The Demise of the American Convention System, 1880–1911

During the nineteenth century American political parties selected their candidates for elective offices in conventions. Around 1910 most states established a system of direct primaries whereby the voters selected their parties’ nominees for public office. The current study examines the transition from the indirect to the direct primary, as well as its implication for American politics. The book offers a systematic analysis of the convention system in four states (New Jersey, Michigan, Colorado, and California) and the legislative history of the regulation of political parties during the Progressive Era. It holds the major political parties responsible for doing away with the nominating convention. As candidates became more open and aggressive in pursuit of their parties’ nominations, they played a pivotal role in inaugurating the new nominating system. The convention system was never designed to withstand the pressures exerted on it by a more competitive nominating process.

John F. Reynolds is an associate professor of history at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Michigan State University and his Ph.D. from Rutgers University. He is the author of Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880–1920, and he has published articles in the Journal of American History, Social Science History, Historical Methods, and The Historian.
The Demise of the American Convention System, 1880–1911

JOHN F. REYNOLDS
University of Texas at San Antonio
To My Teachers:
Bill and Peter
and David O.
and
Richard M. and Richard L.
and especially for Rudy,
who insisted on a second book
Acknowledgments

A book fifteen years in the making accumulates a mountain of debt of the pecuniary and nonpecuniary kind. I am grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge the professional assistance and many kindnesses tendered me over the years from many quarters. The early stages of the project required extensive research into newspapers on microfilm that were tracked down and accessed through the diligent efforts of Sue McCray in the University of Texas at San Antonio’s interlibrary loan office. Every history department deserves a bibliographer on the library staff like Dr. Richard H. McDonnell, who combines his mastery of content with a command of search engines and Boolean logic. Paulo J. Villarreal skillfully digitized and cleaned up the many images in the text that originated from scratchy microfilm. Also at San Antonio, the indomitable Sheryl S. McDonald, the very able Anastasia J. Peña, and the same technologically savvy Paulo Villarreal have run the History Department with such efficiency and quiet professionalism that I could steal time to put the finishing touches on the manuscript, for which I am most thankful.

The numerous research trips that highlighted my summers were supported in part by the university’s Division of Behavioral and Cultural Sciences, through its director, Raymond R. Baird. My sincerest thanks to the staff at the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley; the Department of Special Collections at the Stanford University Library; the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan; the Archives at the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries; the Sinclair New Jersey Collection at Rutgers University; and the public libraries of Denver, Newark, and San Francisco. I must single out the late Charles F. Cummings of the Newark Public Library for his ready assistance in
tracking down material. A development leave from the University of Texas at San Antonio allowed me time to think and write my way through my research notes and emerge with a manuscript.

A number of scholars read and commented on earlier versions of the work given as papers or circulated as drafts. Among my San Antonio colleagues Patrick J. Kelly, in the History Department, volunteered to read some of the earliest chapters in the rough. As on most matters of importance, I have come to rely on James C. Schneider, who lent his meticulous editorial skills to the manuscript and, most especially, prod-ded me think about the work’s broader implications. Diane B. Walz, in the College of Business, generously tutored me on the finer points of binary logistic regression as it applied to the roll call analysis. I am also much obliged to my friends in the politics network of the Social Science History Association, who were subjected to yearly updates on my progress. Philip VanderMeer read and commented on early drafts and offered encour-agement. Howard L. Reiter offered much constructive criticism to the critical early drafts from the vantage point of political science. Peter H. Argersinger read the work with his usual care, helped me better hone my argument, and set me straight on some particulars. Late in the process I had the pleasure of meeting with Alan Ware, who had recently produced his own work on the direct primary but was generous to a fault in assist-ing me in seeing this work to fruition. I count myself fortunate in having Lewis Bateman in the editorial chair for this work, as he was for my previous book; my manuscripts will follow him wherever he goes. Susan Greenberg diligently scrubbed the text clean of ungrammatical stains and improved on the clarity. Mary E. Lennon has endured my many absences, joined in repeated discussions of the work’s content and merit, and read and reread and corrected the text without ever once asking, “Aren’t you done yet?” And that, I suppose, is why I married her.
Abbreviations

DEN  Detroit Evening News
DFP  Detroit Free Press
DP   Denver Post
DR   Denver Republican
DSG  Daily State Gazette (Trenton)
DT   Denver Times
LAT  Los Angeles Times
NA   Newark Advertiser
NEN  Newark Evening News
NSC  Newark Sunday Call
NYT  New York Times
RMN  Rocky Mountain News
SFC  San Francisco Chronicle
SFE  San Francisco Examiner
TTA  Trenton True American