

## The Party's Over

By Jim Nowlan

Political parties used to be vibrant organizations that heavily influenced who won a party's nomination for office and then conducted the election campaign. No more. Parties have ceded power largely to big money candidates, interest groups and the relatively new and secret independent funders of TV campaign blitzes. On balance, I believe this represents a loss to the healthy functioning of our democracy.

Political parties evolved naturally in our new nation as a means of organizing people of shared values around a single candidate for an office, which increased chances of success over the possibility of multiple candidates with shared values. The political party also provided a handy cue for voters, who would not have known the party's slate of candidates.

The heyday of the party organizations was the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when party leaders controlled the nomination process through limited participation caucuses and conventions. By the end of the century, however, Progressives began to chafe over being kept out of the processes. They championed primary elections, widely adopted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as a way of challenging "political bosses" (to this day a reliable epithet).

The old political party organizations did have advantages. When in power, a party controlled appointments to government jobs, which developed a corps of reliable precinct

workers. They also tapped the workers for regular contributions, which provided the party funds. These funds supported loyalist candidates who had worked their way up the ranks, making it possible for non-wealthy candidates to succeed.

A great strength of party organizations was their desire to win, which generally meant the nomination of moderate candidates.

Since the advent of the primaries, party organizations have been in decline. First, civil service laws took ever more jobs away from political appointment, reducing the number of party precinct workers and the funds they generated.

Over time, changes in primary election laws further reduced the party organization's hold on power. In many states, voters were no longer required to register with a political party and could vote in any party's primary. And this year, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn amended a bill so that the primary slates of all parties would be on one ballot, making it possible for a Democrat to vote in a Republican primary. (This action will probably be rejected by the legislature this November.)

Actions like this have left party organizations generally weak, much less capable of dominating the nominating process than in earlier generations. Many local party units gave up trying years ago.

This leaves the party organization simply a medium in which candidates seek to be nominated for office. As a result, Tea Party candidates are actually running against the Republican Party organizations of "professional politicians and bosses"—and are winning.

And now independent, secretly funded non-party groups are spending more than the political candidates and parties on campaigns to elect philosophical soul mates, primarily on the right.

The weakness of party organizations also enhances the ability of really wealthy candidates to succeed. For example, former eBay CEO Meg Whitman spent \$71 million of her own money in winning the recent California GOP primary for governor. This deflects many talented non-wealthy candidates from ever entering the fray.

Certainly, some old party organizations were run by true bosses such as the late Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley. Nor do all super-rich candidates win. Witness Jeffrey Greene spending \$23 million of his own money in a recent loss to Rep. Kendrick Meek for a U.S. Senate nomination in Florida.

But the political party, at least as a vital organization, is basically over. Political organization leaders are being replaced by campaign consultants, their wealthy patrons, and the super-rich. Campaigns are no longer about party labels, which are often shunned by candidates. Instead, we have vitriolic campaigns that try to destroy the persona of the opponent.

I don't see a return to strong parties. The symbol of the "evil political bosses" resonates too well with the public. But we may rue what we're getting in place of effective party organizations.