

## Passion and Preferences

### *William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic National Convention*

The 1896 Democratic National Convention simultaneously proposed a radically new trajectory for American industrial expansion, harshly repudiated its own incumbent president, and rudely overturned the party's traditional regional and social hierarchy. The passion that attended these decisions was deeply embedded in the traditional alliances and understandings of the past, in the careers and futures of the party's most prominent leaders and most insignificant ward heelers, and in the personal relations of men who had long served together in the halls of Congress. This passion was continuously on display in the Chicago Coliseum, shaped by the rhythm of parliamentary ritual and the physical architecture of the convention hall. William Jennings Bryan anticipated the moment when pathos would be at its height and chose that moment to give his "Cross of Gold" address, thus harnessing passion to his personal ambition and winning the presidential nomination.

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*William Jennings Bryan and the 1896  
Democratic National Convention*

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*To Eliza and Seth*

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## Preface

Formal political settings can profoundly influence how individuals collectively make decisions. Such settings are the product of (1) the emotional and political commitments of the participants (including their interpersonal relationships and authority hierarchies), (2) the formal rituals that determine how decisions are to be made and what is to be decided (these formal rituals, in fact, are the most important constitutive feature of such settings), and (3) the physical architecture within which the participants are arrayed as these rituals unfold. It is the combination and interaction of these elements that make the configuration of any formal political setting unique. However, within these unique configurations there are common elements such that there also exists the potential for the intentional manipulation of the passions of the participants. Manipulation of those passions, in turn, can reshape the preferences of the participants in such a way as to change the collective decisions that would otherwise have been made. This book suggests a framework for interpreting these settings, utilizing events in the 1896 Democratic National Convention as examples.

I show that formal political settings shape, among other things, the emotions felt and displayed by the participants as they deliberate. That passion is often, in fact, an artifact of the ritual order of deliberative proceedings and of the material sites in which decisions are made. To see why this is so, we should first distinguish between passion and preferences. In many instances, passion merely reflects the intensity with which an individual holds a preference. For example, a person may strongly or weakly prefer one presidential candidate to another. In this case, passion is simply attached to the preference as a descriptive adjective (as when we say a person “passionately supports the candidate”). In many formal political decisions, passion is irrelevant. For example, when individuals record their preferences in a voting booth, the passion that they attach to their choice does not affect the way in which their preference enters into the decision calculus. To a voting machine, one vote is just one vote, no matter how much emotion the voter may feel. Votes formally recorded in legislative assemblies

are similarly “flat” with no weight assigned to how personally committed a member may be to his or her position.

Because formal political decisions thus ignore passion, the display of emotion by political actors has often been viewed as a largely irrelevant curiosity. This is a mistake for several reasons. For one thing, expressions of passion do more than simply describe the commitment of individuals to one of the alternatives in a formal political decision. Passion can also tell us whether a particular decision will change their future political loyalties and alignments. The loyalty of an individual to a party, for example, is an enduring bond, persisting over time and ultimately grounded in an expectation that the individual’s most intense political preferences will be best realized through affiliation with that party. For that reason, a political party instantiates the political futures of those who belong to it. From the individual’s perspective, the party might take an incorrect position on some things, but when all is weighed in the balance, the preponderance of correct positions warrants the individual’s loyalty. Put another way, party loyalty is a practice in which individuals embed their preferences within an extended time horizon after they have compared the policies favored by their party with those proffered by competitors. There is thus a “future” entrained by a decision to support a party in an election and, more generally, by any political act.

A strong emotional commitment to the decision at hand can truncate that future. In extreme cases, individuals may be so passionately committed to a decision that there is no future at all if the outcome goes against them. For example, in the months preceding the election of Lincoln in 1860 southerners passionately displayed their opposition to a Republican victory, visibly demonstrating that they were, metaphorically speaking, putting all their chips on the table. If they lost the hand they were playing, they would withdraw from the game; in that case, there would be no future moves for them within the American Union. During the Cold War, the slogan “Better dead than red” reflected similar sentiments for many Americans as they considered the implications of a world dominated by the Soviet Union. Displays of passion thus demonstrate that political decisions will have consequences, consequences that will strongly affect the future. That information cannot be communicated in the simple act of voting. That is why passionate political tracts, mass demonstrations, and suicide attacks convey information that cannot be retrieved from the study of election returns and roll call votes.

The struggle over the silver plank was the most climactic event of the 1896 Democratic National Convention, a crossing of the Rubicon that abandoned to their fates many of the party’s most revered national leaders. The passionate protests of the gold men thus indicated that they saw little or no future within their party if the platform were to endorse silver. During the weeks preceding the opening of the convention, the eastern gold men had forcefully described their predicament to their southern and western brethren. Asking the gold men to endorse silver and work for a silver ticket was, they said, like asking condemned men to walk the plank. How could the silver wing break what

had been the traditional social contract between the sections? For decades, this social contract had permitted congressional Democrats to stake their positions on silver while allowing the national party to nominate gold presidential candidates on platforms that evaded positions on money. The formula for national victory in the presidential race had been New York, New Jersey, and one or two other small northern states plus the South. The formula for congressional majorities had been huge, almost solid delegations from the South and New York City with a scattering of representatives and senators from the remainder of the country. The price exacted by the eastern states for their electoral votes in the presidential race was the practical (but not open) endorsement of the gold standard (and, almost invariably, the nomination of a New Yorker as the presidential candidate). Congressional Democrats simply divided along sectional lines when the monetary issue surfaced in Congress.<sup>1</sup>

An unequivocal endorsement of silver in the national platform would utterly destroy this social contract. The eastern gold men saw nothing but disaster ahead for their state tickets, and their own political careers would go down in flames with those tickets. To them, the relative insulation of the southern branch of the party from the monetary issue, arising out of the growing popularity of “white supremacy” as a Democratic campaign theme, seemed to make southern insistence on a silver plank a rather gratuitous assault on the eastern wing. And easterners repeatedly called up the history of their unflagging support for “home rule” in the South in bringing about an end to Reconstruction and, thus, the return to power of the Democratic party in the region. How cruel, the easterners lamented, that this region should now turn on their protectors, destroying them in pursuit of the silver grail.

The pathos of this struggle over money was thus deeply embedded in the history of the party, in the manifold alliances and understandings of the past, in the careers and futures of the party’s most prominent leaders and most insignificant ward heelers, and in the interpersonal relations of men who had served together in the halls of Congress. When they passed one another in the hotel corridors or in the aisles on the convention floor, there was bitterness in their glances, sadness in the words they exchanged, and poignancy in their mutual recognition that they were now destined to go separate ways. The expressions on their faces eloquently confirmed the sundering of their common fates. It was as if the future of the Democratic party could be read from a single glance on the convention floor.

In the demonstrations that occurred in this convention, there was little or nothing in the way of rational debate or logical exposition. These collective displays did not persuade others to change their preferences through the analytical sophistication of their argument. But they did convince observers that the consequences of the decision at hand may be something they wish to avoid. In

<sup>1</sup> For a description of these arrangements and how they changed after 1896, see Richard Franklin Bense, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 6.

that sense, the passionate displays of the gold men demonstrated that the bonds of party comradeship would be severed if the silver plank were adopted. Some of the protests went even further than this, threatening that gold Democrats would defect to the Republican ticket. There were thus future consequences entailed by the outcome of the struggle over silver, and it was the prospect of these future consequences that was intended, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to persuade the silver wing to alter its course.

Displays of passion often raise the intensity of emotional commitments for those participating in them. When these displays thus feed on themselves, they increase the solidaristic identity and cohesion of the group. And this, in turn, makes the displays all the more effective as a political tactic. As we shall see, William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech was delivered at such a moment, a moment in which the silver men fervently wished to demonstrate that their commitment to their position was just as strong as that of the gold men to their position. In a sense, Bryan positioned himself as a cheerleader for silver and then performed so effectively that the emotional intensity of the demonstrations burst all bounds, transferring sentiment for silver to himself as presidential candidate. This transfer, of course, was not the intent of the demonstrators when they entered into their frenzied displays; only Bryan recognized that he could instrumentally serve his own personal ends by giving that speech at that time. Even so, we could note another reason why displays of passion should not be ignored: they sometimes change the preferences of the participants in ways they do not anticipate.

The physical architecture of political action provides the setting within which displays of passion can be performed and observed. The material settings for such displays in the convention were hotel lobbies, campaign headquarters, and the Coliseum where the formal proceedings were held. Such settings can be permanent (e.g., the chamber in which members of the U.S. Senate deliberate), ephemeral (e.g., the streets in which a marching club and band advertise a presidential hopeful), or designed for a transient political purpose (e.g., the hall constructed for a political convention). The physical architecture of such places facilitates the performance and observation of some kinds of displays and obscures (and thus discourages) others. Because, as we shall see, much of the energy unleashed in a demonstration depends on whether and how the demonstrators can view one another and their opponents, the material setting for political action significantly influences how (and whether) these displays take place.

Formal collective decisions are always tightly structured by a ritual order. That ritual order, for example, determines when the moment has arrived in which voting will take place, the serial sequence in which preferences will be recorded, and how and by whom the outcome of the voting will be announced. This ritual order influences several aspects of collective decisions. First, the sequence in which decisions are taken up and decided shapes the expectations of the participants. In the 1896 convention, for example, the delegates knew that the convention officers would be selected, then the platform adopted, and,

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only after those decisions had been made, a candidate for president would be named. A convention thus proceeds in stages, successively orienting the participants with reference to a sequence of decisions that must be collectively made. The second way in which the ritual order affects collective decisions is by conferring or denying formal recognition on the participants when, for example, they wish to address the convention or propose a motion. Formal recognition both focuses the attention of the participants on a select group of individuals and, by exclusion, restricts the range of alternatives considered by the delegates. In the 1896 convention, the presiding chairmen apparently conferred recognition on anyone who observed ritual proprieties in seeking their attention but, as in all such settings, enforced limitations on the purposes to which that recognition might be put.

Both the sequential order in which decisions are made and the way in which ritual focuses attention on the participants significantly influence the construction of a site of politics, but the most important effect lies outside observance of ritual proprieties. That is because demonstrative acts become most visible when they are, in fact, disruptions of a ritual order. Put another way, displays of passion are most effective when they violate the formal proprieties of a proceeding; demonstrators display the intensity of their feelings by transgressing on the otherwise collectively observed etiquette determined by ritual. In that sense, the ritual order becomes an indispensable backdrop against which passion can be displayed. In addition, because most demonstrations are more or less inarticulate concatenations of noise and movement, the ritual order also provides much of the meaning for a display. For example, a demonstration by the gold men as Senator David Hill walked to the podium to give the opening defense of the gold standard during the platform debate was both a testament to Hill's prestige as the leader of the gold wing and a fervent expression of passion with respect to the intensity of that wing's commitment to their cause. But we do not know this because the demonstrators actually said that was what they intended. We know this because the ritual order, announced from the podium by the chairman of the convention, provided that Hill would now speak to the convention in this role. The arrival of this ritual moment thus did three things simultaneously: it coordinated the collective response of thousands of gold delegates and spectators in the convention hall, provided the meaning of the demonstration itself, and displayed (as a disruption of proceedings otherwise highly protected by ritual) the intensity of the commitment of the gold wing to its cause. In the absence of this ritually defined moment, the demonstration would have been a meaningless puzzle to observers, so much so that it is very unlikely that the gold men could have mounted it at all.

The 1896 Democratic National Convention provides a splendid setting in which to illustrate these theoretical implications. For one thing, there was a lot of passion in this conclave, unlike many modern conventions in which the participants and the proceedings seem almost entirely devoid of emotion. In addition, most of the participants were party professionals, fully prepared to evaluate the signaling and other displays of sentiment constantly produced in

this information-rich environment. Because passionate displays came in many forms and erupted in many sites, we have a lot that we can analyse.

Furthermore, we have two equally important but very different situations in the 1896 convention. One of them revolved around adoption of the silver plank in the Democratic party platform. Because the relative merits of silver and gold had been publicly debated for many years, almost all delegates were publicly committed to one or the other of the two metals well before their arrival in Chicago. In fact, by publicly aligning themselves on one side or the other of the great “Battle of the Standards,” many of the delegates had long ago wagered their political careers on either silver or gold.

The other situation centered on the nomination of a presidential candidate. While the delegates had strong preferences with respect to silver and gold, they had only ambivalent feelings toward the candidates who were competing for the nomination. To be sure, the convention did have a front-runner in Richard Parks Bland of Missouri. Trailing him were almost a dozen candidates, some of them no more than the favorite son of a small state delegation. Others had more substantial reputations and followings. A few state conventions had bound their delegates to one of these candidates, but beyond these instructions (as they were called), loyalties to particular candidates were usually weak.

Both the platform fight and the presidential nomination involved the same participants, and these participants in each instance felt that the stakes were very high. The decisions themselves were almost but not entirely separable; announced positions on the monetary plank of the platform were so strongly fixed and the plank was so salient that silver candidates for the nomination could not and would not have run on a gold platform and vice versa. However, all silver candidates could have run on the silver plank that was actually adopted and all gold candidates could have stood on the hard money platform that was rejected.

Thus we can analyse two very different situations in the same convention, one of them known well in advance to closely resemble a structured game and the other expected to be a highly contingent process. In the structured game the preferences on the monetary question were fixed in advance and the decision rules merely processed the outcome. In the absence of deception or other tactics that would impair the transparency of the proceedings, the outcome was thus determined before the members assembled to make the decision. In the highly contingent presidential race, the proceedings themselves shaped the preferences of the members, and the outcome was thus contingent on what happened after the members assembled but before they actually voted. The participants were exactly the same in each case, but they interacted with each other and made decisions in diametrically contrasting ways.

The idea for this book germinated in a series of conferences (“Preferences in Time”) at the Russell Sage Foundation. While all the participants compelled me to clarify the general thesis, the conference organizers, Ira Katznelson and Barry Weingast, were particularly (and invaluable) insistent. A subsequent conference

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at Yale (“Political Action and Political Change: Agents, Entrepreneurs, and Leaders in American Political Development”) gave me an opportunity to extend the analysis, especially with respect to the impact of the physical setting of the Coliseum and the procedural order on Bryan’s convention strategy. Among the many helpful criticisms I received in New Haven, I should single out David Mayhew’s advice as the most helpful. Stephen Skowronek, both as conference organizer and co-editor of the volume that came out of that conference, also helped me to improve the theoretical frame. In my home department at Cornell, Banu Bargu generously read and commented on several drafts. Hong-an Tran spent many hours reworking the illustrations so that they would clearly depict what the uneven quality of the newspaper originals sometimes only implied. The Cambridge reviewers, Dan Kryder and David Mayhew, gave me pages and pages of criticism for which I am eternally grateful. They were able to see what I was trying to do even when my text was rather stubbornly opaque. Although I have attempted to heed all their recommendations and suggestions, I remain thoroughly convinced that I have not done them justice. As always, my editor Lew Bateman was everything that an author could hope for. Books, like films, need producers, and he is one of the best. And Stephanie Sakson has again superbly edited my prose for the third time in as many books. Last but not least, I would also like to thank Marie Chong, the proprietor, chef, and matriarch of Little Tokyo where I learned that cham pong could be much more than a meal.

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