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The Presidential Nominating Process: A Place for Us? (Book Review)

Gary L. Rose
Sacred Heart University

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Gary L. Rose.

The Presidential Nominating Process: A Place for Us? By Rhodes Cook. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

Rhodes Cook, a seasoned election analyst, political commentator, and author of several works on presidential elections, has written an exceptionally clear, instructive, and engaging book concerning the modern presidential nominating process. *The Presidential Nominating Process* is organized into six concise and focused chapters. Twenty-one informative tables and twelve instructive political maps and graphs serve to effectively supplement the author's main points and arguments.

Cook's central theme is that the vast majority of voters are for all intents and purposes excluded from exercising a decisive and meaningful role in the modern presidential nominating process. The process is severely flawed and inherently disenfranchises millions of American voters. The volume's treatment of nomination mechanics and the frontloaded primary calendar that results in three distinct tiers of voters--"kingmakers," "confirmers," and "rubber stamps" (pp. 89-96)--is not only analytically accurate but also a creative and novel approach to describing a nominating system wrought with political inequality. For those who believe that serious reform of the nominating process is not only desirable but also imminent, Cook's descriptions and objective analyses of leading reform proposals will be both instructional and thought provoking. At the same time, however, the author, aware of the complexity associated with nomination reform, cautions that draconian change in nominating rules and procedures is rather unlikely.

In addition to offering a convincing and penetrating critique of the current presidential nominating system, *The Presidential Nominating Process* provides a thorough description of the history and evolution of the presidential nominating process. In clear and systematic fashion, Cook traces the various stages of nomination development from the days of the "King Caucus" (Stage I), through the era of strong national conventions controlled by party bosses (Stage II), to the present system of presidential primaries in which conventions have been relegated to ratification forums (Stage III). The evolutionary treatment of the presidential nominating process is especially captivating, with intriguing anecdotes providing color and life to what can only be described as a unique and bizarre political invention. For example, with respect to the era in which national conventions actually decided a party's presidential candidate, one will learn that the 1844 Democratic National Convention was held in "the Egyptian Saloon on the top of Baltimore's Odd Fellows Hall" (p. 17), and that the 1860 Republican National Convention, which nominated Abraham Lincoln on the third ballot, occurred in a 180-foot-long and 100-foot-wide specially constructed hall known as the "Wigwam" (p. 19). Cook's summary of William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech before the Democratic National Convention in 1896 (p. 19) and his treatment of the suspected sabotage of gas lights at the 1876 Republican National Convention (which plunged the convention into darkness, denying the presidential nomination to House Speaker James G. Blaine, the "plumed knight" [p. 20]), connect the reader to the subject matter in a dramatic manner seldom accomplished in works on presidential selection.

The Presidential Nominating Process nicely covers the proliferation of presidential primaries in the twentieth century, historic primary contests, and the mechanics of the modern nominating system. Cook does an excellent job of describing the pioneering work of the twenty-eight-member McGovern-Fraser Commission established by the Democratic National Committee in the aftermath of the tumultuous 1968 election for the express purpose of reforming the party's nominating rules and procedures. The commission's bold reform efforts resulted in "unintended consequences," with an explosion in the number of primary elections being the end result rather than the commission's original goal of open caucuses. Post-1968 developments and the initiatives of the McGovern-Fraser Commission certainly are key to understanding the dynamics of the current presidential nominating process, and Cook provides a strong examination of this pivotal turning point.

The chapter that explores the nominating systems in Great Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Mexico, and Israel is quite enlightening, particularly for those interested in knowing how candidates are nominated in political systems outside the United States. Cook's comparative analysis underscores the distinctiveness of the American nominating model, while at the same time revealing how primary elections, once exclusive to U.S. politics, are beginning to appear in democratic systems around the world.

Although the volume thoroughly traces the evolution of the nominating process as well as describes and critiques the modern nominating system, it nevertheless breaks rather little new ground. The historical development of the presidential

nominating system, nominating reform proposals, and criticism of front-loading and the primary calendar, along with the argument that far too many voters are relegated to inconsequential roles are common subjects and themes in the literature on presidential selection. With the exception of Cook's cross-national inquiry, little in this work can be regarded as truly fresh or new. Another discernible weakness is the treatment of the 1968 Democratic National Convention conducted in Chicago (pp. 41-42). The summary of events and the politics associated with the convention were mildly disappointing, particularly in light of the sweeping reforms that followed. Readers, in particular students 18-21 years of age, should be more fully informed of how deeply divided the Democratic Party had become by 1968. There is still room in *The Presidential Nominating Process* for extended discussion of the Vietnam conflict, the convention debate over the anti-war plank, the heavy-handed tactics of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and the notorious police riot that bloodied the streets during that fateful and contentious national convention. Finally, the work would benefit from the addition of a bibliography, or at least a suggested list of readings on the presidential nominating process.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, this clearly is one of the very best books on the subject of the American presidential nominating process. *The Presidential Nominating Process* is highly educational and student friendly with respect to writing style, visual assistance, and organization of material. For those who teach about the presidential selection process and who often search for interesting and skillfully constructed works suitable for classroom adoption, Rhodes Cook's most recent contribution will be greatly appreciated.

--Gary L. Rose, Sacred Heart University