



Too Long for a Presidential Campaign

By Herbert G. Klein

The length of the presidential campaign has significantly risen since 1976, a trend that contributes to voter apathy while greatly increasing the expense and negativity of campaigns overall.

The American public is about to see and feel the wrath of an unprecedented “ironman” event that will test the will and the patience of voters and will probe the skills and the physical and mental endurance of the candidates for president in 2004.

This may be the longest and most negative campaign in history.

Thirty years ago, both political parties seriously were considering ways to shorten campaigns, moving conventions closer to election time and scheduling primaries later in the year.

Along came a little-known governor and peanut farmer who went on a two-year, nonstop campaign and upset all odds in winning his party’s nomination and eventually the presidency. His name was Jimmy Carter, and he defeated President Gerald Ford in 1976.

After staving off the primary campaigns of Morris K. Udall, Jerry Brown, and others, Carter cinched the Democratic nomination by winning the Ohio primary on June 8. That was considered early for a Democratic nomination battle, but it is in direct contrast with 2004 when John Kerry quickly parlayed a January 19 caucus victory in Iowa into quick control of the nomination before St. Patrick’s Day.

Historically, the accepted presidential general election campaign’s starting date has been Labor Day, a particularly monumental date for the Democrats. This year, the starting date was March

15. The negative vigor of this early campaigning has been stepped up by several factors, but the most unusual tactic came from the Democratic candidates who spent most of the primary season attacking President George W. Bush instead of each other. The effect has been damaging to Bush, causing him to launch his campaign months ahead of normal starting dates. Thus the campaign is already in mid-season form, and this is only May.

Long campaigns are indecently expensive, and they breed the kind of negative campaigning one has already witnessed in March and April this year. It is likely the campaigns will create the kind of voter apathy one has seen increasingly in all presidential campaigns since 1960. Major differences exist between President Bush and Senator John Kerry, but it is questionable whether the public will get excited as it hears about them time after time.

Both parties will spend millions trying to get out their vote in November, but exciting voter interest when it counts by running shorter campaigns might prove more effective in the future.

This year’s early primary dates were pushed by Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe. While primary and caucus dates are selected by states, political parties guide the dates, and thus we have the Iowa Caucus as the accepted starter, followed by New Hampshire and eventually the Southern states. On March 2, the larger states, such as New York and California, cast their ballots and, in effect, closed the primary season this year.

Herbert G. Klein is a national fellow at AEI. A version of this article appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on April 16, 2004.

Precedents for Political Change

It is possible to change all this.

The protocol for primaries, caucuses, and conventions has been altered frequently during the last century and even since 1960 when television became a major factor. If the two major political parties decided that they wanted to change the rules, they could do so, but it might take pressure from a sitting president to get the process started.

Political platforms were not even a part of party conventions until 1892, and there were no female delegates until 1900 when each party had one. Women only started to become a factor at the conventions in 1920. All that has changed for the better.

There were no primaries until 1904 when Florida enacted a law enabling Democrats to elect their delegates. The Republican convention of 1908 was a first for the GOP, which enacted rules allowing any state to adopt a primary system.

Franklin D. Roosevelt broke a barrier in 1932 when he became the first presidential nominee to appear before a convention and accept a nomination. The Republicans did not follow suit until 1944 when Thomas E. Dewey accepted the nomination in person. When Roosevelt accepted his final nomination in 1944, he did so with a radio broadcast from a secret train car in San Diego.

Television gained its dominance from the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, in which the voters decided to judge candidates by their appearance as well as what they had to say. In the first debate, Kennedy performed best on television and Nixon on radio. Those debates took place after the networks pressured Congress to eliminate a rule requiring broadcasters to include all candidates, not just the two major parties.

Today conventions are designed for television, although in recent years networks have drastically reduced their convention coverage, and it appears that

they will cut back further this year. Gavel-to-gavel coverage is long gone except on C-SPAN.

The long campaign of 2004 and a decrease in television coverage of conventions and campaigns are likely to create apathy and a low voter turnout in a year when the election, in all probability, will be determined by independent voters. Perhaps apathy will cause the two parties to take another look at the nominating process.

Condensing the Calendar

The Republican convention this year will edge into September, but that is because the Olympics will be held after the Democratic convention and will occupy the public interest until the last week in August.

A good start toward shorter campaigns would be to move the 2008 conventions to September and to schedule the caucuses and primaries to start in June. In the past there has been support for a plan to have four area primary dates covering four separate regions of the country during June, July and August. This would place candidates of both parties in the Northeast one time, and then in the West, Midwest, and South. The order of succession could be changed every four years, and there would be two weeks between each primary. Each state would select its own nominating process.

Other solutions are possible, but the central point is that there needs to be a drastic change, and there is precedent to support change. The Internet brings to this election a new factor but not a major one, and campaign broadcast coverage is decreasing. Many newspapers still cover campaigns thoroughly, but even some of the print publications feature more local than national news.

Most important, voters are losing interest, and in a democracy, apathy could be fatal. To quote a much used campaign slogan, "It's time for a change."