



Delegates to the 1900 G.O.P. National Convention met in Philadelphia to renominate President William McKinley. But who would replace Vice President Garret A. Hobart, who had died in office? When Theodore Roosevelt got the nod, Ohio's Mark Hanna said to McKinley: "Your duty to the country is to live for four years."

Choosing America's Presidents

The presidential primary election season is about to begin. Nearly every Tuesday night during the coming months, TV anchormen will gravely report that, based on early returns or exit polls, one Democratic candidate has (or has not) pulled away from his rivals, and that a Republican aspirant has (or has not) bested George Bush, the putative G.O.P. "front-runner." Meanwhile, politicians and scholars debate the oft-reformed nominating process: Does it have to be so long and expensive? Does it produce candidates who will be able to govern the country? Here, our contributors explain how the American way of choosing presidents came to be. They describe how the early political parties soon changed the Founding Fathers' system, which twice gave the new republic George Washington as its chief executive, and discuss the origins and effects of today's "primary game."

THE PARTIES TAKE OVER

by James W. Ceaser and Neil Spitzer

Last September 17, several thousand American politicians and foreign dignitaries elbowed into Independence Square in Philadelphia to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. Addressing the crowd, President Reagan called the constitutional system "the great safeguard of our liberty," and praised the document which "has endured, through times perilous as well as prosperous . . ."

The celebration no doubt would have pleased the 39 men who signed the Constitution in September 1787. The democratic government that they designed has adapted well to the exigencies of modern life. But James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and the other Founding Fathers would have been startled to learn how Mr. Reagan and other recent U.S. presidents have been nominated and elected to office.

The method of presidential selection that the Founders devised and inscribed in the Constitution functioned in its intended form for only two elections (in 1789 and 1792). Moreover, their method bears little re-

semblance to today's drawn-out nomination and election campaigns.

The Founders created a body that became known as the Electoral College—a group of men, chosen by the states, who would elect the president. The college, the Founders hoped, would both temper the electorate's wishes and ensure that successful candidates enjoyed a broad mandate. The college still exists, and candidates still campaign to win electoral votes. But political parties have altered the Electoral College's role. The parties choose the electors, who no longer exercise their own discretion as the Founders thought they would. Instead, electors vote for their party's choice—in December, long after the stress and pageantry of the autumn presidential campaign have faded away.

No Campaigning, Please

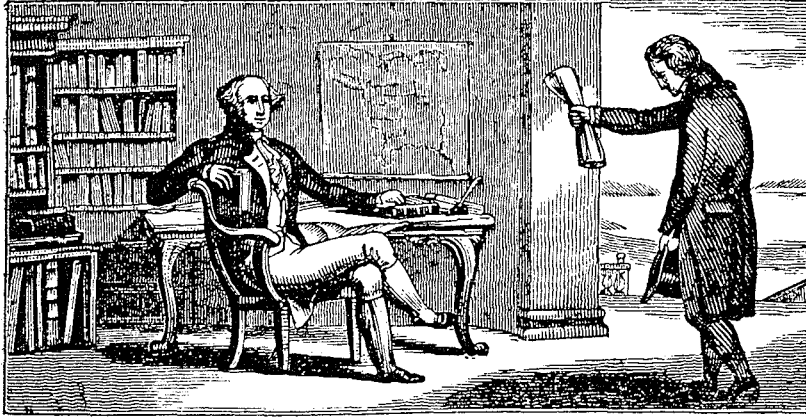
Although the Founders opposed them, political parties have, ironically, performed many of the functions that the Founders hoped the Electoral College would perform. The two major parties have generally moderated ideological extremes, tamed political ambitions, and helped mute sectional differences. In doing so, they have enabled Americans to select or reject candidates for the presidency in an orderly fashion, without triggering coups, civil strife, or mob rule.

Though short lived, the Founders' system for electing the president was not created without considerable thought and reflection. The 55 delegates who assembled at the Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall) on May 25, 1787, debated the matter of presidential selection many times. This was, as Pennsylvania delegate James Wilson said, "the most difficult of all [issues] on which we have to decide."

Most of the delegates shared several guiding principles as the Constitutional Convention began. They believed that the presidential election was a process that should be considered central to (not apart from) the presidency. They argued that the election, like the office itself, should not encourage *radical* change, because that harms a republic. Moreover, choosing the executive, they thought, should encourage ambitious men to pursue the presidency by acting in ways that would be helpful to the Republic. Thus, the election should be a *retrospective* process, with the emphasis on the aspirants' previous records, not a prospective exercise based on campaign promises. Indeed, the Founders did not envision any "campaign" at all.

Several different plans for electing the president circulated at the Philadelphia convention. The Virginia Plan, which 33-year-old Virginia governor Edmund Randolph read to the convention on May 29, proposed

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Washington receives word of his election. Congress considered referring to the chief executive as "His Excellency," "Elective Majesty," "His Serene Highness," and "Elective Highness," before settling on "Mr. President."

that the national legislature select the executive.* Connecticut's Roger Sherman favored the plan, because it would make the executive "absolutely dependent on that body."

The convention's "nationalists," however, wanted a system of electing the president that would keep the executive and legislative branches of government as "independent as possible of each other." The nationalists, notably James Wilson, favored a direct popular election. But that idea struck some delegates as impractical; suffrage qualifications, after all, varied from state to state. Some delegates thought that the voters might not be qualified for the task. It would "be as unnatural to refer the choice of a proper character for a chief Magistrate to the people," observed Virginia's George Mason, as it would "to refer a trial of colours to a blind man."

During July and August 1787, the Philadelphia convention repeatedly returned to the same issues. The delegates voted five times in favor of having the president appointed by Congress, only to change their minds. Individual delegates proposed, variously, that the chief executive's term last three, seven, eight, 15, and 30 years, or even for life. In all, the convention cast 60 ballots on different proposals for electing the president.

On August 24, the convention's delegates, out of frustration, turned over a host of unresolved matters—including the election of the executive—to a Committee on Postponed Parts. On September 4, the committee recommended a plan that had been proposed earlier: the election of the president by a group of electors "equal to the whole number of

*The convention did not decide to call the executive "the president" until September 1787.

Senators and members of the House of Representatives.”

According to the plan, each state would appoint presidential electors in a way to be decided by the state legislatures. Voting in their home states, the electors would cast two ballots each for president. The ballots would then be sent to the national capital, where they would be counted by the president of the Senate. The candidate receiving the highest number of votes would become president—if he received at least the number of votes equal to a majority of the number of electors. The runner-up would become vice president.

The Founders awarded each elector two ballots to make it probable that one candidate would receive enough votes to win. To give candidates from small states a chance, the elector had to cast at least one ballot for a candidate from outside the elector’s home state. So that electors would not waste their second votes on unworthy candidates, the committee created the position of vice president—an office that none of the delegates had even mentioned previously.

“Such an officer as vice-President was not wanted,” as North Carolina’s Hugh Williamson later conceded. “He was introduced only for the sake of a valuable mode of election which required two [candidates] to be chosen at the same time.”

George Washington’s Worry

The convention delegates initially decided that if there was a tie, or if no candidate received enough votes to win, the Senate would choose the president from among the five highest vote-getters. But James Wilson rose to protest. The president, he argued, ought to be a man of the people, not a “Minion of the Senate.” The delegates agreed that the House of Representatives would settle “contingent” elections. To give small states more say, congressmen would vote as members of state delegations, with each state casting one vote.

Not everyone was delighted with the contingent election plan. Madison considered the House scheme “pregnant with a mischievous tendency.” Jefferson, who was not at the convention, later called it “the most dangerous blot in our constitution.”

Though the convention set up the system to produce a winner, some delegates nevertheless thought that “contingent” elections would take place often—perhaps even “nineteen times in twenty,” as George Mason predicted. After George Washington, they reckoned, no candidate would receive a clear-cut majority, and the electors would, in effect, present nominees to the House of Representatives.

The delegates included an age requirement (35) to make it likely that the candidates would have a record of public service that others could judge. To attract capable men for the job, the convention awarded the executive a lengthy term of office (4 years), for which he could run as many times as he wished. The entire plan was embodied in Article II,

Section I of the Constitution.

The Electoral College formula was one of the Constitution's most innovative features. It had no precedent, either in Britain or in any of the American states. Significantly, it kept the executive independent of the legislature, as the "nationalists" had insisted. It was democratic enough to reflect the public's wishes, but select enough to thwart a dangerous popular candidate. Because it was not "pre-established," the college could not be manipulated in advance of the election. Thirty-two-year-old Alexander Hamilton called the system for selecting the president "excellent, if not perfect."

It was also quite temporary.

The first election took place as the Founders had intended. On the first Wednesday in January 1789, the voters in four states (Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware) went to the polls to vote for the electors, who had been nominated by informal caucuses in the state legislatures, or by friends and neighbors. In the other six voting states, the legislatures chose the electors. One month later, the electors sent their ballots by mail to the capital, New York.*

Politicians must have pondered two unknowns. First, would George Washington, the electors' one and only choice for president, accept the job? His ambivalence toward accepting the task was well known. But he decided, as he wrote to Benjamin Franklin, to "forego repose and domestic enjoyment," at his beloved Mount Vernon, "for trouble, perhaps for public obloquy."

Jefferson's Gazette

Second, would the Senate gather the quorum needed for the president of the Senate to count the votes? By March 4, the day the Senate was appointed to count the electoral votes, only eight members of the upper house had arrived in New York. It took over four weeks and an urgent announcement, stressing "the indispensable necessity of putting the government into immediate operation" before a quorum (12 out of 22 senators) could be assembled.

George Washington, 57 years old, was elected president of the United States unanimously, winning one vote from each of the 69 electors. Runner-up John Adams, who collected 34 electoral votes, became vice president. Ten other minor candidates won 35 votes combined.

The first presidential election must have pleased the Founders. A distinguished body of electors had quietly selected the most capable men for the presidency and vice presidency. There had been no competition,

*The first congressional elections took place in the fall of 1788 and the winter of 1789. The state legislatures chose U.S. senators until the ratification of the 17th Amendment (1913), which called for direct election of senators. U.S. representatives were chosen by direct election from the start. Generally, candidates were nominated informally, by friends or by a caucus of state legislators. Newspapers and "committees of correspondence" publicized their candidacies. In most states, only white, male property owners could vote. They did so orally, before a polling official who wrote down the voter's choice.

no partisan squabbling, no grand promises, and no demagoguery. Most of all, there had been no parties. The “great object” of the new government, as James Madison had explained in *The Federalist*, was to “secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction [party], and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government.”

Whatever the Founders’ notions about parties, it quickly became clear that the American presidency was intrinsically a political office. As chief executive, Washington possessed the power to promote his views, to rally his political allies, and to ensure that the new government would carry out the public’s business as he saw fit.

The first parties emerged as rival factions, in both the fledgling administration and Congress, during Washington’s first term. The feuding started when Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton proposed that the federal government assume the states’ debts and create a national bank. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson opposed Hamilton’s “system” because it centralized power at the expense of the states.

Pro- and anti-Hamilton groups formed in Congress. Senators and representatives from New England supported Hamilton and his policies. But their colleagues from Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina generally followed the lead of Representative James Madison, a staunch Jeffersonian who led the anti-Hamilton forces in Congress.



Calling Aaron Burr a “Catiline of America,” Alexander Hamilton helped stop the New Yorker from becoming president in 1800. But Burr got revenge, killing Hamilton in a duel at Weehawken, New Jersey, on July 11, 1804.

Neither Jefferson nor Hamilton shied away from involving the press in their disputes. In August 1791, Jefferson hired New York editor Philip Freneau to work in the tiny State Department, ostensibly as a translating clerk. But Jefferson directed his new employee to start publishing the *National Gazette*. The new paper was needed, Jefferson argued, to counter the “hymns & lauds chanted” by the “paper of pure Toryism,” the strongly pro-Hamilton *Gazette of the United States*. Meanwhile, Washington, who refused to align himself with either group, worried that the “attacks upon almost every measure of government” with which “the Gazettes are so strongly pregnated,” threatened to “rend the Union asunder . . .”

Partisan editors helped to widen the breach between the two nascent parties. In editorials and news stories, Hamiltonians (or “Federalists”) referred to their opponents as disorganizers, Jacobins—and Democrats, then a derogatory term. The Jeffersonians (or “Republicans”) called their adversaries Monarchists, Tories, and Royalists. By the end of Washington’s first four-year term, the parties, though still loosely knit, were firmly in place. “Party animosities here [in Philadelphia],” Jefferson wrote to a colleague in October 1792, “have raised a wall between those who differ in political sentiments.”

Despite all the partisan discord, Washington was re-elected unanimously in 1792. But George Clinton, the immensely popular Republican governor of New York, decided to challenge the Federalist incumbent John Adams for the vice presidency. During this contest, the two fledgling parties took the first big step in altering the role of the Electoral College: Party leaders began to nominate the presidential electors.

‘Baneful Effects’

In Massachusetts, for example, a party circular exhorted voters to cast their ballots for a “slate” of electors, which party managers had drawn up “for the purpose of concentrating the suffrages.” In all 15 states, the electors cast one ballot for Washington. In casting their other ballots for Adams or Clinton, the electors did not exercise their own discretion, but voted for their party’s candidate. Little wonder then, that in all but two states the winning slates of electors voted *en bloc* for either Adams or Clinton. Adams swept New England and retained the vice presidency.

The parties further transformed the Electoral College system four years later, during the presidential election of 1796. In September, George Washington announced that he would not seek a third term as president. In his famous Farewell Address, he warned that “the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party” constituted the “worst enemy” of popular governments. But “baneful effects” were everywhere in evidence during the election, which evolved into a contest between Republicans and Federalists. Neither John Adams nor Thomas Jefferson *campaign*ed for the

presidency as party candidates. But their supporters made it clear to which party each candidate belonged. "Thomas Jefferson is a firm Republican," proclaimed one widely circulated handbill. "John Adams is an avowed Monarchist."

Neither party needed formally to nominate Jefferson or Adams since each was the obvious candidate. But who would serve as vice president?

Neither Federalists nor Republicans in Congress would leave that decision in the hands of independent electors. There was too much at stake now. Not only did the Federalists and Republicans each want to win the presidency; they also wanted to make sure that the other party's presidential candidate did not win the vice presidency by collecting the second highest number of electoral votes. So members of each party in the House and Senate met at two different party assemblies, or caucuses, to choose a vice presidential candidate who would receive the electors' second votes. Little is known about what transpired at the caucuses. The early ones were held in secret.

The Federalist caucus chose Thomas Pinckney, the former governor of South Carolina, as its candidate for vice president. The Republican caucus could not settle on a nominee. Some favored the irascible New York senator Aaron Burr; others supported South Carolina senator Pierce Butler. Jefferson was left without a running mate.

In the end, the election of 1796 produced a strange result. Adams, the Federalist candidate, collected the highest number of electoral votes (71), thus winning the presidency. Some of the Federalist electors who voted for Adams, however, did not cast their other votes for Pinckney. Instead, Thomas Jefferson, Adams' arch rival, finished second, capturing the vice presidency.

Caucus of Conspiracy?

The parties' roles in choosing electors and nominating candidates had begun informally. Neither the Republicans nor the Federalists thought that the parties would last very long; they were formed only to head off their opponents, who they believed were subverting the Constitution. But before long, party nominations became, in the presidential election, regular, quasi-official events.

In the election of 1800, both parties held congressional caucuses to nominate presidential candidates. On May 11, 1800, 43 Republican senators and representatives congregated at Marache's Boarding House on Fourth Street in Philadelphia, and chose Jefferson for president and Burr for vice president. The Federalists held their own conclave in the Senate Chamber. "Each member in his state," the Federalists announced, should "use his best endeavors to have Mr. Adams and Major General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney run for President, without giving one a preference to the other."



In 1836, Whig editors, in the highly partisan style of the day, lambasted the Democratic nominee, Martin Van Buren. The New York Courier and Enquirer compared him to "the mole burrowing near the ground; the pilot fish who plunges deep in the ocean in one spot and comes up in another to breathe the air."

Their best endeavors were not enough. Jefferson and Burr won the contest in the Electoral College, in an unprecedented display of party solidarity. Indeed, there was too much solidarity. The Republicans had planned to withhold several electoral votes from Burr, to guarantee that Jefferson would win the presidency. But somehow, each candidate received 73 electoral votes.

The situation was almost tragicomic: Which victor would serve as president, and which as vice president? Before passage of the 12th Amendment in 1804, the ballots did not distinguish between president and vice president, even though everyone understood who was running for which office. Despite Burr's offer to "utterly disclaim any competition," the House of Representatives had to break the stalemate. Some Federalists hatched a plot to foil the Republicans, and elect Burr over Jefferson. But the scheme broke down when Alexander Hamilton, the most influential Federalist, suggested that the Virginian would make the better chief executive. Still, the House needed 36 ballots before Jefferson was elected president.

Although both parties held congressional caucuses to nominate candidates in 1800, the caucus system stirred bitter controversy. The Boston *Columbian Centinel* voiced the pro-caucus view. Members of Congress, the paper claimed, "were better qualified to judge of the dangers, the resources, and prospects of federalism in the union at large, than any individual in the several states could possibly be."

The Republican *Aurora* reprinted the editorial and criticized “this factious meeting, this self appointed, self elected, self delegated club or caucus, or conspiracy.” The editors were outraged that “about 24 persons” were deciding “for the people of the United States who should be president and vice president.”

After 1800, support for the Federalist Party began to wane, leaving the Republicans with opponents whom they could consistently beat. Between 1800 and 1820, every candidate whom the Republican caucus endorsed (Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe) was elected. Thus, for six straight elections, the Republican caucus was, in effect, choosing the president of the United States.

Henry Clay's Lament

But “King Caucus” was never as omnipotent as its critics feared. Indeed, when it existed, the conclave could not generate a consensus. It could only reflect one. By nominating Jefferson in 1800 and 1804, and James Madison in 1808, the caucus merely recognized the Republicans' popular choice. In 1812 the caucus selected Madison again, but a group of anti-Madison Republicans and Federalists favored New York governor DeWitt Clinton. In 1816 the Republican caucus selected James Monroe, but the New Yorkers endorsed someone else again—this time, Governor Daniel D. Tompkins. Other disgruntled Republicans backed former senator William H. Crawford of Georgia. Within the 1816 Republican caucus, Monroe bested Crawford by only 11 votes, 65 to 54. The whole affair was, in Henry Clay's words, “a spurious and unhallowed act.”

Clay was not the only critic. Others charged that the caucus was undemocratic and that it represented a violation of the Founders' intentions by placing the president, as John Quincy Adams expressed it, “in a state of undue subservience to the legislature.” Newspapers excoriated the caucus institution in lengthy editorials. “As my soul liveth,” wrote Hezekiah Niles in the *Niles Weekly Register*, “I would rather learn that the halls of Congress were converted into common brothels than that caucuses of the description stated should be held in them.”

By 1824 King Caucus was so unpopular that it presented more of a liability than an asset to the candidate it endorsed. When the Republican caucus convened in the Capitol on the evening of February 14, hostile spectators shouted “adjourn! adjourn!” from the gallery above. The few senators and representatives who braved the heckling (only 66 out of 240 turned out) nominated William H. Crawford for president.

The experienced Georgian faced stiff opposition from four other candidates: Secretary of State John Quincy Adams; Secretary of War John C. Calhoun; the popular Speaker of the House, Henry Clay; and a Tennessee lawyer and military hero named Andrew Jackson.

Crawford's supporters defended the caucus, arguing, ironically, that it carried little weight. The conclave's recommendation, observed the

New Hampshire Patriot, possessed “neither the force of a law nor the authority of a command.” The people, the paper pointed out, were at liberty to disregard the caucus’s suggestion. Others called the caucus “the good old way,” and “the old democracy,” and pointed out that it had given the nation Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe.

Such claims proved unconvincing. Many of the states ignored the caucus’s choice, and nominated their own favorite sons. The South Carolina legislature backed John C. Calhoun. The Kentucky and Missouri legislatures endorsed Henry Clay. Conventions in Tennessee and Pennsylvania conferred their blessings on “Old Hickory,” Andrew Jackson. Massachusetts and Maine favored Adams. “The period has surely arrived,” declared the Pennsylvania convention’s delegates, “when a president should be elected from the ranks of the people.”

With support for each candidate so regionally fragmented, no single presidential aspirant could muster an Electoral College majority. Crawford, the caucus nominee, finished a dismal third after Jackson and Adams. The House of Representatives had to decide the election. Clay threw his support to John Quincy Adams, who won. Even before Adams made Clay his secretary of state, Jackson claimed that the two men had struck a deal and that the election had been stolen.

The Little Magician

The election of 1824 marked the end of King Caucus. With party competition gone, nominating a candidate made little sense. Most politicians welcomed this “Era of Good Feeling,” during which public affairs, as they saw it, would be free of intrigues and partisan strife.

Senator Martin Van Buren of New York, however, did not believe that a republic without parties would serve the public interest. Only parties, he stressed, could transcend regional factions, nominate candidates with broad appeal, produce a consensus on legislative issues, and get the president and Congress to work together. Though long considered a relatively undistinguished one-term president (1837–1841), many scholars now consider the “Little Magician,” as Van Buren’s friends called him, responsible for establishing national party competition in the United States.

In Van Buren’s view, the 1824 election had produced exactly what the Founders had set out to avoid: a popular election, in which a large number of candidates variously appealed to the populace on narrow grounds, moving “the bitter waters of political agitation,” as Van Buren said, “to their lowest depths.” Indeed, the contest had fostered a kind of popular demagoguery, which threatened national unity and constitutional government. Without parties, Van Buren feared, the House would have to settle inconclusive elections all too often.

As a senator from New York, Van Buren set out to re-establish the two-party system by recreating the old Republican and Federalist par-

ties. Indeed, Van Buren sought to unite "General Jackson's personal popularity with the portion of old party feelings yet remaining" by forming a coalition between "the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North."

A master politician, Van Buren was well suited to the task. "His strength lay in his suavity," New York editor Horace Greeley remarked of him. "He was the reconciler of the estranged, the harmonizer of those who were feuding among his fellow partisans." Members of the new party would call themselves "Democratic-Republicans" or just "Democrats." Old Hickory would head the party's ticket in 1828.

Inventing the Convention

To Van Buren, Jackson's 1828 campaign presented both a danger and an opportunity. Jackson, after all, was not a party man. A victory for Jackson alone would only further the "name politics" that Van Buren opposed. But if the Tennessean committed himself to the party and its principles, his election, Van Buren believed, would "be worth something." The Little Magician wanted parties to nominate presidential candidates, perhaps at a national nominating convention. To publicize his ideas, Van Buren enlisted the support of Thomas Ritchie, editor of the Richmond (Va.) *Enquirer*.

In a letter to Ritchie, Van Buren argued that national conventions would help the Republicans "by substituting *party principles* for *personal preferences* as one of the leading points in the contest." Such an assembly, he went on, would force New England Republicans "to decide between indulgence in sectional & personal feelings," and "acquiescence in the fairly expressed will of the party, on the other." Finally, Van Buren reflected that "the call of such a convention, its exclusive Republican character, & the refusal of Mr. Adams and his friends to become parties to it, would draw anew the old Party lines."

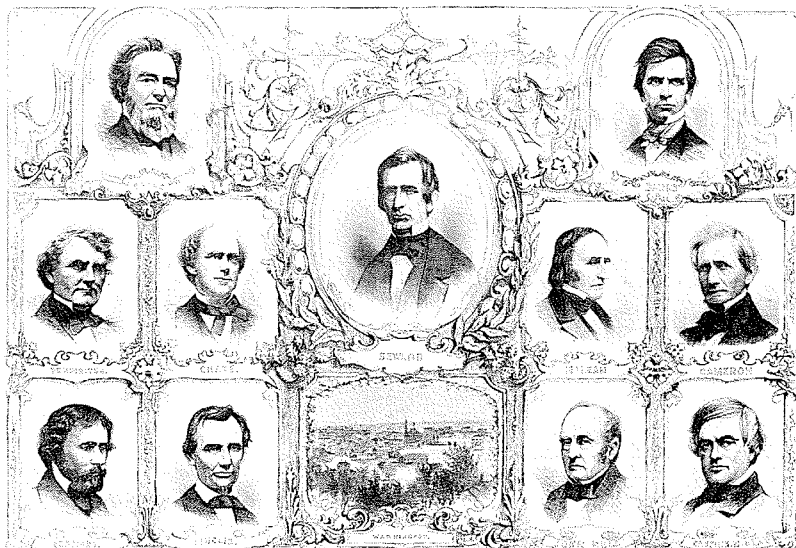
In the end, the Little Magician's political acumen helped pave the way for Jackson. On a trip to Georgia, Van Buren convinced Senator William H. Crawford to stay out of the 1828 presidential race. Another possible competitor, South Carolina's John C. Calhoun, voluntarily declined to run. Van Buren prudently chose not to hold a national convention. A fight over the vice presidential nomination, he feared, would shatter his fragile anti-Adams coalition. "Let it [the vice presidential nomination] be left to the natural course of public sentiment," he wrote to Jackson, "& it will fare best."

Instead, Jackson and his running mate, John C. Calhoun, were nominated by a series of state conventions and caucuses. The presidential election, meanwhile, had grown steadily more democratic. In 21 of the nation's 24 states, the voters—as opposed to the state legislatures—now chose the electors. Jackson defeated John Quincy Adams handily, winning 178 out of 261 electoral votes.

The convention idea, however, remained attractive. Critics had attacked the congressional nominating caucus because it was undemocratic and because it violated the constitutional separation of powers by having members of Congress nominate candidates for president. The national nominating convention, however, brought together a much larger pool of party activists from the states, most of whom did not even hold public office. Moreover, the convention, unlike the caucus, expressed the wishes of all of the state parties, whether or not they enjoyed representation in Congress.

In any case, the national parties experimented with conventions for the first time in the presidential election of 1832. The small Anti-Mason Party and the National Republican Party (basically a front for Henry Clay and his supporters) held separate conventions in a Baltimore tavern called the Atheneum in late 1831. Andrew Jackson's Democratic-Republicans staged their first national convention in Baltimore. The event, as historian James S. Chase has observed, "was a sure sign of the Jacksonians' coming of age as a party."

The first Democratic convention was not a well-rehearsed affair. Each state party decided how to choose its delegates. In Ohio and Indiana, the party elected delegates at state conventions. In Georgia, county meetings instructed the state's congressional delegation to represent the state in Baltimore. In New Jersey, a party caucus authorized public meetings to choose the delegates.



In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was one of many challengers when he upset Sen. William H. Seward (N.Y.) to win the Republican Party's nomination.

The Baltimore convention renominated Jackson for president, and nominated Van Buren for vice president. The assembly also gave the institution of conventions a ringing endorsement. One New Hampshire delegate called the convocation to order in the hope that "the people would be disposed, after seeing the good effects of this convention in conciliating the different and distant sections of the country, to continue this mode of nomination."

In the 1832 election, Jackson won again by a wide margin, this time over the National Republican candidate, Henry Clay.

Despite Jackson's victory, the question lingered: Could the Democratic Party flourish without the benefit of Old Hickory's popularity? The election of 1836 would provide the test.

To gather his forces, Van Buren, the leading Democratic presidential prospect, called for a national convention, which assembled on May 20, 1835, at Baltimore's Fourth Presbyterian Church. The show of Democratic strength was impressive. There were more than 600 delegates from 22 states. The convention chose Van Buren as the party's presidential nominee. An official party statement expressed the nominee's view that the convention was "the best means of concentrating the popular will."

The 1836 contest became, in part, a referendum on national political parties and nominating conventions. The opposing Whig Party—a coalition of former National Republicans and other Anti-Jacksonians—campaigning not only against the Democrats, but against the "undemocratic" party assemblies. "The multitudes cannot go to caucuses and conventions," said one Whig newspaper, "[which] are made up of officeholders and their agents."

The Whigs Reconsider

Believing that no single candidate could defeat Van Buren in a national election, the Whigs nominated three regional favorites for president at state conventions and caucuses. Their plan was to deny Van Buren an electoral majority, thus throwing the contest into the House of Representatives. The unorthodox strategy failed: Van Buren scored a decisive electoral victory.

Defeat forced the Whigs to reconsider the importance of party unity. From then on, they would show more interest in national conventions and consensus candidates. "We must run but one candidate," observed Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden, "lest we break up and divide when it is so necessary that we stay together and defeat Van Buren and Jacksonianism."

The election of 1836 brought party politics to maturity. From then on, all major U.S. political parties would hold quadrennial presidential nominating conventions. During the rest of the 19th century, the convention provided a way for the parties to select candidates, draft plat-

forms, and galvanize the rank and file around their nominee.

In retrospect, it is interesting to note how dramatically the modern system for selecting U.S. presidents differs from the Founding Fathers' original designs.

Political parties, acting with little reflection or foresight, altered the Electoral College's role in two major ways. First, the parties, beginning in 1792, began choosing slates of electors, who would not exercise their independent discretion (as the Founders intended), but vote for their party's choice. Second, the parties began nominating the candidates, first at congressional caucuses, and later at national conventions.

Today, it is easy to forget about the Electoral College. But the college endures. When Americans go to the polls this November, most will find the names of the presidential candidates on their ballots. But technically they will not be voting for the candidates themselves, but for either the Republican or the Democratic Party's slate of electors. Because each slate will be committed to voting for the party's candidate, Americans, *in effect*, will be voting in a direct popular election.

Were they now alive, the Founders might or might not like how political parties have changed their scheme for electing the president. But the parties have managed to transcend regional enmities (with the notable exception of the Civil War), prevent the emergence of demagogic leaders, and ensure that the winning candidate enjoys wide national support. Even as America has grown from a sparsely populated wilderness into a heterogeneous industrial society, the parties have served to "blunt the edge of disappointed ambition," as editor Thomas Ritchie promised they would, and "disarm the rage of maddened factions."

To modern Americans, it may seem surprising that the Founders could have imagined a republic—and the election of its leaders—without political parties. As it happens, the "Spirit of Party" has not been "the worst enemy" of popular government in America, as George Washington predicted, but one of its better friends.