

Parties and print media play declining roles in politics

By Jim Nowlan

The strange 2016 presidential campaign prompts important questions about the roles of political parties and the media in American politics. Are these institutions today fulfilling generally constructive functions for a healthy democracy?

My premise is that even with generally thoughtful citizens like you and me included in the mix, the public is nevertheless a collective “beast,” largely uninformed, undisciplined.

This beast needs mediating institutions like parties and the media to help guide it along the democratic process.

I fear that parties and the media, at least as critical mediating institutions, are being overwhelmed by an untethered tangle of 24/7 television news, digital social media, and smart phones.

George Washington decried “factions” (nascent political parties), yet parties became irresistible as a way of nominating candidates and organizing support from voters, especially as the franchise expanded rapidly in the early days from propertied white males only to everyone age 18 and over today.

Nominations by parties proceeded from caucuses of a few party leaders, in the early days, to conventions of appointed, then elected, delegates, and on to primary elections in which all party registrants could vote.

Now, in some Western states, any voter can vote in primaries for any candidate, regardless of political party. As a result, parties are becoming almost meaningless in terms of influencing (mediating, in my terms) nominations.

Originally, newspapers were often handmaidens of political parties. In the 1800s, many newspapers were created almost expressly to plump for parties and their candidates. And the names carry over. The *Belleville News-Democrat*, the *Bureau County Republican* and the *Quincy Herald-Whig*, in Illinois, come to mind.

Newspapers provided valuable cues to voters through their endorsements of candidates, on the premise that busy but good citizens can't know as much as they might like about all the candidates.

The rise of television and of paid political ads has largely, not wholly, pushed aside newspaper endorsements and party precinct workers as mediating forces.

[In 1982, I managed the campaign of a friend who ran for the GOP nomination for the low visibility office of state treasurer. We had a modest amount of money for TV ads, which we ran in only certain parts of the state; our opponent had no money for such ads.

[After the election, I was able to analyze the impact of our ads, or no ads, on a county basis along with the impact of endorsements, or no endorsements, by local county party leaders. In a modest academic article, I was able to show statistically that the TV ads had a quite dramatic positive effect on the successful outcomes of my candidate.]

The impact was [also] seen dramatically in 2006 in Illinois.

In his successful re-election campaign, Gov. Rod Blagojevich spent most of his \$29 million campaign war chest to transform, in the minds of the public, the persona of his opponent,

the eminently decent Judy Baar Topinka, into that of a lady wearing a cone hat and riding a broomstick.

This year Donald Trump has brilliantly used provocative comments to captivate the media into giving him enough “earned” (free) television coverage to catapult him into the national spotlight.

In just a decade, social media like Twitter and Facebook have sucked our eyeballs away from newspapers, causing circulation to plummet and newsrooms to shrink.

The Capitol pressroom in Springfield is about one-third the size of a decade or so ago, and reporters have been moved from a prominent place between the House and Senate chambers to the basement catacombs of the state house.

Social media does not yet dominate political discourse and candidate advertising, but I predict it soon will.

A former student of mine runs campaigns. He spent, for example, just 5 percent of the \$200,000 budget for a judicial candidate on Facebook.

Yet for his small expenditure he was able to “micro-target” his messages to very specific voters, such as left-handed Latinas with PhDs, or whatever, because Facebook knows so much about each of its billions of users.

And Facebook makes it incredibly easy for people to find one another.

“It’s almost too easy to find people who agree with you,” says a friend and heavy Facebook user. Friend and I think this leads, in political discourse anyway, to heavy confirmation bias (support for one’s views), polarization and avoidance of other points of view.

I worry about the sharp decline of the role of political parties and old-fashioned print media in helping the great public beast make political decisions and develop somewhat sensible pictures of the world around about politics and government.

I fear such is being replaced to a significant extent by lightly informed opinion caroming around the echo chamber of Facebook and the public beast.

At this juncture, I don't have any profound thoughts (as I usually do, I'm sure you will agree) as to what might be done. That will have to be the subject of future scribblings.