



Candidate selection-Primaries

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This Note looks at the possibility of introducing primaries into the candidate selection processes of UK political parties, following the experiment of an open primary in Totnes, Devon, by the Conservative Party. It also examines experience of primaries in the United States, where the procedure is well established.

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1 Background

The UK has no twentieth century tradition of holding primaries in order to select candidates for political parties. The usual method is for the local party to select the candidate, either through ballots of members or through a decision of the party executive. The practice of selecting candidates by primaries is widespread in the US and a number of pressure groups and politicians have suggested that the use of primaries might help reinvigorate party politics in the UK.

Before the advent of mass parties, nomination meetings were common in British elections. A study by Jon Lawrence *Electing our Masters* illustrated how the 1972 *Ballot Act* “abolished the ancient system of public nomination at the hustings- replacing it with a purely administrative system requiring the submission of signed nomination papers”.¹ Jon Lawrence also drew attention to attempts by local Liberal Party associations to hold pre-election trial ballots in an effort to prevent rival candidates from splitting the vote in the late 1860s.² He considered that the experiments petered out because the Bristol election petition of 1870 established that a candidate could be unseated for corrupt and illegal practices in a pre-election ballot and because the Ballot Act meant that party supporters were no longer public identified.

Until comparatively recently, there was surprisingly little material on the feasibility of introducing primaries to British elections. A study was published in 1967 *The selectorate: the case for primary elections in Britain* by Peter Paterson. MacGibbon and Kee, but this provoked only limited debate as to their value. Primaries were considered only suitable for the US, where party ideology was seen as weaker than in other western states. As the 1986 New Zealand *Report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System* put it:³

Though superficially attractive, [primaries] tend to place a premium on campaign organisation and expenditure by individuals and thus penalise potential candidates who have no personal access to professional expertise or campaign funds. They could also tend to weaken the cohesiveness of political parties if they led to excessive intra-party competition.

Political parties in Israel introduced primaries in the 1990s, and the process has been examined in an article in *Electoral Studies*.⁴ One rather surprising conclusion of this article is that incumbents hold a tremendous advantage in candidate selection through the use of primaries, so that the introduction of primaries did not lead to an injection of fresh blood into political institutions.

However, since the introduction of new electoral systems for the European Parliament and the devolved bodies, there has been increasing interest in the party mechanisms for selecting candidates, in particular opening out decision-making to all local party members, and in encouraging nominations from women and ethnic minorities.

1.1 Open and closed primaries

The main distinction in types of primaries are between open primaries, where participants do not have to be a member of the relevant political party to vote, and closed primaries, which are restricted to party members. Part two of this Note looks at the variants in the US in

¹ *Electing our masters: The hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair* Jon Lawrence 2009

² Ibid p46

³ Para 9.29 Towards a Better Democracy

⁴ The 1996 Intra Party Elections in Israel: Adopting Party Primaries'. 1997 *Electoral Studies*

greater detail. Opponents of open primaries argue that they are vulnerable to manipulation by activists from another party, but proponents believe that they attract the more moderate voter, who will retain an interest in the eventual electoral contest.

1.2 Recent proposals for reform

A Conservative MP, Andrew Tyrie, was the first advocate for primaries in the UK in the twenty first century.⁵ He set out his proposals in a pamphlet entitled *Back from the Brink* in 2001. He envisaged all Conservatives in a constituency given a vote to choose their preferred candidate ahead of an election:

[this would be] a genuine pre-election open primary contest, would be likely to generate much greater interest in the Conservatives and activity at local level in the run up to a general election, giving a huge advantage to the party, particularly in marginal seats. If well constructed it could transform the image of the party in many areas, especially in those we most need to win.”⁶

The *Commission on Candidate Selection*, hosted by the Electoral Reform Society issued its report in October 2003. Written by the Commission’s Chair, Peter Riddell of the *Times* newspaper, the report documented the unrepresentative nature of elected representatives in local and central government. The Commission recommended a basket of measures to improve the situation, including financial help to cover the cost of training aspiring candidates, a code of good practice for the parties and more permissive legislation to allow for positive discrimination. The Commission also raised the possibility of the use of quotas, although it preferred to focus on voluntary mechanisms for the time being.

One option considered by the Commission to strengthen the legitimacy of election candidates was the use of primaries. The Conservatives experimented with primary elections to choose their parliamentary candidates in November 2003. An ‘open’ primary was held in Warrington South, in which all local voters were allowed to participate. 350 voters turned up to hear the three shortlisted candidates speak at a hustings, and then cast their ballot; roughly half of these were believed to be non-party members. The annual report of the Warrington South Conservative Association for 2003 noted that a single sponsor had met 75 per cent of the cost of the primary- a sum of £10,655. The costs were set at £11,088.⁷ In the event, the seat was held by Labour in the 2005 general election.

A further primary was held in Reading East where Robert Wilson was selected at an open party meeting, although only those people who expressed support for the party were eligible to vote. Mr Wilson went on to win the seat at the 2005 general election.

David Cameron, indicated interest in primaries as the new leader of the Conservative Party, in December 2005:

This could involve community panels or US-style primaries in which anyone in a constituency registered as a party supporter will be able to select between a shortlist of candidates from the priority list picked by the local association.⁸

⁵ “Tories need US style primaries” 14 December 2001 *BBC News*

⁶ *Back from the Brink* Andrew Tyrie 2001 Parliamentary Mainstream p26

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http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0020/19370/WarringtonSouthConservAssoc_12859-9922_E_N_S_W_.PDF

⁸ “Cameron aims for more women MPs” 12 December 2005 *BBC News*

The Power Inquiry into Britain's Democracy published in March 2006 stated that proposals to introduce primaries should not be discouraged, but thought that on their own were not enough to rebuild the relationship between parties and people.⁹ In *Back from Life Support*, published by the think tank Policy Exchange in 2008, Frank Field argued for primaries for MPs, in order to reconnect the public with politicians.

Following the controversy over Members' expenses in May 2009, there has been renewed interest in primaries as a way of identifying a new type of candidate for Parliament. Most recently, David Cameron commented on his party's use of open primaries in his speech *Fixing Broken Politics* given on 26 May 2009:

One of the reforms I'm most proud of is the widespread introduction of open primaries for the selection of Conservative parliamentary candidates in recent years.

I want to see that continue, with much greater use of open primaries for the selection of parliamentary candidates - and not just in the Conservative Party, but every party.

In time, this will have a transformative effect on our politics, taking power from the party elites and the old boy networks and giving it to the people.¹⁰

The Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, has suggested a form of closed primary, where supporters of Labour would participate in the selection process:

Miliband advocated a third approach in his article, suggesting Labour should adopt a system of "registered voters" – supporters, but not party members – and allow them to vote for parliamentary candidates, a system common in the US.

This would help the party "tap into the energy in communities, ensuring we reflect the problems of the future, the power structure of the future and the people of the future", he said....

Miliband, who has urged Labour to consider primaries before, also suggested the party should learn from some of the techniques adopted by Barack Obama's US presidential election campaign and by the Greek socialist party Pasok, the only European socialist party to do well in the recent European elections.

Obama "removed barriers to participation" by scrapping party membership fees, Miliband said, and Pasok has allowed 900,000 Greeks, out of a population of 11 million, to support the party as members or "friends".

"The party has quotas for male and female representation, open primaries to select party candidates for local elections and has developed 'every day a citizen' - an organisation dedicated to citizen engagement," Miliband wrote.

"Such engaging and deliberative party structures enable Pasok to tap into the energy in communities and multiply the force of a national message through local, authentic and committed advocacy, with resultant electoral success."¹¹

⁹ Power to the people: the report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy, March 2006, p188 Available at <http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php>

¹⁰ *Fixing Broken Politics* David Cameron speech 26 May 2009 at <http://www.epolitix.com/latestnews/article-detail/newsarticle/david-cameron-fixing-broken-politics-speech-in-full/>

¹¹ "David Miliband urges Labour to let non-members have say in candidate selection" 8 August 2009 *Guardian*. The *Tribune* article is available at <http://www.tribunemagazine.co.uk/2009/08/07/how-the-next-decade-can-belong-to-labour/>

Will Straw, son of the Justice Secretary, recently released a pamphlet advocating primaries, particularly for the next London mayoral elections and for constituency Labour parties where the membership was fewer than 200.¹²

2 The Totnes primary

The Conservative party has undertaken some experiments with holding open residents meetings in order to select candidates. However in Totnes, following the decision to retire by the long standing MP, Anthony Steen, the party leadership decided to hold an open public primary which involved sending a postal ballot to every registered voter (nearly 69,000), at a cost of £38,000. The turnout was nearly 25 per cent and the event sparked considerable media interest in August. There were three candidates, chosen after a short listing process by the local party: Dr Sarah Wollaston, a local GP, Sara Randall-Johnson, mayor of East Devon district council and Nick Bye, Mayor of Torbay.

2.1 Results of the primary

The results were:

Sarah Wollaston 7,914 votes

Sara Randall-Johnson 5,495 votes

Nick Bye 3,088 votes

The *Independent* reported:

Dr Wollaston made a virtue of her status as the political outsider in the contest, arguing it was time for an "ordinary person" to stand up for the concerns of local people.

The Conservatives spent £38,000 on the primary - equivalent to £2.30 for every vote cast - but declared that the experiment in democracy had been a success in engaging the constituency's electors. They said they wanted to repeat the experiment in other seats before the next election - if the cost to the party could be reduced.

Dr Wollaston, 47, a GP in Chagford, has been a doctor for 23 years and also worked with Devon and Cornwall Police as a forensic medical examiner. During a hustings session she was asked whether she would be at a disadvantage taking and throwing the punches in political exchanges. She received spontaneous applause when she responded that she had no appetite for that sort of thing.

Dr Wollaston fought on a strongly Eurosceptic platform and campaigned on health - notably alcohol-related problems. A Tory source said: "It may be a combination of reasons that she won - that she was a fresh face, she was a woman and she was well-known and respected locally."

Dr Wollaston's victory means that she is almost certain to be heading to Westminster after the next election.

Totnes has been held by the Conservatives since the 1920s. Their majority over the Liberal Democrats dropped to 1,947 at the last election, but party sources insist that it should soar with a change of candidate.¹³

¹² *The case for primaries to select Labour candidates* Progress Will Straw August 2009
<http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/prog/The%20case%20for%20primaries%20to%20select%20Labour%20candidates%20-%20Will%20Straw.pdf>

There has been some debate about the merits or otherwise of open primaries. The positive reasons are:

- Enables a much greater proportion of local electors to participate in the selection of candidates
- Widen the pool of prospective candidates to those without years of party experience
- In the US, there are significantly higher levels of party membership than in the UK, suggesting that primaries encourage participation
- Gives the local party a public platform on which to promote the candidate to the electors

On the other hand arguments against primaries include:

- They displace local party volunteers, who enjoy a privileged role in selecting a candidate in return for years of unpaid work
- The expense of primaries is difficult for political parties to bear
- More 'media savvy' candidates may distort the result and displace those with more loyalty to the party
- They may promote intra-party dissent, as rival candidates promote differing policies
- They act as a distraction to more fundamental reform of the electoral system, such as the Alternative Vote, or Single Transferable Vote, which offer voters an opportunity to rank candidates.

2.2 Election expenses and regulation of donations

The question of election expenses is of interest. Currently, candidates are not considered to incur expenses until formally adopted at the beginning of the election campaign and the dissolution of Parliament. The *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* (PPERA) removed earlier uncertainties about when election expenses would start to be incurred, which had made prospective candidates cautious about inadvertently 'triggering' their expenses. The *Political Parties and Elections Bill 2008-09* initially proposed a return to the regulation of all candidate expenditure, regardless of when incurred. However, there was considerable debate during its passage through Parliament of the practical feasibility of such a return to triggering.

The Bill received royal assent on 21 July 2009 and in its final form section 21 provided for an additional pre-candidacy limit for those occasions when Parliament extends beyond 55 months. Section 21 provides that for the current Parliament the new limits would apply from 1 January 2010. Further information is available in Library Standard Note 4967 *Progress of the Political Parties and Elections Bill 2008-09*.¹⁴ Initial guidance has been issued by the Electoral Commission in respect of the pre-candidacy limit, but there is no reference to the

¹³ "GP wins Tories' experiment with open primaries" 5 August 2009 *Independent*

¹⁴ <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-04967.pdf>

costs incurred in primaries, since the guidance is designed to assist candidates for the general election who have already been adopted.¹⁵

There have been indications in recent PQs that the new limits will be brought into force, once adjustments have been made to the Communications Allowance payable to MPs. On 21 July 2009, in a written answer Jack Straw, the Secretary of State for Justice, noted that Communications Expenditure would affect these rules:

Mr. Straw: ...As I made clear in the debates at Commons' Report stage on 9 February 2009, the provision in clause 20[1][1] restricting pre-candidacy election expenses will not be commenced until restrictions on the use of the communications allowance have been agreed by the House: "the two matters were linked—one depends on the other" (9 February 2009, *Official Report*, columns 1221-23). As my hon. Friend, the Deputy Leader of the House (Barbara Keeley), made clear in a written answer to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 20 July 2009, *Official Report*, column 800W, the Leader of the House hopes to bring forward the necessary amendments shortly after the summer adjournment.¹⁶

The Electoral Commission guidance is at an initial stage and there may be some questions about whether expenditure to support a candidacy in a primary should be regulated, if one takes place after January 2010. The Regulatory Impact Assessment for the *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009* commented how the new limits would avoid the perception that high levels of spending could buy electoral advantage.¹⁷

There are also implications for the regulation of donations. Candidates in a primary would have to declare any donations made under PPERA, since they would be regulated donees, that is, party member, or holders of relevant elective offices. A candidate who was not a party member and who was unsuccessful in the primary would seem to fall outside the current definition of regulated donee.¹⁸

3 Primary elections in the United States

In the United States, primary elections are widely used for the selection of candidates for political office at both the federal and state level. The use of primaries has evolved with the development of the American party system. Neither political parties nor primary elections are mentioned in the Constitution. While the Constitution lays down certain requirements regarding age, citizenship and residency for those wishing to be elected to the House of Representatives, the Senate and the Presidency, and while it sets out the dates of Presidential and Congressional elections, there are no constitutional provisions which address the conduct of primary elections.

Nevertheless, through convention primaries have developed into a key feature of the American political landscape. Their use in the selection of presidential candidates has evolved markedly since their introduction early 20th century. The current system has been in place since 1972. Primaries are also used for the selection of candidates for the House and Senate. Congressional primaries, which are held in the months prior to the November general election (usually between May and September), differ from the better-known

¹⁵ Candidates' expenses: initial guidance for a UK 2010 Parliamentary Election September 2009 *Electoral Commission* at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/79824/033-expenses-guidance-Final.pdf

¹⁶ HC Deb 21 July 2009 c1388W

¹⁷ Published on 20 July 2009 at www.justice.gov.uk/publications/political-parties-elections-bill.htm

¹⁸ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/candidates-agents/regulated-donees>

presidential primaries in that the winner of the congressional primary automatically becomes that party's candidate in the general election. In presidential primaries, by contrast, voters select a candidate indirectly, with candidates awarded delegates at the National Party Convention which takes place around two months before the general election.

1.1 Presidential primaries

The US presidential primaries are, by far, the most well known international example of primary elections. Before 1820, Democratic-Republican members of Congress would nominate a single candidate from their party. That system collapsed in 1824, and since 1832 the preferred mechanism for nomination has been a national convention. However, in the 19th and early 20th centuries these national conventions were far from transparent or democratic. Progressive era reformers looked to the primary as a way to measure the popular opinion of candidates, as opposed to the opinion of the party bosses. In 1910, Oregon became the first state to establish a presidential preference in which the delegates to the National Party Convention were required to support the winner of the primary at the Convention. By 1912, 12 states either selected delegates in primaries, used a preferential primary, or both. By 1920, there were 20 states that used primaries, but some went back to the old system and from 1936 to 1968, just 12 states used primaries.

Until the 1970s, therefore, most states did not hold presidential primaries. The parties preferred to control candidate selection through a series of State Party Conventions. Whereas any registered voter can participate in a primary or caucus, only certain selected party members could participate in these state conventions. Here, decisions over candidate selection were largely in the hands of party bosses – powerful state party leaders such as city mayors. It was they, not the ordinary voters, who decided who would become the party's presidential candidate. The few primaries that were held were not decisive. In 1968, the last presidential election held under this system, in neither party did the overall winner of the primaries get his party's presidential nomination. In the 1968 Democratic primaries, Senator Eugene McCarthy won 38.7% of the popular vote, but it was Vice President Hubert Humphrey who became the Democratic Party's eventual presidential nominee, despite having won just 2.2% of the popular vote in the primaries. Indeed, Humphrey had not entered any of the primaries; the few votes he received were as a result of voters writing in his name on the ballot paper. In the Republican Party, Richard Nixon won the 1968 nomination despite polling marginally lower than California Governor Ronald Reagan in the party's primaries: Nixon won 37.5% to Reagan's 37.9%.

Following the 1968 primaries, the system came to be regarded as undemocratic, elitist, non-participatory and potentially corrupt. It was reformed significantly at the instigation of the Democratic Party following the events at its 1968 National Party Convention. Following Humphrey's loss to Nixon in the general election in November 1968, the Democrats established the McGovern-Fraser Commission to recommend reforms of the presidential nomination process. It was this commission that led to the significant increase in the number of states holding primaries from 1972 onwards.

Over the past 40 years, the nomination process has changed significantly. In 1968, presidential primaries were used by Republicans in 16 states and by Democrats in 17 states. By 1980, this had grown to 32 and 33 respectively with three-quarters of national convention delegates selected this way. By 2008, primaries were the dominant method of selecting candidates, with a few states selecting their candidates through caucuses – a state-based series of small-scale meetings designed to select a party's candidate, traditionally held in geographically large but thinly populated states.

In the United States, primaries have two main functions: to show the popularity of presidential candidates; and to choose delegates to go to the National Party Conventions. They are run under state law, which means that a great number of variations exist. Some states use “open” primaries – where any registered voter can participate – whereas others use “closed” primaries – where only registered Democrats can vote in a Democratic primary and only registered Republicans can vote in a Republican primary. In some states, those who are registered to vote but describe themselves as “independents” can vote in party primaries, whereas in other states they cannot. Some states allocate delegates to the National Party Convention on a “winner-take-all” basis – where the candidate with the most votes wins all of that state’s delegates to the Convention – while others allocate them in proportion to the votes each candidate attains.

States must decide when to hold their primary or caucuses. The national parties usually lay down the earliest and latest possible dates – often mid-January to the beginning of June – but within that period each state can decide its own date. Some states schedule their contest on a day when no other primaries are taking place in order to give their state primary a prominence it would otherwise not have. Other states deliberately arrange their primaries to coincide with other, often neighbouring, states, thereby creating a regional primary. An increasing number of states like to schedule their primary early in the election year, believing that the earlier primaries have more influence over candidate selection. This recent move to early scheduling is referred to as “front loading”.

Nevertheless, the overall timetable for US presidential elections is consistent: primaries begins in the January of the election year, conclude in June or early July, and are then followed by the National Party Convention in late August or early September, and the election itself takes place in early November. The cycle is repeated every four years. In reality, however, jostling for position for the primaries begins well before the beginning of the official primary season. The “invisible primary”, as it is known, usually begins around two years before the election. During this period, potential candidates embark on a concerted effort to raise funds, appear on political talk shows and publish books to generate political momentum for their campaigns, and pay frequent visit to those states who hold the early primaries and caucuses, traditionally New Hampshire and Iowa.

Eventual nominees are generally known a considerable period of time before the National Party Convention. The last time a major party’s nomination was not clear before its convention was in 1976 when incumbent President Gerald Ford narrowly defeated then California Governor Ronald Reagan. In 2008, despite the close contest for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama was the presumptive nominee several weeks before the Democratic National Convention which took place in August.

The party’s nominations for president are only formally made at the National Party Conventions. It is commonplace for the challenging party to hold its convention first. The conventions choose the presidential candidate in a roll-call vote. In which each state’s delegates announce which candidate they wish to vote for. In the pre-reform days, prior to 1972, delegates came to the convention and made up their minds in the convention hall, but now the vast majority of delegates arrive at the convention as “committed delegates” – committed to vote for a particular candidate in the first ballot if that candidate is still in the race. As the number of delegates is known beforehand, because it is decided in each state primary or caucus, the result of the convention ballot is therefore a foregone conclusion. To win the presidential nomination, a candidate must receive an absolute majority of the delegate votes.

1.2 Strengths of the US primary process

Advocates of the current US primary process argue that it is a considerable improvement on what went before. In particular, they point to the following strengths of the system:

- There is an increased level of participation by ordinary voters. In 1968, the last year of the unreformed system, only 11.7 million Americans took part in the nomination process, or 11% of the voting-age population. By 1988, the figure was 35 million, or 21% of the voting-age population.
- There is a significant increase in the choice of candidates. In 1968, there were just five presidential candidates to choose from – three Democrats and two Republicans. In 2008, there were fifteen - eight Democrats and seven Republicans.¹⁹
- The process is opened up to outsiders, enabling politicians who do not initially have a national reputation to make a serious challenge for the nomination, for example Jimmy Carter (1976), Bill Clinton (1992), Howard Dean (2004), and Mike Huckabee (2008).
- The power of party bosses is diminished, making the process more democratic and less susceptible to corruption.
- The gruelling race through the primaries is seen by many as an appropriately demanding test for a demanding job. In 1992, Senator Paul Tsongas, who had fought back from cancer to run for the presidency, was seen to have a lighter schedule than his rivals. Although many liked Tsongas and his policies, they saw in the primaries that he might not have the physical resilience to be President.

1.3 Criticisms of the US primary process

Although there are accepted strengths to the current system, various commentators have criticised the process. Writing in the *Washington Post* in March 1996, David Broder commented on the presidential nominating process arguing that “any way you look it, this is madness”. Similarly, a *New York Times* editorial of March 1996 described the primaries as “a crazy process”. Academic commentators have also criticised the process. Professor Robert Loevy (1995) argues that:

More voters, to be sure, take part in [presidential] primary elections than in [the old system of] caucuses and [state] conventions. But what of the *quality* of that participation? Primary voters often know little about the many candidates listed on the ballot. They may drop in at the primary election booth between a trip to the drug store and the local supermarket and give little more thought to choosing candidates than to choosing among brands of toothpaste or canned vegetables.²⁰

The following criticisms have been levelled at the current US primaries process:

- There is widespread voter apathy and boredom. More people do participate in the nominating process than was the case 40 years ago. However, the 36 million people who voted in the presidential primaries and caucuses in 2000 represented just 15% of the voting-age population.
- Primary voters are unrepresentative of the voting-age population. It is argued that low turnout would not matter too much if those who did vote were a representative cross-

¹⁹ A further four Republicans withdrew their candidacy prior to the primary elections.

²⁰ Robert Loevy, *The flawed path to the presidency 1992* (1995)

section of the voting-age population, but they are not. Primary voters tend to be older, better educated, wealthier and more ideological than the voting-age population as a whole. As a result, certain types of candidate – especially more ideological candidates – tend to do better in primaries than arguably they should. In 1996, for example, Pat Buchanan, a conservative Republican, who over 20% of the vote in 24 primaries and over 30% in six of those. However, Buchanan is considered unlikely to have been able to poll anything like those figures in a general election.

- The process is far too long. In 1960, Senator John F Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency just 66 days before the first primary. In contrast, in readiness for the 2004 campaign, Senator John Kerry announced his candidacy 423 days before the first primary. The McGovern-Fraser reforms, which introduced more widespread use of primaries, had a dramatic and immediate effect on the length of campaigns. In 1968, the last election under the old system, Nixon announced his candidacy 40 days before the first primary. In 1972, the first election under the new system, George McGovern announced his candidacy 414 days before the first primary.
- The process is very expensive. This is something of a circular argument. Candidates need to raise a large amount of money, so they need to start their campaigns early. Campaigns are therefore much longer and much more expensive. With the onset of “front-loading” (the process of putting more primaries early in the contest), there is now little time to raise money once the primaries have started: it has to be done before they begin, so candidates start their campaigns early.
- The process is dominated by the media. In the pre-reform era, decisions about candidates were made by a small group of professional politicians. They were people who knew the candidates. The role of the media was small. However, in today’s process, the decision-makers – ordinary voters – must rely on the media for information about the candidates.
- Primaries can all too easily develop into bitter personal battles. The contest between Bush and McCain in 2000 got very bitter and personal as did that between Bush Sr and Buchanan in 1992, and between Carter and Ted Kennedy in 1980.
- There is a lack of “peer review”, leading to a failure to test presidential qualities. In the pre-reform era, presidential candidates were selected largely by other professional politicians. They had a good idea of what qualities were required to be a successful president. Now, candidates are chosen by ordinary voters who cannot be expected to know much about presidential qualities, let alone whether a particular Senator or Governor possesses them. As a result, presidential primaries tend to test campaigning qualities rather than presidential qualities.

1.4 Proposed reforms of the US primary process

A variety of reforms have been proposed to the US primary process to address some of the criticisms levelled at it. The reforms are mostly concerned with the timing of primaries and attempts to increase the role of professional politicians without losing the democratic elements of the current system. Three possible reforms have been outlined:

- Regional primaries: The country would be divided into four regions – Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. Four days would be set aside for these regional primaries: the first Tuesdays of March, April, May and June. The order of the regions would change every

four years. The three main advantages of the reform would be: the end of front-loading; cutting down of travel required of candidates; and allowing a more measured decision with a chance for second thoughts by the voters in later primaries.

- Weighting votes for elected politicians at the National Party Conventions: This would require the parties to devise a mechanism for weighting the votes of elected politicians – members of Congress, state governors, city mayors – at their National Party Conventions. This would increase the opportunities for peer review and the role of the parties themselves.
- A pre-primary mini-convention: This is the most radical of the three reform proposals. It involves the introduction by each party of a pre-primary mini-convention – smaller and shorter than the traditional National Party Conventions and held before the primary season – which would approve a list of up to three possible presidential candidates who would then run in the primaries. To be nominated at the mini-convention, a would-be candidate would need to present a petition signed by at least 10% of the delegates. Candidates would have an opportunity to address the mini-convention, followed by voting by the delegates. The top three candidates who would then enter the primaries.