The 1960s was a time of upheaval and just as Americans were learning to be more accepting of one another in society and African Americans and women were asserting their rights, politics was also changing. Some of the political change was directly related to the civil rights movement and the protests against the war, but some political change came about from a more generic need for reform and an opening up of the political process. Two campaigns, the 1960 John Kennedy campaign and the 1964 Barry Goldwater campaign, had profound impact on the internal politics of political parties. These two campaigns, one from the left and one from the right, attracted new political amateurs to party politics. Regardless of party, these reformers were individuals with high hopes and high ideals who were perhaps taken aback by what they observed as they worked for their candidates (Wilson 1966). Most assuredly, the Democratic amateurs must have been horrified at the idea that a candidate (Vice President Hubert Humphrey) who hadn’t entered a single primary and who, at least symbolically, represented Lyndon Johnson’s position on the war in Vietnam would get their party’s nomination for president. They, and even their Republican counterparts, must have been further horrified by the events in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic Convention.

The Next Step

Technically established by the 1968 Democratic Convention, perhaps as a way of recognizing that their selection process that year was flawed, the McGovern-Fraser Commission worked to examine the selection process and make recommendations for change in an environment tainted by the antiwar protests in the streets of Chicago during the convention and Humphrey’s loss in a very close race. The commission’s work would be important not just for its impact on the 1972 race for
president, but also for how it changed the Democratic Party’s process of selection to this day and for its ripple effect on the Republican Party’s selection process.

First chaired by George McGovern, who was the stand-in candidate for Bobby Kennedy at the 1968 Democratic Convention and who later stepped down as chair to seek the party’s 1972 nomination, the commission was charged with developing the rules for the 1972 convention. The commission was established by vote at the 1968 convention, but its members were appointed afterward by Democratic National Committee (DNC) chair, Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma. Harris steered clear of appointing old school party officials and packed the commission with members of the party known for their reform agenda. Picking McGovern, who was known for his antiwar positions and being somewhat antiestablishment, certainly was a key signal about the direction the commission’s work would take. The commission began its work in 1969 with hearings in Washington and around the country listening to party rank and file members who felt slighted by the 1968 process. By 1971, McGovern was set to move on to announce his candidacy for the 1972 Democratic nomination for president and was replaced as chair by Congressman Don Fraser from Minnesota.

The recommendations made by the commission were fairly broad in scope. Tinkering with these initial changes resulted in both further democratizing, as well as later retrenchment of democratization. The letter and spirit of the recommendations have had a lasting impact on the process by which both political parties select their presidential candidates. The recommendations, couched as “guidelines,” first made it clear that the process used by state party organizations must be clear and specific. Further, any rules used by state parties should include that all meetings related to the selection of delegates (caucuses and conventions) be advertised in advance and “open.” Additionally, these meetings must be held in the same calendar year as the presidential election. This rule would rear its head in the 2008 contest as Iowa and New Hampshire, the first in the nation caucus and primary respectively, moved their contests closer and closer to January 1st in order to maintain their status when threatened by other states moving their contests much earlier in the year.

Regardless of the mechanism any state party would employ to select delegates—caucus, convention, or primary—there were goals for the achievement of proportional representation of certain groups within the state’s delegation to the national convention. These initial groups included blacks, women, and voters under the age of 30. The “unit rule,” which was a mechanism to turn any contest into a winner-take-all outcome, was banned. No longer would a simple plurality of the state’s delegation get to force the rest of the delegation to vote for the plurality’s candidate. Other guidelines were aimed at correcting what these reformers felt were defects in state election laws that overly limited ballot access (e.g., petitioning), discriminated against minorities (e.g., literacy tests), and made it difficult for more mobile voters to get involved (e.g., students).

Not all of the guidelines were adopted and many created controversy. The guidelines urging proportional representation certainly stirred debate and still do today. The arguments raised are quite similar to those made by opponents of affirmative action programs when the charge is made that such policies are nothing but racial quotas that create reverse discrimination, or in the case of voting limit, the rights of