

American presidential nominating process—a primer for the Chinese

By Jim Nowlan

I write a periodic column about “Understanding America” for the Oriental Morning Post, a leading Chinese-language newspaper in Shanghai (they translate my words). This past week, I wrote a 1,500 word piece for the OMP about our presidential nominating process. Since American newspapers generally limit such columns to 600-750 words, I am excerpting here from the OMP column just as I wrote for my editor in Shanghai:

The U.S. presidential nominating process is complicated. Few Americans understand it fully. The process is a conglomeration of influences that include federal and state laws, political party rules, the Supreme Court, candidates, money and the media.

Delegates to the Republican National Convention are selected within the 50 states, via caucuses and primary elections. In caucuses, party members go to physical caucus locations such as schools, churches, or government buildings where they debate the candidates’ credentials and policy positions and then cast votes for their respective favorite candidates.

By the way, in the U.S. there is no formal party membership. (NOTE to American readers: This would be a revelation to Chinese readers, as membership in the Chinese Communist Party is limited to invitation and much is expected of party members.) Any person may register with election officials or simply declare that he belongs to the Republican or Democratic Party. There are no dues or responsibilities of membership.

At primary elections, party members (and in a few states, even independents and members of the other party) vote in an election to select a preferred candidate.

This year, no Republican has yet emerged as the favorite. Thus it is possible that several candidates will go down the gauntlet of primaries and caucuses, and none will arrive at the convention with a majority of delegates pledged to him. In that case, the convention delegates will make the selection in what is called an “open convention.” This means that even new candidates, who did not participate in the caucuses and primaries, may be considered by the delegates.

The GOP convention selects 2,380 delegates from the 50 states and American territories. To win the Republican Party nomination, a candidate must win the support of a majority of the delegates. At present, less than 10 percent of the delegates to the convention have been selected through the caucuses and primaries that have been held thus far.

Money is the elephant in the election process [by elephant, Americans mean something like a “huge factor”-JN]. No candidate can win the 2012 nomination and general election without hundreds of millions of dollars in support from individuals, trade associations and unions. Obama hopes to raise \$1 billion for his campaign. Conservative activist and campaign guru Karl Rove hopes to raise \$300 million for his “super PAC.”

A super political action committee (super PAC) is a somewhat new phenomenon. Super PACs have been developed in the wake of U.S. Supreme Court decisions in recent years which have held that money is speech, and thus individuals and groups cannot be limited in their total spending on campaigns.

Individuals are limited as to what they can contribute to presidential candidates--\$5,000 per election per individual. So these super PACs seek additional, often huge, donations from the super-wealthy class.

For example, a billionaire who owns gambling casinos in Las Vegas, among other holdings, has contributed \$5 million to a super PAC that supports Newt Gingrich.

About two-thirds of the money raised by candidates and super PACs goes for advertising on television and social media. Most of the spending is for negative, sometimes vicious and misleading ads that make the opponent appear to be lower than pond scum [means a very low form of life, like algae-JN]

Campaigns have become exponentially more expensive in recent decades. When I ran for the office of state representative in the 1960s, I spent \$5,000 in a contested race, which would be about \$30,000 today. In recent contested campaigns for the same office in my state of Illinois, up to \$1 million has been spent!

Many of us fear that through super PACs American politics will become controlled by the super-wealthy. For example, a person can watch a presidential candidate's standing in the polls ebb and flow based on the infusions of major advertising purchases by the super PACs.

If process does go to an open convention in Tampa, FL August 27, look for new candidates to emerge. After all, the delegates are generally required to support their candidates from the caucuses or primaries only on the first ballot at the convention.