

Bill Kraus: Primary repairs

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Political Primary elections have had a short, relatively sad history.

They came into existence at the beginning of the last century. The idea was to take the slating of candidates out of the hands of the bosses and parties and turn it over to the people.

Our own Fighting Bob La Follette was a prominent player in the creation. So was Teddy Roosevelt who was kind of embarrassed into his lead role when someone pointed out that 70 percent of the money for his campaign came from corporations, not people.

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The first bad thing that happened to this good idea was that the voters weren't much interested in picking candidates. Voting percentages in primary elections fell far short of expectations.

This flaw turned this new slating election over to the voters who were most active in politics. Not a bad outcome as long as those active in politics were representative of the population as a whole.

By the 21st century the extremists had taken over the primaries and moderate activists were pretty much gone. "I didn't leave the party. The party left me" was the lament of most moderates who had been the election-deciding swing voters for most of the 20th century.

Party candidates always had to run two distinct races. They needed the activists to get nominated and the moderates to get elected. This was an interesting

contradiction which was deftly handled for a very long time.

Money had a lot to do with the distortion of the primary idea. Money in the hands of the incumbent leaders became a useful weapon to keep their caucuses in line. It didn't take a lot of money to win primary elections and the threat of that money terrorized once independent incumbents. "It's all about the money" was what they said, and rued. And it was.

Party rules and party extremists were suddenly in charge.

Until California, Maine and a few other states came along and recognized that candidates were more entrepreneurial [you have the money and energy to do this, you can self nominate]. These states defanged the parties' power by turning their primary elections into popularity contests where neither party is guaranteed a place in the finals. One of the hopes was that popularity primaries would bring out more voters and more moderate candidates. The jury is still out, but one thing they have done for sure is diminish the parties' power to influence candidate selection. No more votes in the pockets of party officials. Less of a play to the more radical bases.

I like the Maine system which is also espoused by Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter in their [essay](#). Maine has one primary for all, four winners for the finals, and an over 50% winner on one or more peel-off votes at the end.

— *Kraus is a longtime Republican strategist and former co-chair of Common Cause in Wisconsin.*