

Primary colors

How a little-known task force helped create Red State/Blue State America

By Mark Stricherz, 11/23/2003

ONCE, OUR TWO MAJOR political parties were thought to represent the haves (Republicans) and the have-nots (Democrats). But now they increasingly represent either "Red" or "Blue" America. According to a new study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the country is evenly but sharply divided by region and culture. This confirms that the color-coded electoral map of the 2000 presidential election -- in which Democrats won the "blue" states on the coasts and upper Midwest while Republicans won the "red" heartland and the South -- was no fluke. Indeed, note the study's authors, in their 16 years of measuring voters' attitudes, there has never been a wider gap between church-attending, socially conservative Republicans and relatively sermon-free and liberal-minded Democrats.

ADVERTISEMENT There have been a number of attempts to explain this growing divide. In their 1991 book "Chain Reaction," Thomas and Mary Edsall argued that the Democratic Party's embrace of the civil rights movement, followed by Nixon's Southern Strategy, caused many working-class whites to desert their ancestral party in favor of the GOP. In 1991, E.J. Dionne Jr. extended the argument in his book "Why Americans Hate Politics," contending that Republicans "were able to destroy the dominant New Deal coalition by using cultural and social issues -- race, the family, 'permissiveness,' crime -- to split New Deal constituencies."

But both explanations are overly broad and incomplete. If region and culture divide the parties, it is not simply the legacy of the upheavals of the 1960s. It is also the legacy of a forgotten 28-member body called the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (1969 -- 72), better known as the McGovern or McGovern-Fraser commission.

The McGovern commission, chaired first by Senator George McGovern and then Congressman Don Fraser of Minnesota, ended the old boss system of choosing presidential nominees and helped create the modern presidential primary system. This led to a class shift in each party, as affluent liberals gained more power in the Democratic Party while working-class conservatives won more say in the GOP.

Perhaps most importantly, the commission changed the rationale for choosing presidential nominees: Picking a candidate who was likely to win became less important than choosing one who represented the views of primary voters and special-interest groups. Today the legacy lives on in the insurgent candidacy of quintessential "blue-state" candidate Howard Dean.

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Wisconsin governor Robert LaFollette created the first direct primary (for statewide offices) in 1904. But presidential primaries didn't become especially important until '56, or decisive until '72. Before then, from 1832 to 1968, each party chose its nominee with the help of party bosses.

While the aim of the boss system was to reward candidates who appealed to all wings of the party, in practice it was often abused. In 1968, the Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey, even though many Democrats abhorred his muddled position on the Vietnam War and he hadn't entered a single primary.

Party reformers, associated mostly with antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy, were outraged. They proposed studying the delegate selection rules, and their cause got an enormous lift from the famously disastrous Chicago convention, where tens of thousands of young people battled the police in the city streets. On Aug. 27, the second night of the convention, Democratic delegates voted for a commission that would seek to ensure that "all Democratic voters have had full and timely opportunity to participate."

By early 1969, this appropriate and modest goal would be abandoned. For a variety of motives, mostly having to do with bitterness over Vietnam and the Chicago convention debacle, party reformers themselves abused the commission's mandate. Instead of trying to reform the Democratic Party, they sought to revolutionize it.

For starters, new Democratic National Committee chairman Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma didn't appoint any party bosses -- such as former Pennsylvania governor David L. Lawrence and former DNC chairman John M. Bailey -- or their representatives to the commission, as promised. "I made up the membership of the commission in such a way as to ensure that they would come up with what they did come up with," he says today.

As a result, the commission was stacked with party reformers, many of whom were deeply opposed to the war.

One of these was 30-year-old Ken Bode, hired as the commission's research director (he later became the moderator of PBS's "Washington Week in Review"). Bode favored increasing the representation of women and young people in the party, in part to advance ideological goals.

At that time it was well-known women were more likely to oppose the war," Bode said in an interview early last year. "There was a cleavage in society. People under 30 were fighting this war, and we said, 'Count the number of delegates who were under 30 and women.' The idea was that if women were brought in, there would have to be policy consequences."

Those ideas bore fruit at the commission's final two meetings in 1969, held on Nov. 19 and 20. In the old and elegant Senate Caucus Room, the revolutionaries pushed through three major changes. First, the commission could require state Democratic parties to comply with its wishes - the equivalent of Congress being able to do the same to each of the 50 state legislatures in the country. Second, it would require soft quotas in the selection of delegates. Women, young people, and blacks would have to be represented in numbers "in reasonable relationship" to their demographic presence.

Third, there would be an end to the practice of appointing ex-officio delegates (i.e., the cronies of the bosses) to the convention. Today, about 20 percent of delegates are still "super" or ex-officio delegates, interest group representatives, and union officials, the latter two appointed by party officials.

The McGovern commission brought the old system to an end. No longer would party bosses have control over two-thirds to four-fifths of the delegates. Not only could they no longer appoint ex-officio delegates, but just as importantly -- and against the desires of many on the commission -- a number of state legislatures decided to institute new elections in order to comply with the jumble of new rules. Thus the modern presidential primary was born. In 1968, 16 states held primaries. By 1972, 28 did -- and George McGovern himself became the Democratic nominee. In 2004, primaries are scheduled in 33 states.

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The McGovern commission also changed the makeup of the party's followers. No longer would nonunionized working-class whites have the same influence in party affairs. As polls have consistently shown, they don't tend to vote in primary races, while college-educated professionals do. The latter are not only more civically engaged in general than their working-class counterparts, they are more knowledgeable about party affairs. As a result, more upper-middle-class voters joined the party and had more say within it.

In addition, the McGovern commission brought more women in general, and feminists specifically, into the Democratic coalition. It's easy to forget now, but as late as 1971 many of the top supporters of an Equal Rights Amendment, such as one-time RNC cochair Mary Crisp, were Republican women. Many of these Republican feminists were attracted by the Democrats' new rules for convention delegates.

"They were a way to seek to reform the existing structures within rather than challenging them from the outside," said Doris Meissner, who was head of the National Women's Political Caucus. In 1968, 13 percent of the delegates to the Democratic convention were women. In 1972, the number had jumped to 40 percent.

But in adding women and feminists, most of whom supported legal abortion, the McGovern commission loosened other groups' ties to the party. One such group would be the so-called Reagan Democrats, typically Midwestern Catholics disheartened by the party's embrace of social liberalism. When the economy is strong, as it was in 1988 and 2000, these voters tend to vote Republican.

As Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg wrote in a post-2000 election analysis for the Institute for America's Future, "Voters turned away from Al Gore, in the first instance, on cultural concerns. . . . The cultural minefield made the most damage, moving non-college white women and younger non-college white men to Bush." According to Greenberg, the three biggest doubts about Gore were, in order, his perceived support for domestic partnership benefits for gay couples, his position on abortion, and his support of gun control.

(Of course, the McGovern commission transformed the Republican Party, as well. The assimilation of evangelical voters into the GOP's ranks in the late 1970s was a result of their power in newly expanded Republican primaries, as well as the rise of organized movements like the New Right.)

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A final effect of the McGovern commission was to change the rationale of the party's presidential nomination process. The old boss system focused on selecting candidates who would win. As John Bailey, DNC chairman from 1961 to 1968, often said, "I go with the bird that can fly, not with the pigeon that can't get off the ground." But the new primary-based system ends up producing candidates who appeal not only to primary voters but also to various ideological interest groups -- not to mention the TV camera.

Howard Dean's candidacy is an excellent example. Unlike most Democratic nominees before 1972, he is more liberal on social issues (except gun control) and foreign policy than he is on economic issues, where his track record in Vermont is one of fiscal restraint. Among Democratic primary voters, these positions play well. But while his social liberalism -- along with his forthright demeanor and outsider status -- have made him the Democratic front-runner, it may hurt him in a general election. In the Pew study, Dean ranked *fourth* among the Democratic candidates in a head-to-head matchup with President Bush, trailing the incumbent by a 41-to- 52 margin.

Some conservative pundits have lately been chortling over the prospect of a McGovern-style debacle in 2004. But the point of the McGovern commission wasn't to win elections, but to transform the party. As McGovern himself says today of his commission's work, "I'm not saying we'd get a better presidential nominee. It just means that whoever we nominate would go through a democratic process. Democracy has always been a gamble, and if we make mistakes, at least they are our mistakes."

Mark Stricherz, a Phillips Foundation fellow, is writing a book on the McGovern commission.

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QUESTIONS:

1. Why was the McGovern commission formed?
2. How did the McGovern commission change the nomination process for president? List your answers.