberative, yet quick; representative, but with some having a greater voice than others. Those in the national party establishments have tried unsuccessfully to resolve these contradictory impulses, but as we will see, their discussions have centered around procedural details that fall within the jurisdiction of the party organization which do not address the overarching public concern of creating a process that will produce effective presidents. In recent years, efforts to reform the selection process have focused on matters like which state or states should go first in selecting presidential candidates; when and where the national party conventions should be held; how many party officeholders should be permitted to attend the national conventions and in what capacity; and what proportions of men, women, Blacks, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other groups should comprise the various state delegations. These concerns are a present-day continuation of a centuries-long effort to get the selection process right, fueled then as now—as we will see—by the debates between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson as to which is the best path to take.

\textbf{From John Adams to Joe Biden: Enduring Problems in Presidential Selection}

The process for selecting presidents hasn’t always been as backbreaking as it is today, but if today’s method of selecting a nominee may be less than ideal, it is only the latest in a long series of flawed approaches. At no point since the Constitution was ratified in 1789 has the United States employed a consistent method for choosing its presidents, no less a selection system that effectively balances the national character of the presidency with a role for states and localities. For most of American history, nominees have been selected by methods that have been subject to the whims of party elites and the ambitions of individual candidates.

\textit{First Attempt: The Electoral College}. The Framers understood that finding a method to ensure the selection of a consistently good president was one of the most conspicuous failures of the Constitutional Convention. Convening in Philadelphia in 1787, the delegates considered myriad schemes before finally...
settling upon the Electoral College. As devised by the Framers, each state would have a prescribed number of electors equaling its congressional delegation, based on the number of senators (two) plus the number of representatives (which varies from state to state based on its population). Under the Electoral College system, each elector would cast two votes for president. The Framers believed that state loyalties would determine the first vote (i.e., votes would go to “favorite sons”) but that the second vote would be for someone of national stature. Making his case for presidential selection by the people, Alexander Hamilton wrote in The Federalist that the electors’ “transient existence” and “detached situation” made the Electoral College a wise instrument for choosing the right kind national leader:\textsuperscript{18}

[The Framers] have not made the appointment of the president to depend on any pre-existing bodies of men, who might be tampered with beforehand to prostitute their votes; but they have referred it in the first act to the people of America, to be exerted in the choice of persons for the temporary and sole purpose of making the appointment.\textsuperscript{19}

However, the Electoral College only worked as planned in the elections of George Washington in 1788 and 1792. In each case, Washington won unanimous victories—the only president ever to receive such a distinction. But by 1796, the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties were more organized and vigorously competing for votes—thereby negating Hamilton’s intention that the Electoral College would find the best person with the greatest national standing to serve as president. In 1800, the system completely broke down when Thomas Jefferson recruited Aaron Burr to run with him as his intended vice president. Burr broke his promise to defer to Jefferson and have him become president in the event of a tie vote. Instead, Burr sought the presidency outright with the result being a deadlock in the House of Representatives that was broken by the leader of the opposition party, Federalist Alexander Hamilton. By 1804, the Electoral College that had once been the object of Hamilton’s effusive praise was completely overhauled when Congress and the states approved the Twelfth Amendment that allowed for “tickets” of presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

The experiment of selecting presidential nominees using the Electoral College ended quickly, but the Electoral College still plays a central and at times problematic role in the final selection of the president. After slavery, it is one of the most flawed parts of the original Constitution and the subject of endless reform proposals. Calls for abolishing the Electoral College mount each time
it appears that a presidential candidate could win the Electoral College without winning the most popular votes—something that happened in 1828, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016, and nearly happened in 1960, 1968, 1976, 2004, and 2020. In 2019, 53 percent of Americans preferred doing away with the Electoral College and making the selection of the president solely dependent on the winner of the popular vote. 20

Given this sentiment, it’s not surprising that there has been ongoing tinkering with the Electoral College. In 1972, Maine decided to allocate its electoral votes by congressional district, with the winner of each receiving an electoral vote. Nebraska followed suit twenty years later. Split decisions in those states occurred in 2008 when Barack Obama won one electoral vote from Nebraska; in 2016, when Donald Trump received one electoral vote from Maine; and in 2020, when Trump again received one electoral vote from Maine and Joe Biden received one electoral vote from Nebraska.

In 2020, the Supreme Court considered the issue of “faithless electors,” those individuals who did not follow the dictates of their state’s popular vote when casting their electoral college votes. Fifteen states had laws penalizing electors who did not vote for the popular vote winner, some of which included financial penalties. In 2016, these penalties did not stop seven electors from bolting from their state’s popular vote winner (five from Hillary Clinton and two from Donald Trump), 21 including four electors from Washington State who were fined $1,000 apiece. 22 The Supreme Court unanimously decided that states could require electors to vote for that state’s popular vote winner, noting that the US Constitution gives states the right to appoint electors “in such Manner as the legislature thereof may direct.” 23

Yet Congress and the public have failed to sustain serious interest in making major changes to the Electoral College, despite its flaws and unpopularity. Even though it has misfired in two of the last six elections, and despite the fact that Joe Biden could have won a popular vote majority as large as seven million and still lost if a combined forty thousand voters had changed their minds in Wisconsin, Georgia, and Arizona, 24 most proposals to reform the Electoral College have failed. These include:

- Having all states cast their electoral votes on a proportional basis like Maine and Nebraska.
- Creating bonus electors that would be awarded to a candidate who won the national popular vote to ensure the national popular vote winner is elected president.
• Allocating electoral votes based on proportional representation.
• Eliminating the electoral college entirely and electing the president based on the popular vote, with the proviso that if a candidate fails to win a majority, a runoff between the top two candidates would follow.25

Second Attempt: The King-Making Caucuses. Legendary party boss William Marcy Tweed once remarked, “I don’t care who does the electin’ as long as I do the nominatin’.”26 The issue of who should “do the nominatin’” has vexed the American polity for more than two-hundred years. With the emergence of political parties and the collapse of the Electoral College as a means for choosing presidential candidates, attempts to reform the nominating systems set the Hamiltonian perspective on national authority against the Jeffersonian preference for local accountability.

The second try at choosing presidential nominees was the Congressional Caucus (commonly nicknamed the “King Caucus”). It consisted of House and Senate members who belonged to the same party. They would meet, discuss the pros and cons of various candidates, and emerge with a nominee. As a national institution that represented state and local interests, it was thought that a gathering of congressional party leaders to choose a president was a sensible alternative to the Electoral College. Moreover, it was generally assumed that presidents would come from the national legislature, so it seemed only natural that Congress would choose from among the prospective candidates.

The Congressional Caucus functioned relatively well during the period of light inter-party competition during the Era of Good Feelings, producing three consecutive two-term presidents from Virginia. But the system completely broke down in 1824 as the last of the Founding Fathers, James Monroe, was exiting the presidency. That year, the caucus nominated William Crawford, who commanded little support outside the halls of Congress and was badly beaten in the election. A five-way scramble for the presidency ensued, and John Quincy Adams, the son of John Adams, became president. By the late 1820s, the caucus system became a target of supporters of defeated candidate Andrew Jackson who vehemently argued that the entire nominating process epitomized aristocratic rule and thwarted the popular will. Jackson had a point since he decisively won the popular vote in 1824 and finished with the most electoral votes as well.

Third Attempt: Party Conventions. The collapse of the Congressional Caucus created an opening for a new method of nomination. Initially, the youthful parties gravitated toward a Jeffersonian-like convention system that took local sensibilities
into account. Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, urged a national convention, in a letter addressed to Martin Van Buren dated January 2, 1824:

Vain is any expectation found upon the spontaneous movement of the great mass of the people in favor of any particular individual, the elements of this great community are multifarious and conflicting and require to be skillfully combined to be made harmonious and powerful. Their action, to be salutary, must be the result of enlightened deliberation, and he who would distract the councils of the people, must design to breed confusion and disorder, and to profit by their dissensions.²⁷

In Ritchie’s view, party conventions allowed for a successful fusion of Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism. The convention could speak with an authoritative voice in selecting the nominee, but individual states maintained their sovereignty in choosing the delegates. In 1831, the Anti-Masonic Party held the first political convention in Baltimore. A year later, the Democratic Party followed suit. The Democrats were driven toward the convention system not only because it seemed more “democratic” but because President Andrew Jackson wanted to replace Vice President John C. Calhoun who had become an outspoken administration critic. One key Jackson operative pointed out “the expediency, indeed absolute necessity, of advising our friends everywhere to get up a national convention to convene at some convenient point, for the purpose of selecting some suitable and proper person to be placed upon the electoral ticket with General Jackson, as a candidate for the vice presidency.”²⁸ Eventually, the convention was held and the delegates chose a Jackson loyalist, Martin Van Buren, for the vice-presidential slot.

Over the years, nominating conventions became vital party instruments by providing a forum for making key decisions about who would head the presidential ticket, what issue positions the party would emphasize, and how their nominee would be supported if elected. Conventions are still held today, in mid-summer before the general election, usually in one of the nation’s largest cities in an important electoral state. In 2020, Democrats planned to hold a convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Republicans intended to gather in Charlotte, North Carolina, before both locations were scrubbed due to the pandemic. As we will see, however, conventions no longer serve the purpose of selecting nominees.

Until the 1970s, state and local party leaders chose convention delegates. These party leaders ran the show, instructing delegates on what platform positions to support and which candidates to back. Leaders were guided by local
considerations, especially which of the candidates would run best in their own communities. With delegates representing numerous and diverse states and localities, deal-making would ensue among party leaders and the identity of the presidential nominee was often unknown as the convention convened. During the early twentieth century when party bosses wielded their greatest power, Democrats took an average of ten ballots to select their nominees; Republicans took five. As boisterous and contentious as these gatherings could get, conventions were a way of reconciling local and national interests to nominate a winner, a fusion of Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian thinking.

Initially, the Republican Party of the late nineteenth century was most hospitable to Alexander Hamilton’s notion of a national family. Republicans viewed their party as a national organization that was critical to selecting successful presidential tickets. During a credentials fight at the 1876 Republican Convention, one delegate asked, “whether the state of Pennsylvania shall make laws for his convention; or whether this convention is supreme and shall make its own laws?” The delegate answered his own question with a distinctly Hamiltonian flourish, saying: “We are supreme. We are original. We stand here representing the great Republican Party of the United States.”

Democrats adopted a wholly different approach, believing they should adhere to the traditions of their progenitor, Thomas Jefferson. At their first convention in 1832, the party adopted a rule under which no candidate could be nominated for president unless two-thirds of the delegates agreed. Democrats also invented the “unit rule,” a device that allowed a state to cast all its votes for one candidate if a majority so desired. These changes presented considerable difficulties in getting the southern and northern wings of the party to agree on nominees. Thus, it took forty-nine ballots to nominate Franklin Pierce in 1852 and seventeen to select James Buchanan four years later. The two-thirds rule and the unit rule accentuated the federal character of the Democratic Party’s nominating process—something the party desperately sought to protect. Rising to defend the unit rule, a delegate to the 1880 Democratic Convention excoriated the Republicans as “a party which believes . . . that the states have hardly any rights left which the Federal Government is bound to respect . . . [and] that the state does not control its own delegation in a national convention. Not so in the convention of the great Democratic Party. We stand, Mr. President, for the rights of the states.” Jefferson couldn’t have said it better.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the debate intensified over which approach to take in nominating presidents—one rooted in Hamilton’s idea of nationalism or Jefferson’s preference for localism. The struggle took place not
only between the two parties but within them. During the first years of the twentieth century, the Republican Party developed a growing Progressive faction that wanted to nationalize party affairs since local politics was often rife with corruption. Progressive leader Theodore Roosevelt advocated the creation of a national presidential primary in 1912. Failing that, Progressives wanted state parties to establish a direct primary, believing that Teddy Roosevelt would dominate them. Fourteen states followed this route, and Roosevelt beat incumbent William Howard Taft in all the primaries. But Republican stalwarts, led by Taft, preferred having state GOP leaders retain their decisive voice in selecting presidential candidates. Taft’s dismal third-place finish in 1912 resulted in a further nationalization of the nominating process. Progressive advocacy of the direct primary was extended to most elective offices, including the presidency. By 1916, twenty-three states with 65 percent of the delegates had adopted presidential primaries, though the party bosses still retained their power to determine the party nominee. Even so, a slow process had begun whereby party regulars would be shown to the convention exits.

Democrats, meanwhile, continued to support a Jeffersonian-like approach in choosing their presidents. Although Woodrow Wilson backed Theodore Roosevelt’s call for a national primary, the 1912 Democratic platform upheld the rights of the states and condemned as a “usurpation” Republican-inspired efforts “to enlarge and magnify by indirection the powers of the Federal Government.” Thus, any attempt to nationalize the party’s rules would be turned aside. In fact, southern leaders blocked the nomination of Speaker of the House Champ Clark, who was unable to obtain the two-thirds support from the delegates needed to win the nomination. Seeking compromise, the delegates turned to New Jersey Democratic governor Woodrow Wilson, whose birthplace was Staunton, Virginia.

But not all was harmonious within the Democratic ranks. Waves of immigration wrought havoc in Democratic Party councils. These foreign-born Americans, mostly Roman Catholics, gravitated to the Democrats early and sought a voice in their state and national conventions. Most supported New York governor Alfred E. Smith in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1924. But the two-thirds rule prevented Smith from capturing the nomination. After 103 ballots, an exhausted convention finally turned to John W. Davis, a well-known lawyer whose views on race were acceptable to the South.

The many attempts to quell these internal party squabbles did not solve the nominating dilemma, because the argument between the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian perspectives became linked to the ongoing debate about what kind
of president we should have. Those advocating a Hamiltonian nation-centered system believed leaders with popular support make the best presidents, even if they aren't likely to be beholden to party bosses. Those who subscribed to a Jeffersonian approach held that candidates need sufficient institutional backing to mount a winning campaign and form a successful administration.


During the nineteenth century, the youthful parties zigzagged between the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian approaches to presidential nominating, never quite sure how to balance the two. But during the Progressive Era, Hamiltonian nationalism started to gain the upper hand. Recall that the principal goal of the progressive movement was to create a more open and democratic electoral process. One means to accomplish this was to allow average voters a say in nominations. By 1912, a dozen states adopted presidential primaries, and a few years later about one-half followed suit.

Back then, the outcome of these primaries was only advisory, as convention delegates were not automatically assigned to the winners, making them little more than political “beauty contests.” The results provided information to party leaders as to which candidates were popular, but convention delegates were not bound to support them. This gave local party leaders bargaining leverage at the conventions. Although the growth of presidential primaries was at first only a symbolic step toward a national nomination process, it was an important one for what it foreshadowed.

Beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic Party adopted a Hamiltonian approach to picking its presidential candidates. In 1936, Roosevelt succeeded in having the Democratic Convention strike down the two-thirds rule, despite vigorous resistance from southerners. Former navy secretary and ambassador to Mexico Josephus Daniels spoke for the administration: “The Democratic Party today is a national party, and Northern, Southern, and Western states would have greater representation in the party conventions under a majority rule.” Southerners argued that revoking the two-thirds rule would drastically reduce the role of individual states in the nomination process. On the surface, it was a call to a Jeffersonian-like system. Below the surface, Southerners realized that if a two-thirds majority was needed for the nomination, they could act in unison to veto any nominee they did not like, most pointedly nominees who held liberal positions on racial issues. The end of the two-thirds rule was a blow to these efforts.

Following Roosevelt's four successful presidential campaigns, Democrats continued in the Hamiltonian tradition as their nominating process became
increasingly nationalized. In 1952, a Democratic National Committee member lost his seat because he supported Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower for president. Four years later, the Democratic Convention passed a resolution that required a state to list the party’s presidential nominee on its ballot for its delegates to be seated in the convention hall. A major step toward nationalizing the parties occurred in 1964, when the so-called Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party claimed to be more representative of that state’s Democratic voters than the “regulars” who ran the state Democratic Party. Asked to settle the dispute between the two factions, the 1964 Democratic Convention passed a resolution forbidding discrimination in choosing delegates. Henceforth, delegates would be chosen without regard to their race, creed, or national origins. If a state delegation did not comply with the new rule, it could be ejected from the convention hall. A committee chaired by New Jersey governor Richard Hughes would be responsible for implementing the rule. On July 2, 1967, Hughes wrote to the DNC and all state Democratic Party chairs outlining six requirements each state must meet to comply with the charge of the 1964 convention. Failure would mean that the seats would be vacated and filled by the convention—an unprecedented act at that time.

Not all states met Governor Hughes’s criteria. In 1968, the Democratic Convention tossed out all the Mississippi and half of the Georgia delegations for violating the Hughes resolution. In addition, the delegates abolished the 146-year-old unit rule that permitted a state to cast all its votes for a presidential candidate even if other candidates had support within the delegation. Then, in the aftermath of what became a violent and tumultuous national convention, Democrats went so far as to authorize the creation of the McGovern-Fraser Commission that would recommend dramatic reforms to the nominating process.

**Fourth Attempt: The McGovern-Fraser Commission.** At first, it appeared that the 1968 convention would be a dull affair because Lyndon B. Johnson, the sitting Democratic president, gave every indication of seeking another term of office, and not since Chester Arthur in 1884 had a party denied an incumbent president renomination. However, Johnson’s plans were upended when Eugene McCarthy, a little-known senator from Minnesota, decided to run against him as an anti-Vietnam War candidate. McCarthy had few resources and even less backing from party leaders. But with a battalion of antiwar activists drawn from college campuses, McCarthy opposed Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Johnson defeated McCarthy as expected, but his margin of victory was a miniscule eight points—an extremely poor showing for an incumbent president. Johnson read the result as a sign that a successful reelection campaign would be difficult to wage, and in a dramatic turn of events, he stunned the country by
saying in a nationally televised address, “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.”

Johnson’s departure did not mean that most Democratic Party leaders were ready to back McCarthy—quite the contrary. If Johnson was out, the choice of establishment Democrats was his second in command, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. Given the relative unanimity of party leaders supporting his candidacy, Humphrey did not need to campaign in any of the seventeen states holding primaries in 1968. This infuriated anti-Vietnam War demonstrators among the Democratic Party rank-and-file, who charged that Humphrey was a member of the Johnson administration that had escalated US involvement in Vietnam. Robert F. Kennedy, the brother of the late president and a US senator from New York, entered the primaries and, along with McCarthy, fueled an anti-Humphrey movement. For a while, it looked as though Kennedy had a chance to win the nomination. He drew large crowds, received substantial media attention, and won most of the primaries he entered. Whether Kennedy would have been nominated is left to historical debate, as an assassin ended his life on the night he won the California primary.

Kennedy’s assassination left the nation in a state of shock and the Democratic Party in tatters. So deep were the internal party divisions that essentially two conventions were held in Chicago during the summer of 1968: the traditional one in the convention hall, and an anti-party protest in the streets outside. Mayor Richard J. Daley, Chicago’s Democratic boss, refused to grant the crowds of young college students who descended upon the city a permit to demonstrate against the Vietnam War, but the students demonstrated anyway. Daley’s police attacked them with clubs and tear gas, creating what authorities subsequently described as a “police riot.” Inside the hall, in a jarring contrast to the violence outside, party leaders nominated Humphrey amid the usual convention hoopla. Presidential chronicler Theodore H. White wrote darkly that Humphrey has been “nominated in a sea of blood.”

The protests in the streets, a widespread perception that Humphrey won his party’s nod unfairly because he had not competed in a single primary, and raucous dissent within the Democratic ranks led to the creation of the McGovern-Fraser Commission. As George McGovern, then a US senator from South Dakota, recalled, “Many of the most active supporters of Gene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy and later of me, believed that the Democratic presidential nominating process was dominated by party wheel horses, entrenched officeholders, and local bosses. They believed that despite the strong popular showing of McCarthy and Kennedy in the primaries, a majority of the convention delegates were
selected in a manner that favored the so-called establishment candidates.” The McGovern-Fraser Commission, which he led, arrived (not surprisingly) at a similar conclusion. In evocative language, it urged Democrats to change their ways: “If we are not an open party; if we do not represent the demands of change, then the danger is not that the people will go to the Republican Party; it is that there will no longer be a way for people committed to orderly change to fulfill their needs and desires within our traditional political system. It is that they will turn to third and fourth party politics or the anti-politics of the street.”

Chaired first by McGovern and later by Minnesota congressman Donald Fraser, the commission (which was officially called the Committee on Party Structure and Delegate Selection) adopted several recommendations that further nationalized presidential politics, including:

- A reaffirmation of the abolition of the unit rule, an action already approved by the 1968 Democratic Convention.
- Refusing to seat delegates chosen in backrooms.
- Prohibiting certain public or party officeholders from serving as delegates to county, state, and national conventions by virtue of their official position.
- Banning proxy voting, a practice used by party bosses to cast votes on behalf of absent delegates often without their knowledge.
- Ordering states to choose delegates during the calendar year in which the convention is held.
- Requiring states to post public notices announcing the selection of a delegate slate that would be committed to a particular candidate and inviting the rank and file to participate in the selection process.
- Creating a Compliance Review Division within the DNC to ensure that states obeyed the McGovern-Fraser recommendations.

In effect, the McGovern-Fraser Commission told the party establishment to “reform or else.” As McGovern recalled: “In public statements, speeches, and interviews, I drove home the contention that the Democratic Party had but two choices: reform or death. In the past, I noted, political parties, when confronted with the need for change, chose death rather than change. I did not want the Democratic Party to die. I wanted our party to choose the path of change and vitality. That was the function of the reforms.”

But behind the reforms lay another agenda: removing the so-called “Old Democrats”—mostly white, middle-aged, establishment types who supported the Vietnam War—and replacing them with “New Politics Democrats” who were younger, college-educated professionals, women, and minorities who were
anti-war, anti-establishment, and anti-party. The commission exceeded all expectations in achieving this objective. At the 1968 Democratic Convention, just 14 percent of the delegates were women, two percent were under age thirty, and only 5 percent were Black. Four years later, women accounted for 36 percent of the delegates; those under age thirty, 23 percent; Black delegates, 14 percent.

But increased diversity came with a high electoral price tag. In an unprecedented act, the 1972 Democratic Convention voted to exclude the delegates from Cook County, Illinois (including Chicago), led by Chicago party boss Richard Daley, and replaced them with pro-McGovern delegates led by a young civil rights activist named Jesse Jackson. The US Supreme Court subsequently affirmed the convention’s right to do this using decidedly Hamiltonian language: “The convention serves the pervasive national interest in the selection of candidates for national offices and this national interest is greater than any interest of any individual state.” Establishment Democrats were astounded at the convention’s actions and their ratification by the Supreme Court. Daley delegates had won the Illinois primary, whereas Jackson’s slate had not even competed.

Moreover, Daley was viewed as key to winning this electoral vote-rich state in the fall. As it turned out, McGovern (who won the 1972 nomination in part by understanding the new rules better than anyone) lost Illinois (and forty-eight other states) to Republican Richard M. Nixon. But by removing the Daley delegation on the grounds that it had less than the requisite number of women, young, and Black delegates, the convention opened a Pandora’s box on the matter of representation and delegate selection. As McGovern later acknowledged, “Whatever the commission originally intended, in administering the guidelines on minorities, women, and young people, it eventually moved very close to adopting a de facto quota system.”

Today, the issue of representation remains at the forefront of Democratic Party politics. In 2020, Democratic Party rules required each state party reach out to historically under-represented groups and that delegate selection should prioritize “African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and women.” Moreover, each state delegation should be evenly divided between men and women.

Along with mandating specifics of the composition of each state’s delegation, the commission also sought changes in how they were to be selected. The 1968 fiasco drove home to the reformers that party bosses held the power to select nominees in a closed process. The commission’s proclamation that delegate selection must be “open, timely, and representative” was somewhat vague, but there was no doubt that it was written with the intention of opening windows in
the proverbial smoked-filled room. As few states wished to jeopardize their role at the next convention by violating the spirit of the McGovern-Fraser reforms, most state Democratic Party leaders shrugged their shoulders and abandoned their state conventions in favor of primaries and caucuses where the rank and file would make their presidential preferences known. As compensation, these leaders would retain a decisive voice in selecting their own candidates for state and local offices.

The shift from party leaders to primary voters deciding who would be the next president has been significant. In most of the states that hold primaries, voters choose how many delegates each candidate will have at the nomination convention. A candidate who nets 50 percent of the primary votes, for instance, will receive 50 percent of the state’s delegation. The actual delegates themselves are usually selected by state party meetings and conventions, but, unlike the “advisory” primary system of the Progressive Era, they are bound to support the candidate they were sent to support, at least on the first ballot. Other states have a “pure” primary system whereby voters directly elect delegates to the national convention, with each would-be delegate’s candidate preference listed on the ballot. Delegates chosen under this system are duty-bound to support their affiliated candidate.

**Republicans Follow the McGovern-Fraser Lead.** The gusts of change blowing through Democratic Convention halls rattled Republican windows, too. Although not subject to the recommendations of the McGovern-Fraser Commission, Republicans felt its effects when state legislatures passed laws mandating state presidential primaries. Several state legislatures, largely controlled by Democrats, passed laws mandating presidential primaries for both parties. Republicans also engaged in a modest effort to alter their rules in the name of fairness. The 1972 Republican convention authorized the creation of a Delegate-Organization (DO) Committee. The purpose of the DO Committee (called the “Do-Nothing Committee” by critics) was to recommend measures for enhancing the numbers of women, youth, and minority delegates at future Republican conventions. The committee proposed that traditional party leaders be prohibited from serving as ex-officio delegates; that party officials should better inform citizens how they could participate in the nomination process; and that participation should be increased by opening the primaries and state conventions to all qualified citizens.

But the 1976 Republican Convention rejected several of the committee’s more important recommendations, including allowing persons under twenty-five years of age to vote in “numerical equity to their voting strength in a
state;” encouraging equal numbers of men and women delegates; and having one minority group member on each of the convention’s principal committees. Later, the RNC rejected a recommendation that it review state affirmative action plans, and the GOP has refused to abolish winner-take-all primaries.

Today, Republicans continue to have winner-take-all primaries in selected states. In 2020, Donald Trump called for an end to primaries and caucuses, preferring to have state party conventions choose the delegates instead. Failing that, Trump argued for more winner-take-all primaries, in a successful effort to quash any significant intra-party challenges to his renomination.\textsuperscript{42}

The Unintended Consequences of the McGovern-Fraser Reforms

In its effort to open the presidential selection process to the party-in-the- electorate, the McGovern-Fraser reforms unleashed several unintended consequences. These include the end of political conventions as the locus of the nominating process; the creation of today’s marathon nomination schedule; the emergence of outsider candidates; and a power shift from party elites to media elites and social networking activists.

*The Demise of Conventions.* In the 1965 edition of *The World Book Encyclopedia*, nominating conventions were described as forums for allowing “all citizens an opportunity to observe one of the processes of representative government. And when two strong candidates seek nomination, a national convention is more exciting than a World Series.”\textsuperscript{43} But it has been years since a convention has been more exciting than a World Series. In 1972, Richard Nixon anticipated contemporary party conventions by scripting every moment of the event for television. Nixon faced no serious opposition in his quest for renomination and viewed the convention as a four-day infomercial in which his party could message voters and produce dramatic images (including a huge balloon drop at the end). Since then, conventions gradually became staged opportunities for parties to showcase their best arguments and images. But scripted conventions held no suspense and therefore no news value, and over time television networks cut back on their coverage as ratings steadily fell. In 2020, just 24.6 million viewers watched the Democratic Convention compared to 29.8 million in 2016. Similarly, 23.8 million watched the 2020 Republican Convention compared to the 32.2 million that viewed the proceedings in 2016. Viewership on social media enhanced these figures but accounted for people watching only select moments of the conventions rather than the gavel-to-gavel viewership they once commanded.
A Proliferation of Primaries. The McGovern-Fraser Commission had not intended to create a marathon presidential campaign, but that has been the effective result of substantially increasing the number of presidential primaries. In 1960, John F. Kennedy could announce his presidential campaign early in the year and win his party’s nomination after running in only three primaries. As we have seen, the 2020 presidential campaign started just as the 2016 campaign ended, and the 2024 campaign (at least on the Republican side) is already underway.

In 2020, forty-seven of the fifty states scheduled Democratic primaries—only Iowa, Nevada, and Wyoming held caucuses—and Republicans generally followed a similar path (although several primary dates were moved to mid- and late summer, and some Republican primaries were canceled in favor of state party-run conventions because of the pandemic). While 2020 presented its own unique set of circumstances, it remains true that successful presidential candidates must run virtually everywhere, meaning that in years without a public health crisis they must have a presence in two, or three, or even four different places at once.

Primary and caucus dates change every presidential election cycle, but custom and tradition keep Iowa and New Hampshire at the top of the schedule as the first caucus and primary states, respectively. To add diversity to these two small states with mostly white non-urban populations, the Democratic Party has ensured that Nevada and South Carolina follow them. Their addition also adds regional balance to the early primary calendar. Democrats are currently debating whether Nevada and South Carolina should be moved ahead of Iowa and New Hampshire and whether the Iowa caucus should be scrapped altogether in favor of a primary. Such debates follow a pattern: since 1972, the rules for conducting presidential contests have undergone revisions every four years.

In 2020, Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina held their contests during the month of February. There is a clear advantage to going early because candidates who do poorly early on find it difficult to raise money and tend to lose supporters, so as the primary calendar progresses the field of potential nominees shrinks. This motivates states to hold their primaries and caucuses as early as possible after the first four and has led to a glut of contests typically on the same day in early March, dubbed “Super Tuesday” (in 2020, there were sixteen Super Tuesday primaries).

Primary rules affect candidate strategies and can complicate the marathon presidential contest. Historically, Republicans have preferred winner-take-all primaries with the popular vote winner receiving all of that state’s delegates. Democrats adhere to a 15 percent rule whereby candidates must win 15 percent
of the vote in a congressional district to earn delegates. The more votes above 15 percent, the more delegates awarded. This complicated process requires an intricate familiarity with the election calendar and party rules. Some states hold open primaries whereby anyone can vote. Others have semi-open primaries where only registered party members and independents can participate. Still others have closed primaries where only individuals registered with the party can cast ballots.

Caucus states require party members to assemble in public forums, which can last for several hours, and openly declare whom they support. Unlike primaries, which are state-run elections, caucuses are party-run affairs, and they tend to attract activists and strong partisans who do not mind devoting an evening or an afternoon to participating. Once fairly widespread, caucuses have fallen out of favor. In 2020, the Iowa Democratic party had difficulty tallying and reporting their results, causing a long delay in announcing the winner and further undermining the reputation of caucuses as a means for selecting convention delegates.

The Emergence of Outsider Candidates. The McGovern-Fraser Commission facilitated George McGovern’s insurgent anti-Vietnam War candidacy in 1972. It would not be the last time an outsider would be favored by the rules his commission had put in place. Successful insurgent candidacies have included Democrat Jimmy Carter and Republican Donald Trump. Other insurgencies have made establishment favorites work hard to win their party nomination. In 1976, Ronald Reagan ran as an insurgent against incumbent President Gerald Ford and nearly defeated him for the Republican nomination. Forty years later, Bernie Sanders waged a spirited insurgency against the highly favored Hillary Clinton that took the entire primary season to resolve. And we saw how Joe Biden, a forty-plus-year political veteran, was seriously challenged by Sanders, as well as by Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, and newcomer Pete Buttigieg. In the post-McGovern-Fraser world, no establishment-backed candidate is ever certain to win their party’s nomination because the primary process gives outsiders an opportunity to capture a political moment in time and parlay it into a presidential nomination.

The Press and Social Media Play Important Roles. As the nomination process became primary-centered, it also became candidate-centered, with candidates needing to appeal directly to voters to win primaries and amass delegates rather than working within party structures to win the support of party leaders. This shift caused candidates to turn to the media to broadcast their message to voters to earn their support. Initially, the process was driven by television. Today, social media has assumed an important role.
One unanticipated result of the party reform process is that instead of shifting control over the nominating system from party elites to the rank and file, reform efforts have transformed individual candidates into free agents who campaign on television and online, unwittingly making media elites important power brokers. This development has thrust both journalists and social media influencers into the heart of the process, replacing party elders as the new king-makers. Collectively, these reporters and influencers exercise a form of “peer review,” acting as political analysts who send cues about who is (and who is not) a serious candidate. Candidates play to these influencers and amplify their positive messaging on their social media feeds.

Traditional political reporters are fascinated with the campaign horserace—who’s up, who’s down, and why. In the months before primary voting begins, they look at metrics like which candidates raised the most money and how they rank in public opinion polls to assess whose future looks bright and whose star is fading. In fact, this preprimary period has been dubbed the “money primary” where criteria for success include a candidate’s standing in the national polls, how much money they have raised, and the strength of their respective organizations.

Once the primaries begin, these same reporters assess a candidate’s viability by looking at wins and loses measured against prior expectations of how they believed candidates would perform. In 2016, Donald Trump’s unexpected first-place New Hampshire finish gave him an added bump in media coverage (and campaign donations). Four years later, Pete Buttigieg received a polling “bounce” from his unexpected (to reporters) photo finish in Iowa. Eight days later, Bernie Sanders, Buttigieg, and Amy Klobuchar found themselves in the media spotlight after beating press expectations in New Hampshire. Outsider candidates who can maintain a level of overperformance can parlay press attention into a long run through the primary season—and possibly into a party nomination. This gives journalists and social media influencers the ability to broker outcomes in a manner once reserved for party elites.

Reforming the Reforms: Democrats Tinker with the Rules

The unintended consequences of the McGovern-Fraser reforms have not stopped Democrats from continuously tinkering with their presidential nomination system. The 1972 Democratic Convention authorized the creation of a Commission on Delegate Selection and Party Structure chaired by Baltimore’s then city councilwoman Barbara Mikulski. The Mikulski Commission reaffirmed the idea of choosing convention delegates through direct primaries and state party
caucuses and having a delegate’s presidential preference clearly expressed on a state ballot. But even more radically, the commission recommended that anyone receiving 10 percent of the primary or caucus votes receive a proportionate share of the delegates. The DNC agreed with the basic thrust of the recommendation but raised the threshold to 15 percent. This furthered the revolution in the nominating process that began with the McGovern-Fraser Commission, putting party bosses out of business and giving candidates motivated more by ideology or opportunity than pragmatism a realistic opportunity to seize the reins of power.

This did not work out well for Democrats, who went on to lose all but one presidential election in the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, they kept trying to adjust the nomination process to produce competitive candidates. Reform commissions abounded. In 1975, Democratic National Committee chairman Robert Strauss created the Commission on the Role and Future of Presidential Primaries, chaired by Morley Winograd, the Michigan State Democratic chair. The Winograd Commission recommended that each state Democratic Party “adopt specific goals and timetables” to carry out affirmative action programs, citing women, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans as groups for which remedial action was needed to overcome the effects of past discrimination. Upon receiving the commission report, the DNC immediately ordered that state delegations comprise equal numbers of men and women (a rule that continues to be enforced).

Taken together, these changes banished much of the Democratic Party establishment from the convention proceedings. Before the McGovern-Fraser Commission, 83 percent of Democratic governors, 68 percent of senators, and 39 percent of representatives attended the 1968 Democratic Convention as delegates or alternates. In 1984, New York Times columnist Tom Wicker wrote that the Democratic Party’s obsession with representation in the selection process had overcome its desire to win presidential contests: “[Democrats have become] a party of access in which the voiceless find a voice while Republican control of the presidency has permitted them to maintain enough coherence and unity to become a party of government.”

Jimmy Carter’s 1980 landslide loss to Ronald Reagan prompted the creation of the Hunt Commission, chaired by North Carolina governor James Hunt, which undertook to restore some modicum of elite influence to the nominating process. It called for the creation of “superdelegates”—that is, Democratic officials and party officeholders who would be automatic convention delegates. Not officially bound to any candidate, superdelegates could, in theory, reverse the verdict of the rank-and-file primary voters in a closely contested nomination
race. They were an important part of the 2016 contest between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. That year Clinton won overwhelming support from the superdelegates.17 Many were reluctant to support Sanders given that he served as an independent in the Senate who caucused with Democrats but did not identify as one. Sanders’ supporters cried foul and rejected the concept of superdelegates on the grounds that they were not selected by primary voters. Clinton and Sanders struck a deal to create a new Unity Commission that would dramatically reduce the number of superdelegates and bind them to the results of their respective state primaries and caucuses, thus moving the Democratic Party 180 degrees away from the reforms of the Hunt Commission. In 2020, there were just 771 Democratic superdelegates out of a total of 4,750, and they were precluded from voting on the convention’s first ballot. Under the new rules, only if a convention were deadlocked and required more than one ballot could superdelegates cast a vote.48 Sanders and his reformers understood how unlikely that was to occur. No party convention has required a second ballot since 1952, effectively making the superdelegates superfluous.

Looking to the Future

After centuries of altering the method of selecting presidential nominees and multiple reform commissions, the riddle that confronted the Framers remains: How do we find an optimal way to select the president and what characteristics do we want the president to have? As the nationally elected executive, we might side with the Hamiltonian perspective that the president should be a leader who can articulate issues and solutions that are in the national interest. But who gets to define the “national interest”? Is it the individual and corporate contributors whose dollars fuel successful presidential campaigns? Is it reporters and social media influencers who set the terms of success in nomination campaigns? Is it those few individual candidates willing to endure a grueling selection process for the chance of being the one left standing at the end? Or is it state and local party leaders who believed that winning candidates were good for their party and the country?

When it comes to choosing a president, the focus on the individual rather than the party, which has prevailed since 1968, complicates answers to these questions. The Framers’ attempt to devise a presidential selection system that would create a presidency free of partisan constraints resulted in the creation of the Electoral College, which failed to work almost as soon as parties developed. By the mid-1800s, political parties became more firmly rooted in American
tradition, and the party convention, which emphasizes group activity rather than individual choice, supplanted the congressional caucus. The party convention enjoyed a long life, in part because it fused a Jeffersonian-like federalism with Hamiltonian nationalism and became a source of social activity in an era when parties were an important socializing force. But as a collective decision-making entity the traditional convention is no more—a victim of reform and the ambitions of would-be presidents. Today, conventions ratify; they do not decide.

While ambition has always been a characteristic of presidential candidates, today’s system rewards those with unquenchable determination like never before. No longer do presidential candidates wait in line for party leaders to tell them it’s their turn. In 1960, reporter Richard Reeves wrote that the most important feature of John F. Kennedy’s career was his ambition:

He did not wait his turn. He directly challenged the institution he wanted to control, the political system. After him, no one else wanted to wait either, and few institutions were rigid enough or flexible enough to survive impatient ambition-driven challenges. He believed (and proved) that the only qualification for the most powerful job in the world was wanting it. His power did not come from the top down nor from the bottom up. It was an ax driven by his own ambition into the middle of the system, biting to the center he wanted for himself. When he was asked early in 1960 why he thought he should be president, he answered: “I look around me at the others in the race, and I say to myself, well, if they think they can do it why not me? ‘Why not me?’ That’s the answer. And I think it’s enough.”

Since Kennedy uttered those words, every presidential candidate has said, in effect, “Why not me?” In presenting themselves to the public, these driven contenders have relied on their own personas, rather than their party affiliations, to help them get elected. Celebrity politics is entertaining, but it is not party politics. While Donald Trump was morphing from a cultural figure into a serious presidential candidate, his ties to the Republican Party were, at best, nominal. Trump had previously given campaign contributions to many Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, and he had changed party registration five times, having been alternately a Democrat, a member of the Reform Party, an independent, and a Republican. Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders came close to winning the Democratic nomination in 2016 and 2020, despite having had no previous affiliation with the party.

The investment required to run for president can yield dividends for candidates even if they lose, making the decision to run attractive to ambitious
politicians. Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, and Chris Christie all became media personalities after their unsuccessful 2016 presidential runs. Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and Andrew Yang saw their public profiles enhanced by their failed 2020 candidacies. For Buttigieg, running unsuccessfully for president led to a high-profile cabinet appointment in the Biden administration. Harris, of course, became vice president.

More than two centuries after looking to the Electoral College as a means for choosing presidents, the nomination system remains an imperfect work in progress. There almost certainly will be future tinkers, and besides wondering what kind of president we want, we may also be wise to ask “How do we get a president who can govern effectively?” Because the way the selection process rewards some candidates and punishes others is directly related to the skills the winner will bring to the office. Systems of presidential selection have sequentially rewarded individuals of strong reputation with ties to a congressional elite, then insiders with strong connections to power brokers, and then popular figures with a media presence who can raise a lot of money and speak directly to voters. As these criteria shifted control of the selection process from elites and insiders to candidates and their supporters, political parties have lost the ability determine who will win the most coveted prize in politics: nomination by a major party for the presidency of the United States. The dilemma of trying to create a nomination system that fuses Hamiltonian nationalism with a Jeffersonian concern for state and local sensibilities remains unsolved in favor of the Hamiltonian approach now favored by both Democrats and Republicans.