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PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT  
AND THE 2000 NOMINATING CAMPAIGN  
*Implications for Electoral Reform*

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A Report of the  
Vanishing Voter Project

Presented at the National Press Club  
Washington, DC  
April 27, 2000

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The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy  
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

# Public Involvement and the 2000 Nominating Campaign: Implications for Electoral Reform

April 27, 2000  
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The Vanishing Voter Project, a study of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, seeks to understand the factors that affect public involvement in the 2000 presidential campaign. Since early November, with the support of a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, we have conducted weekly national polls of 1000 respondents.

## A. AMERICANS' RESPONSE TO THE NOMINATING CAMPAIGN

Each of our weekly polls included four questions designed to measure and track Americans' involvement in the campaign:

- During the past week, how much attention did you pay to the presidential election campaign—a great deal, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?
- During the past day have you been doing any thinking about the presidential campaign, or is this something you haven't been thinking about?
- Can you recall a particular news story about the presidential campaign that you read, saw, or heard during the past day?
- During the past day have you discussed the presidential campaign with anyone?

Responses to these questions are the basis for our weekly Voter Involvement Index; it is the average of the affirmative responses to the four questions.<sup>1</sup>

**Public Involvement:** We had expected public involvement to rise slowly but steadily in the months

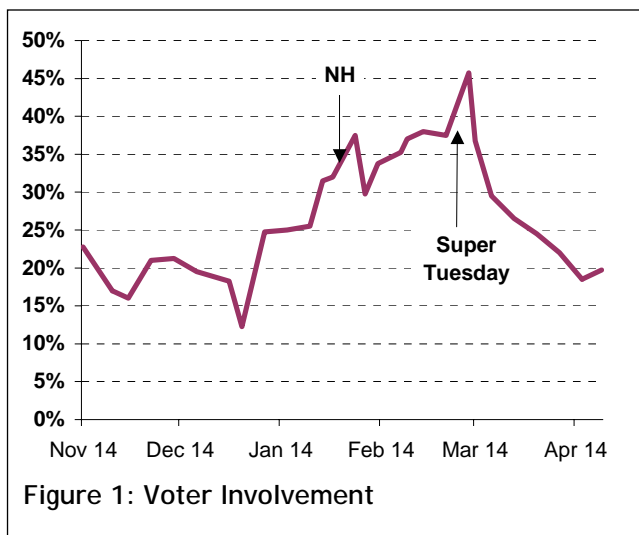


Figure 1: Voter Involvement

<sup>1</sup> For the question about attention to the campaign, the affirmative responses are “a great deal” of attention and “quite a bit” of attention.

before the Iowa and New Hampshire contests. A different pattern emerged (see Figure 1). Involvement rose and fell irregularly during November and December and never climbed very high during any week in this period. Not until two weeks before the first contest in Iowa did involvement begin to increase steadily. The peak level of involvement (46%) occurred in the days immediately following the Super Tuesday primaries. All components of the involvement index reached their highest level at this time: 36% claimed to have been paying “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of attention to the campaign, 55% said they had been thinking about the campaign, 38% reported having had a conversation about it, and 54% said they could recall a news story about it.

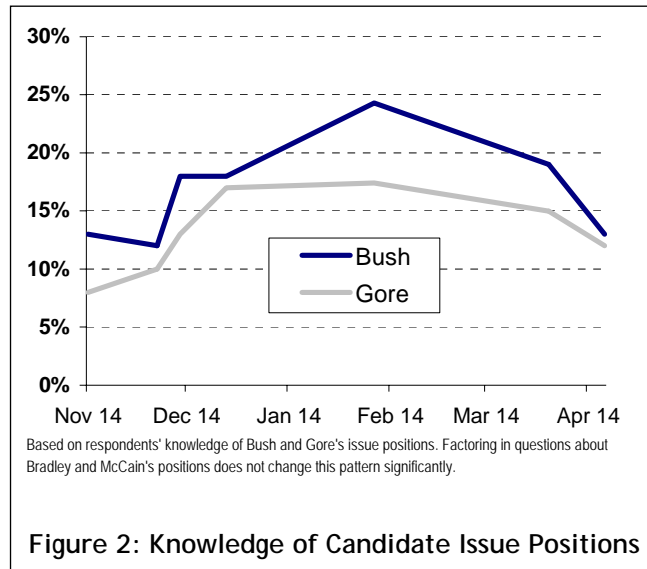


Figure 2: Knowledge of Candidate Issue Positions

After Super Tuesday, public involvement dropped steadily. The Voter Involvement Index is now at a level (20%) close to that of November and December. In our latest weekly poll (April 18-22), 15% said they had been paying close attention to the campaign, 27% claimed to have thinking about the campaign, 14% said they had talked about it, and 22% could recall a news story about the campaign.

Critical events clearly play the key role in stimulating public involvement. Although the candidates were campaigning heavily in November and December, most Americans expressed little interest in the election at that time. The Iowa and New Hampshire contests spurred public interest, which was still rising at the time of Super Tuesday's primaries. These contests marked the end of the active primary campaign and, since then, public involvement has declined sharply.

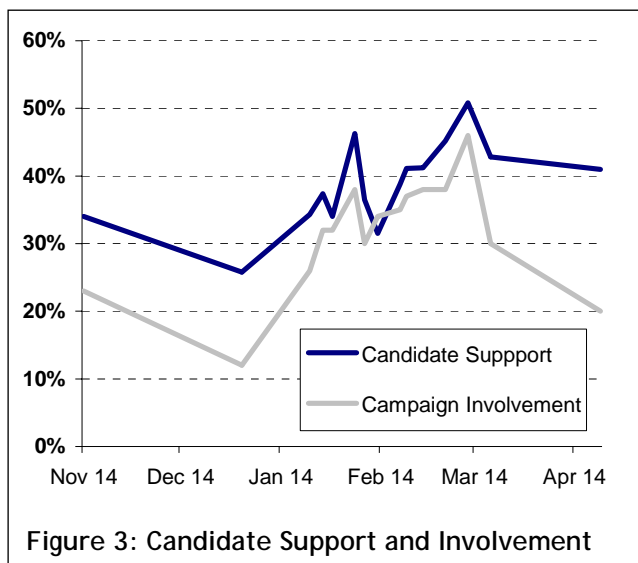
**Information and Candidate Preferences:** Although it might be assumed that people's information about presidential candidates rises steadily during the nominating period, our data tell a different story.

Americans' awareness of the candidates' issue positions improved gradually as the campaign moved toward the first contests but, after the flurry of Super Tuesday contests, it began to diminish (see Figure 2). Americans today are measurably less informed about Bush and Gore's positions than when the campaign was at its March peak. As people's interest in the campaign has declined, their knowledge has also diminished.

Candidate preferences have followed a similar pattern (see Figure 3). We had expected the proportion of undecided voters to decline steadily as the campaign unfolded. This pattern held only in the most active period of the campaign. After the Christmas

holiday period, for example, the number of undecided voters rose by almost ten percentage points. A similar increase has occurred in the period since Super Tuesday.

**Perceptions of the Campaign:** A presidential nominating campaign can be an exciting, suspenseful event. The Bush-McCain race obviously captured the interest of many Americans. Nine of the contested Republican primaries enjoyed a record turnout.<sup>2</sup>

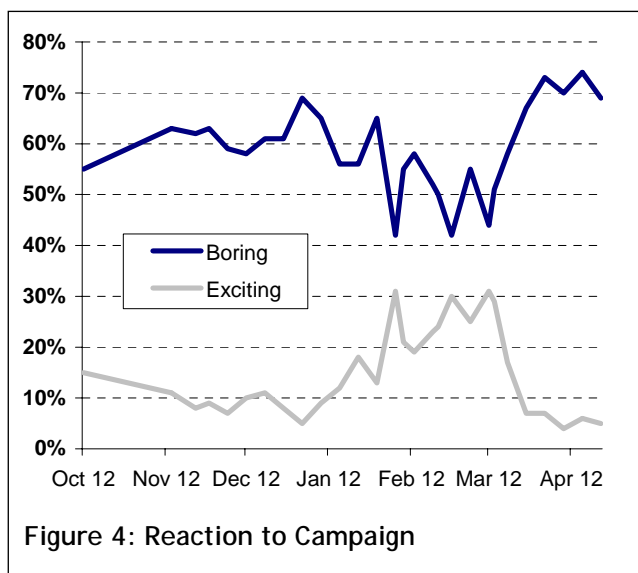


Nevertheless, we did not record even a single week when Americans claimed to be more excited than bored by the campaign (see Figure 4). The New Hampshire primary produced the highest excitement level: 31% of our respondents claimed it had been an exciting week in the campaign. Yet 42% said it had been boring. In our latest poll, those who claimed the week was boring far exceeded (69% – 5%) those who found it exciting.

During most weeks Americans have also claimed to be discouraged by recent developments in the campaign. Those who said they were “encouraged” exceeded those who were “discouraged” during only two of the 26 weeks we have been polling.

And during most weeks people have described the campaign as uninformative. Only during the six-week period following New Hampshire did a larger proportion of respondents describe the campaign as informative.

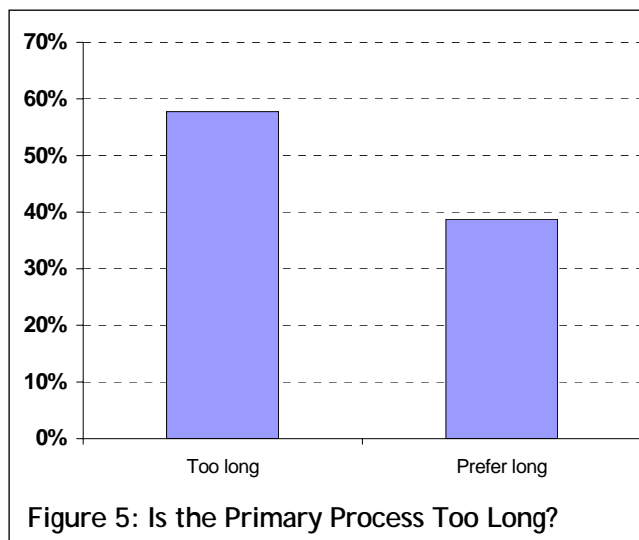
These perceptions tracked closely with the level of campaign activity. Americans were much more likely to describe the campaign as “exciting,” “informative,” and “encouraging” during the intense period between Iowa and Super Tuesday than at any other time.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that turnout in the contested Democratic primaries was the second lowest in forty years. The lowest was recorded in 1996 when Clinton ran unopposed.

<sup>3</sup> Americans’ rather dim view of the campaign coincides with their general dissatisfaction with election politics. Over 70% of our respondents agreed with the statement: “Politics in America is generally pretty disgusting.” An even larger proportion (87%) felt that “most politicians are willing to say whatever it takes to get themselves elected.” Half of these

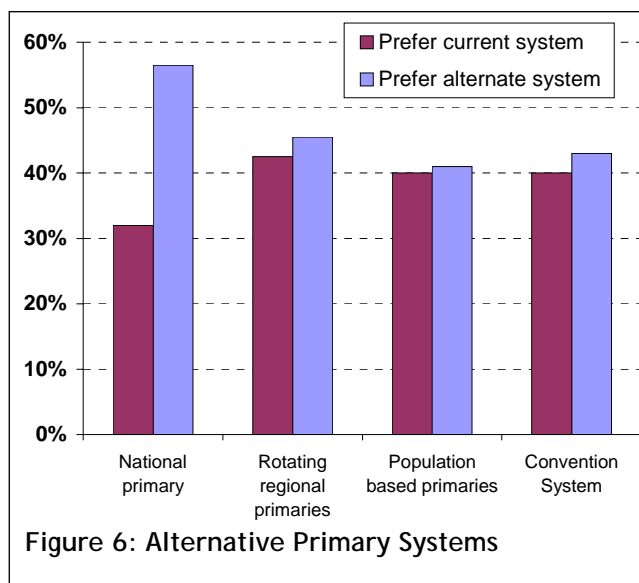
**Americans' View of the Current Nominating System:** The public is not strongly attached to the current nominating process. A chief complaint is that the campaign lasts too long. When asked in four separate surveys whether the campaign “is too long” or whether they prefer a long campaign because it offers “a better chance to know the candidates,” a majority in each instance claimed that the campaign is overly long (see Figure 5).



The campaign’s length was also the major source of complaints when respondents were asked open-ended questions about the nominating system. These questions also revealed that many Americans believe the system is unfair. This opinion was sometimes expressed in the context of whether the system is equally fair to all presidential candidates. But it was expressed chiefly in regard to voting. Americans believe the system is biased against states that hold their primary late in the process.

New Hampshire’s primary is also a source of dissatisfaction. Thirty-one percent of respondents claimed that it “has too much influence” on the nominations. However, 44% claimed, instead, that New Hampshire is “a good test of the candidates.” Small-state residents are particularly supportive of the New Hampshire primary.

**Americans' Opinions of Alternative Nominating Systems.** Americans say they would like a change in the nominating process. Their favorite alternative is a national primary (see Figure 6). By nearly two-to-one, Americans say they would rather have a national primary than the current system. Support for a national primary rests primarily on people’s belief that it would dramatically shorten the campaign and that it would be “fair” since all voters would cast their ballots on the



respondents believed that none of this year’s presidential candidates was an exception to the rule. Among those who cited an exception, John McCain was mentioned most often. Thirty-one percent of these respondents claimed that he was willing “to say what needs to be said even if it hurts his chances of winning.” Less than 20 percent placed Bush or Gore in this category; those who did were typically Bush or Gore supporters.

same day.

By a narrow margin, respondents also indicated a preference for rotating regional primaries over the current system. They claimed that a regional primary system would be “shorter,” “cheaper,” and “fairer” than the current one. Respondents by a narrow margin also said they would prefer a population-based primary system (the so-called Delaware plan, discussed below) to the current one.

Americans’ dissatisfaction with the existing system is broad enough that a plurality even expressed a willingness to eliminate primary elections altogether. When asked whether they preferred the current system or the “old system” in which party activists from all the states met in the national conventions to choose the nominees, a plurality –43% to 40%– opted for the “old system.” This preference was especially strong among older Americans. Half of those 50 years of age or older said they would prefer a convention-based system.

**Americans’ Response to the Televised Debates:** There were two dozen televised primary election debates in 2000. The audiences were quite small. One reason is that none of the debates was televised on the major commercial broadcast networks. The debates also failed to hold the interest of viewers. In our survey, two-thirds of those who tuned into a debate said they watched only “some” or “a little” before switching channels.<sup>4</sup>

Viewers were not particularly impressed with the debates. Negative comments outnumbered positive ones by three-to-two. Viewers complained about everything from the debate formats to the candidates’ conduct. Viewers who said they watched “all” or “most” of a debate had a more favorable opinion but even they were as likely to express a negative opinion as a positive one.

## **B. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: COMMUNICATION IN THE NOMINATING PHASE**

The Vanishing Voter Project seeks to improve knowledge of public involvement in presidential campaigns. It also seeks to apply this knowledge to policy judgments about the structure of the campaign. The project assumes *ceteris paribus* that a more engaged and informed public is preferable to a less informed and engaged one and that the public’s involvement is to some degree affected by the structure and conduct of the campaign.

**Televised Debates:** The most successful structural reform of recent decades was the reintroduction in 1976 of televised general election debates. The fact that 70 million Americans tune into these debates is remarkable enough; the fact that most viewers watch a ninety-minute debate nearly in its entirety is truly remarkable. The general election

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<sup>4</sup>After ten of the debates (five Democratic and five Republican), we asked respondents who claimed to have watched all or part of the debate for their reactions.

debates also meet the "water-cooler test"--the next day, millions of people share their impressions of what they saw and heard the night before. These debates are more than just another campaign event. They are an act of community. For an hour and a half, millions of people involve themselves actively in a collective political experience.

The primary election debates are quite another story. They do not draw large or highly enthusiastic audiences and have much less capacity to hold an audience's attention. Of course, our audience data underestimates the debates' impact since the debates affect the next day's election coverage. We found that election news typically increased the day following a debate. Our evidence also suggests that a string of televised debates before the Iowa caucuses was a contributing factor--both directly and indirectly through news coverage--to increased public involvement during this period.

Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that the full potential of the televised primary debates has not yet been realized. This potential is unlikely to be realized unless the commercial broadcast networks assume responsibility for televising some of the debates. There are still many Americans who do not have cable television. It is also the case that debate viewing is in part "accidental." Some viewers watch a debate, not because they know it is schedule and make a point to see it, but because they happen to come across it when changing channels. Since the broadcast networks are among the cable channels that viewers habitually monitor, the number of inadvertent viewers would increase substantially if the networks carried some of the debates.

Our data (at least from a preliminary analysis) are otherwise inconclusive. We correlated people's responses to the debates with a wide range of debate-related factors including formats and number of participants. The public's responses to the debates were not closely related to any of these factors. Responses to open-ended questions about the debates suggest that viewers prefer a more spontaneous type of debate to a rigidly structured one, as long as spontaneity does not degenerate into mudslinging. We also detected a degree of viewer fatigue with the later debates ("it was the same old thing") that might suggest a smaller number of more widely televised debates would be preferable. In some of the later Republican debates, some viewers also complained about the continuing presence in the debates of candidates who had no chance of winning, although we found no consistent relationship between people's overall reactions to the GOP debates and the number of candidates who participated.

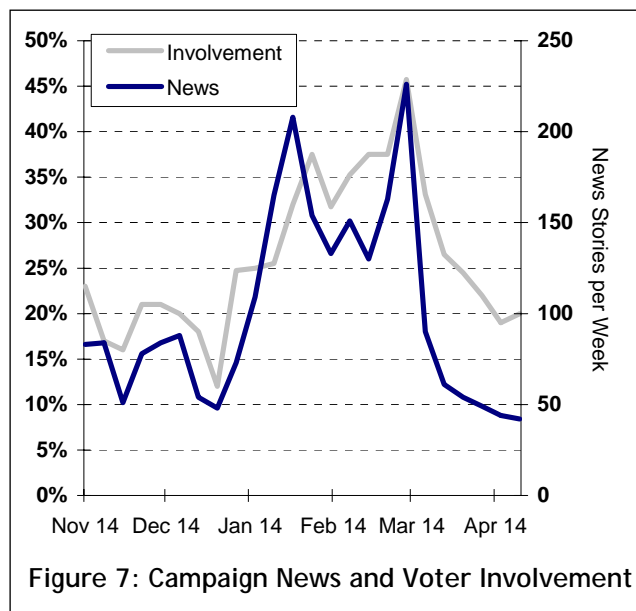
**News Coverage:** Public involvement closely correlates with the amount of election coverage (see Figure 7).<sup>5</sup> As coverage increases, involvement rises. As it decreases, involvement declines. Of course, this relationship is partly attributable to developments in the campaign. News coverage and involvement both rise in response to the heightened activity that surrounds contested primaries and caucuses. Nevertheless, as the relationship between involvement and coverage in the period before the first contests indicates, news coverage has some capacity to boost involvement levels.

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<sup>5</sup> Our news data are based on the combined election coverage of five newspapers: The New York Times, Boston Globe, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Des Moines Register, and Minneapolis Star-Tribune.

For its part, involvement affects the impact of news coverage. Communication research indicates that people learn more readily from news exposure when they are more deeply involved in a subject. They are both more likely to attend to relevant news stories and to retain the information the news provides.

News coverage during the 2000 nominating campaign focused heavily on the horse race when the primaries were being actively contested. This period, of course, was also the peak time of public involvement and therefore of public learning. News about the candidates' records and issue positions, on the other hand, was a relatively larger proportion of overall election coverage during the period before the Iowa and New Hampshire contests. However, involvement during this period was lower and so, therefore, was the public's capacity to acquire this information.



After Super Tuesday week, the amount of election coverage plunged dramatically. There was not much election news of any kind. Yet public involvement was still relatively high at this point. It declined more slowly than news coverage. The news media had an opportunity at this point to contribute to people's information by replaying and extending the earlier policy coverage. An effort of this kind would not have dramatically increased people's issue awareness, but it would have helped to clarify and solidify the information they had acquired.

### C. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: ALTERNATIVE NOMINATING SYSTEMS

Does the current system of nominating presidential candidates serve to broaden and deepen public engagement and information? Our findings lead us to conclude that it is not well designed for this purpose. It may serve the needs of the parties, particular candidates, and the voters in a few states, such as Iowa and New Hampshire. It does not, however, serve the general public's interests.

“Front loading” of the primaries (the tendency of states to schedule their contests on the earliest available dates) is a major reason. Front loading forces the candidates to campaign heavily in the months before the first contests, contributing to the public's perception that the campaign “starts too early” and “lasts too long.” Yet because the public's attention is relatively limited until the Iowa and New Hampshire contests, citizens do not learn very much about the candidates in the months leading up to these contests. Then, soon after the public starts to pay closer attention and acquire information



about the candidates, the heavily front-loaded Super Tuesday brings the active campaign to a sudden halt. Yet the conventions are still months away, heightening the public perception that the campaign is needlessly long. And because the nominating campaign is basically “over” in people’s minds, they disengage from the campaign and begin to lose some of their knowledge of the candidates. Meanwhile, citizens in states that have yet to hold their primaries and caucuses feel disenfranchised.

For some of these reasons and others, the Democratic and Republican parties are reviewing alternatives to the present system. They are examining a number of options, including rotating regional primaries, population-based primaries, and restrictions on front loading. The Secretaries of State from a majority of the states have proposed a specific change for the 2004 election: rotating regional primaries.

Would any, or all, of the proposed alternatives result in increased levels of public engagement and information? It is this question to which we now turn.

**Criteria for Evaluating the Alternatives:** Assuming that the public’s level of engagement and information are overriding considerations and that the public’s complaints about the current system should be taken into account, an alternative nominating system would be preferable to the current one if it created:

1. A shorter campaign;
2. A nominating process that remained competitive for a longer period of time in order to give the public a greater opportunity to engage the campaign and to become informed about the candidates;
3. A briefer interval between the decisive contests and the conventions in order to help people sustain the levels of public engagement and information they had attained when the nominating campaign peaked; and
4. A system that increases the likelihood voters in all states will have an effective voice in the selection of the nominees.

**Evaluating the Alternatives:** These criteria are not necessarily consistent; the first and second ones, for example, can conflict in some situations. Nevertheless, they are a basis for a public-centered evaluation of alternative nominating systems. The following are brief evaluations of some of the proposed alternatives:

1. **The Current System Without the Front Loading:** If front loading could be reversed and the system restored to its original 1970s form, the public would likely be more responsive to the process. The campaign would still be a lengthy one—which would be a source of public dissatisfaction—but there would be more Tuesdays during the initial phase in which a single state’s primary was scheduled. This would increase the likelihood that the race would remain competitive for a longer period, which would result in higher levels of public involvement and public learning. It would also increase the public’s sense that the process was “fair”: a larger number (but not all) of the states would have an effective voice in

- the selection of the nominees. And if the race were competitive for a longer period, the public's sense that the process itself was overly long would probably diminish.
2. **Rotating Regional Primaries with Iowa and New Hampshire's Opening Positions Preserved:** This system would probably not reduce the public's dissatisfaction with the nominating process and could conceivably increase it. This system would not shorten the campaign appreciably. It would reduce the number of dates on which state contests were held but the process would still stretch from February to June. Public involvement and learning would increase with the holding of the Iowa and New Hampshire contests but would still be far short of an optimal level when the first regional primary was held. This primary date might well mark the end of the race; a candidate with money, name recognition, and party support could sweep or nearly sweep the region's contests. A candidate with these advantages would almost certainly prevail by the second round. Voters in other regions would then feel they had been denied a voice in the outcome. This perception would be heightened by the *regional identities* that the system would generate. The perception that the process is unfair would be especially pronounced if the victorious candidate had his or her political base in an opening region.
  3. **Population-Based (Delaware) System.** This system, as it has been proposed, would start with contests in the ten least populous states, followed a few weeks later with the contests in the next ten least populous states, and so on. It would end with contests in the ten most populous states. This population-based system would not shorten the campaign appreciably. It would reduce the number of dates on which the state contests were held but the process would still stretch from mid-winter through early June. This system is more likely than the regional system to produce a sustained race although it is unclear whether the typical race would extend to the last set of primaries. In all likelihood, it would not last through all five rounds. Repeated instances of this outcome would generate intense dissatisfaction with the system in the most populous states—their voters would feel completely disenfranchised by the system since the nominations would always be decided before their primaries were held. However, the system would probably create more overall public involvement and learning than the regional system because it could be expected to unfold more slowly. (NOTE: If this system receives serious consideration, the standard proposal might warrant revision. Iowa and New Hampshire's opening positions should probably be preserved. These two contests would serve to trigger public involvement and learning in advance of the first multi-state wave of contests. If Iowa and New Hampshire led off, it might make sense to cluster the remaining states in groups of twelve in order to confine the campaign to four subsequent dates. Moreover, it might make sense to include a regional factor in the selection of the sets of twelve states—that is, the first twelve states would not be the twelve least populous states (excluding New Hampshire) but instead the three least populous states from each of the four regions. This configuration would increase the public's sense that the process is a

- fair one. If the Delaware plan as originally proposed was adopted, no southern state would be included in the first cluster of primaries.)
4. **National Primary System.** (NOTE: There is little sentiment for a national primary within party circles; however, the purpose of this paper is to present a public-centered view of the nominating process.) A national primary is far and away the public's preferred alternative. There are, as previously indicated, two reasons for this sentiment: a national primary would dramatically shorten the campaign and would be "fair" in that all states would vote on the same date. The critical question about a national primary is whether the voters would get involved deeply enough far enough in advance of primary day to cast an informed vote. To have any chance of working effectively, the system would require activation mechanisms in advance of the national primary, such as a beauty contest in New Hampshire or a series of very high-profile nationally televised debates.
  5. **"Old-Style" National Party Convention System.** This option would shorten the presidential campaign (and reduce the role of money in presidential nominations). A national convention system would also reduce the involvement and information burdens that the current system places on ordinary voters; these burdens would be transferred to party activists. A hard-to-answer question about this system is whether people would regard the system as "fair." Our polling indicates that Americans are willing to countenance a return to the convention system. But a full test probably wouldn't come until the system's first application. If the convention and the run-up period (which presumably, as in the old days, would include a few primary elections) were dominated by vigorous and open competition for delegate support, the general public would likely accept the system's legitimacy. (Objections from opinion leaders probably eliminate this system from serious consideration by either party. It is commonly accepted in American politics that the selection of presidential nominees is best accomplished through a primary-based system.)
  6. **A Hybrid System:** There is a hybrid alternative that would satisfy all four requirements. This system would start on the first Tuesday of April with the first of five single-state contests each scheduled a week apart. (For illustrative purposes, let's assume the campaign starts in Iowa; then goes to New Hampshire in the second week; Georgia or South Carolina in the third week; Washington or Oregon in the fourth week; and Ohio or Michigan in the fifth week.) After the last of these contests, there would be a four-week interval that would allow the candidates to campaign around the country and participate in televised debates. Then, all remaining states would hold their contests on the same day (roughly the first Tuesday in June). In this system, the campaign would be dramatically shorter; there would be a nine-week period of intense activity during which the public could engage the campaign; and all states would be active participants, since the nominating races would not be decided until the final day. This hybrid system combines features of the current system, before front loading altered it, with features of a national primary (45 states would hold their contests on the final day).

#### **D. WHAT LIES AHEAD**

Our weekly surveys will continue through the November election. The next major report of the Vanishing Voter Project will examine the convention period of the campaign and is scheduled for presentation in early September. Our third report will examine the general election campaign and the televised general election debates; it will be presented at a conference in the late fall. We will issue a summary report on the 2000 presidential campaign sometime during 2001.