

**Consider whether the growth of primary elections in the Presidential nomination process has reduced the role and functions of the national nominating conventions to a mere formality.**

*(40 marks)*

The Democrat convention of 2008 marked the first time since 1976 (and the Republican NNC), that a party's presidential candidate had been in doubt at the opening of a National Nominating Convention. The growth in the role of primaries has often made certain the party's candidates prior to the occasion, arguably reducing the role of the NNCs to a mere formality?

Primary elections occur in the first half of an election year, with the electorate voting for who they would like to run in the upcoming Presidential election. Arguably this further increases the democracy of the country, by involving the electorate at such an early stage in an election campaign. Prior to the reforms of 1976, states held a series of meetings (not too dissimilar to the caucuses held today) in "smoke-filled rooms", where the party bosses of each state, decided on who they would support for the party's nomination. The voters were blissfully unaware of this stage, usually only taking notice when the official election season began following the NNC. Clearly, the NNC was at this stage incredibly important as it effectively announced a party's candidate to the country, for the very first time. Today, the electorate of a state vote for the candidate they would like to see run, thus undermining the status of the National Nominating Convention.

Primaries are run under state law and so a great number of variations exist. One such variation is whether they are "open" or "closed". Prior to the official primary season beginning, voters are asked to declare their part. Prior to the official primary season beginning, voters are asked to declare their party affiliation (if any); in "closed" primaries, only declared Democrats can vote in the Democrat primary. This could be seen to make the system fairer, as the electorate here are only voting for the candidate they wish to run for President. If all states were to adopt this system, then there would be an ever clearer indication of the winning candidate prior to the convention. In "open" primaries, however, as the new suggests voters can vote in both parties' elections. This can lead to a cross-over voting and a great deal of tactical voting. Such that, in the 2000 Michigan Republican primary (which uses an "open" system), 66% of registered Republicans voted for George W. Bush, whilst John McCain gained 82% of the Democrat vote. Of course, the voters may simply be voting for their "second choice" candidate, if their party loses the overall election, but in many cases a voter may vote for who they deem to be the weakest candidate. This can lead to confusion before the National Nominating Convention, with many of the party bosses unaware of who is actually leading the race.

Today, the primaries are an increasingly strong indicator in deciding who should be a party's presidential candidate. One such indication is that of delegates: throughout the primary process, candidates pick up delegates in the different states. Delegates pledge to vote for that candidate in the balloting at the National Nominating Conventions, thus giving a clear indicator beforehand of potential victors. In the 2008 Republican nomination race, for instance, John McCain gained a delegate count of 1500, whilst Mike Huckabee only had 300. McCain would, of course, later go on and win the nomination. The convention was not held until September, yet by the end of the March of the same year, McCain was the only candidate left in the running, implying that if a candidate fails to gain a substantial amount of delegates they will drop out. The NNC was a mere formality to have a ballot and announce him as the Republican's 2008 Presidential candidate.

Of course, before the need to gain delegates, candidates go through what has become known as the “invisible primaries”. This is the unofficial campaigning which occurs before the start of the official primaries. Candidates may appear on TV news shows such as NBC’s influential “Meet the Press” or “The Capital Gang” on CNN. These programmes have in-depth interviews which are a great opportunity for candidates to get “their name out there” and gain support, prior to the official campaigning season. Chat shows such as “The Late Show” give candidates a chance to show their more human side and appeal to the more “style-conscious” voters. Candidates may prepare and deliver formal speeches (free from party endorsement) to possible supporters; others may write a book in which they give across their key policy ideas (e.g. Barack Obama’s “Audacity of Hope” in 2008). With sufficient marketing, books can give a candidate a good foothold with the more politically-aware electorate. Public feeling and comments made in the media give a good indication of the strongest candidates with the highest chance of gaining a party nomination. In 2000, helped by his role as incumbent Vice-President, Al Gore gained a lot of popular support during the invisible primaries, going on to easily win the Democrat’s nomination.

The main role of the National Nominating Conventions have undeniably decreased in recent years, with in many cases the event simply been a confirmation of the leading candidate. However, that could be deemed as the main, modern role of these events: to officially confirm the party’s candidate. These are clearly big media events and can lead to a number of effects within the party. During the campaign, it is understandable that the party will become somewhat disunited with the leading candidates fighting it out for their party’s nomination. Indeed, by the start of the 2008 Democrat convention it was still somewhat unclear over whom would be the party’s Presidential candidate. Both Obama and Clinton had a high number of delegates and both had received support from previous candidates who had since dropped out. Of course, Obama won the nomination and Clinton had to openly endorse her opponent. The convention reunited the party with positive morale, with many sure the impending election was in the bag. This image of disunity prior the NNC was used by Republican candidate John McCain to his advantage, claiming that the party was disorganised and disunited.

However, if the role and function of the NNCs has been decreased to a mere formality, what do they actually accomplish? For one, they are symbolic of the start of the long, national campaign, a feat which often reunites a disunited party back together. This can be somewhat of a task given the conflicting nature of primaries. This symbolism also encourages more voters to “sit up and take notice” of the Presidential election: turnout is very low during the primaries (with most states only getting a turnout of around 30%), but now the two candidates have been officially announced, people are more prepared to participate. Perhaps this is because they feel their vote actually counts for something now (i.e. the President, rather than just a candidate). Because of this, it can be argued that the conventions encourage greater voter turnout in the impending election.

The national nominating conventions are also great media events, with almost all now staged around the idea of TV viewing. The image of an upbeat, united party makes for great viewing and can be a great opportunity to pick up more voters. In recent years, the conventions have been held in huge auditoriums with grand, purpose-built sets and are tightly choreographed. This all adds to the television and media spectacle, with many apolitical viewers tuning in. At the 1996 Democrat convention, actor Christopher Reeve turned up to show his support for incumbent President, Bill Clinton.

Acceptance speeches by the winning candidates occur at the conventions and these can often pick up potential voters, which can be seen in the opinion polls. In 1992, for instance, Bill Clinton enjoyed a “post-convention bounce” of a record 16 percentage points. Moreover, the speeches can

help distance and connect with past governments and Presidents. In 2000, for instance, Bob Dole made a conscious effort to distance himself from Bill Clinton following his scandals and impeachment and instead promoted himself as his own man. This arguably worked as he enjoyed a boost of 7% points the following day.

The conventions also formally announce the candidate for Vice-Presidency. This, however, attributes to the argument that NNCs are now a mere formality, as these are almost always known beforehand. Having said that, the less politically aware voters may be encouraged to vote for a particular candidate on the basis of their running mate, alone. In 2008, for instance, John McCain gained a large proportion of the female vote following the Democrat convention (and the announcement of Barack Obama as their candidate) and the loss of Hillary Clinton. McCain's running mate was, of course, Sarah Palin.

There is no doubt that the National Nominating Conventions will continue for many years to come, however their role and purpose has changed significantly since their formation. The traditional idea of them been the stage to announce a party's candidate to the country, for the first time, is long gone since the advent of primaries and the media. However, calling them a "mere formality" is misleading as they serve a very important purpose of brining in voters and giving across the party's message. Yes, their role has changed, but it has changed for the better.