THE DEMOCRATS' FRUSTRATING SEARCH FOR A NOMINEE

By James A. Barnes

If one looks at candidate recruitment as the "first primary" in the presidential nominating process—when some politicians choose to enter the race while others opt for the sidelines—the results so far must be disheartening for the Democrats. The list of candidates who have indicated a preference to run in *1996* is now longer than that of those who are lining up for the race in 1992—and also more impressive.

The Insiders Sit It Out

Senate Majority Leader, George J. Mitchell of Maine, has passed the word to close associates that he wants to go in 1996. Supporters of New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley indicate that he will seriously consider a bid in that year as well. Ditto say some close to House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt, of Missouri. When West Virginia Senator John D. (Jay) Rockefeller announced at a press conference that he was not running next year, he made it clear to reporters that he will probably seek the presidency some day, which some take to mean in 1996. Most recently, Senator Al Gore, saying he still wants to be president, has decided to pass on 1992.

These are all potential candidates who are insiders of sorts. Gephardt and Mitchell hold important leadership positions in their respective chambers. Bradley, Rockefeller, and Gore have a record of building coalitions: the New Jersey senator on tax reform; the West Virginian as chairman of two bipartisan commissions on health care reform and children's policies; the senator from Tennessee, the son of a famous Democratic politician, might mediate the party's waning wings on foreign affairs. In contrast, most of the Democratic presidential candidates entering the 1992 starting gate, or at least ambling around the paddock, are outsiders who don't have much to risk by running. If these candidates dominate the 1992 field, you won't find many defenders of the party's status quo, and congressional Democrats in Washington could wind up taking a few hits before the eventual nominee is selected.

Outsiders Are In

Former Massachusetts Senator Paul E. Tsongas often reminds listeners that he has been "out of politics for seven years," and has served on several corporate boards and thus understands the real workings of the economy. In almost the same breath, Tsongas can also be one of the harshest critics of his party's abilities on that score. In a recent speech to the American Electronics Association, he labeled his fellow Democrats as "fundamentally an anti-business, corporate-bashing, class-warfare, protectionist party." And for good measure he added that "as the Reagan-Bush Administrations drive us down in our inability to compete, the Democrats are no better."

As Virginia's Governor L. Douglas Wilder explores a White House candidacy he clearly poses as an outsider. To him differences between Democrats and Republicans may not be as important as those between the "party inside Washington" and the "party outside Washington," in which he counts himself. "The party inside makes the backroom deals that Washington can live with," says Wilder, "while the party outside fights for fair policies that the American people can live and prosper with." The congressional pay raise has become a favorite Wilder target of late, which he cites as evidence that few in Washington, Republicans or Democrats, are serious about cutting the deficit. "It was a mistake," Wilder said in a recent interview. "In a recession-riddled economy, the board of directors is rewarded—those who were responsible for presiding over the recession?", he asked mockingly.

Two other Democrats, Iowa Senator Tom Harkin and Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, are identified closely with extra-party organizations that make different ideological criticisms of what they perceive as party stands. Harkin worries that during the 1980s, Democrats have been too inclined to mimic Republicans; he has become active in the newly created Coalition for Democratic Values, a group of liberal Democrats who lambast what they see as creeping moderation in the party's ranks. "Once we start reasserting our traditional fundamental values to the American people, you wait and see, it will be like a stampede, they are going to want to come back to the party," said Harkin in a recent interview. As the outgoing chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, a group of moderate and conservative Democrats, Clinton would probably agree with Harkin that the party's old time liberalism will get voters charging, but not in the Democrats' direction. "People aren't buying what we are selling," said Clinton, who wants to increase the role of individual responsibility in social programs, not government's role.

Should these two become the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination, the race would probably be defined as an ideological battle for the soul of the party. But in so doing, both would probably seek to position themselves as anti-establishment candidates. Harkin could hardly be described as a member in good standing of the Senate "club." The acerbic liberal irritated his Majority Leader, George J. Mitchell, by forcing the Senate to begin as soon as it convened in early 1991 the debate over the use of military force in the Persian Gulf War. Mitchell had initially favored delaying the debate. Although Clinton isn't known as a party boatrocker, he can ruffle the feathers of traditional party constituencies. In Arkansas he has battled with teachers' unions over merit pay, performance testing, and choice in education issues.

"The Professionalization of Politics"

In 1988, three Democratic senators made the race: Delaware's Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Tennesseean Albert Gore, Jr., and Paul Simon of Illinois. Four Democratic senators sought their party's nod in 1984, and three ran in 1976. Those past races also attracted party leaders from the House of Representatives, Missouri's Gephardt in 1988, and Arizona's Morris K. Udall in 1976. This year as Labor Day approached there was only one member of Congress, Iowa's Harkin.

One reason why few insiders are lining up to run may be that they have more to risk by challenging a popular incumbent president. "What is happening now is another manifestation of the professionalization of politics," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a senior associate at Claremont Graduate School's Center for Politics and Policy. "When politics becomes a career, running for president means risking a job," Jeffe said. "Those who have less to risk are those looking at a race." Thus potential candidates like Gephardt and Mitchell who hold leadership posts forego the race. Rockefeller wasn't risking his career by running against a popular incumbent president, but he may have been risking career advancement: A landslide loss could damage his stock as a potential candidate in 1996, when the odds of success look better than they do today.

By comparison many Democrats who seem likely to run aren't risking much: Tsongas is out of office; Virginia law prevents Wilder from seeking reelection. In his fifth term, Clinton may be growing tired of being governor a small state and has little prospect of moving up to the Senate anytime soon with two popular Democratic incumbents, Dale Bumpers and David Pryor, showing no signs of retirement. As an outspoken and relatively junior senator, Harkin, who is not up for reelection until 1994, has little power in that chamber.

For the "Good of the Party"?

If New York Governor Mario M. Cuomo enters the race, his candidacy would surely gather the support of many establishment figures in the party, but that wouldn't necessarily make him an insider. Cuomo has been a frequent critic of Democrats on Capitol Hill, having chastised their leaders for not offering much in the way of an alternative agenda to Bush's policies. Cuomo might even be described as a political loner. He rarely consults with party pols in Washington outside of his own state's congressional delegation, and he skipped the last meeting of the National Governor's Association in Seattle.

Not too long ago, Democrats with national stature and clout used to run for president "for the good of the party," but the nominating process that could seduce and reward those candidates to make the race has changed. The constituencies from which those individuals gathered their political strength, and owed loyalty to, don't control it anymore. Big city political machines and union leaders can't deliver delegates to conventions for candidates as they once did. Whoever the candidates are and however they ultimately position themselves, they will all have to run the same endurance race of primaries and caucuses to get to the nomination.

A Different Road in '92

Recently, the first stop on that course has been in Iowa for most candidates, but that may change in 1992.

The impact of the Iowa Democratic presidential caucuses on the rest of the nominating process has already been devalued since 1988, when the top two finishers, Gephardt and Simon, failed to get very far in their presidential quests. With an incumbent Iowa senator in the race, they could be little more than a footnote to the 1992 contest. Starting as late as they are, it's unlikely that relatively unknown Democratic contenders would have the time to mount the necessary grass-roots organizing effort that is required to do well on caucus night.

That might not have been the case if Gephardt had sought the nomination. According to his supporters, Gephardt's private polling showed that he would have had a chance to do well enough against Harkin to at least win the media's expections contest. But even without a formidable challenger like Gephardt, Harkin will have to pay attention to politics in his own backyard. A recent Democratic preference poll in Iowa gave him only 34%, but it also included Gephardt (16%) and Cuomo (11%) on the list of potential candidates. Walter Mondale faced an expectation of winning at least 50% of the Iowa caucus votes in 1984, and Harkin will probably be held to at least that standard. Unfortunately for him, the caucus results can only have a downside effect on his candidacy—a victory will be dismissed as having been a foregone conclusion against a weak field, while a poorer-than-expected showing could doom his campaign.

Despite the fact that Tsongas is a neighbor, New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary is seen as the first key test on neutral ground for 1992. With no contest in the Republican race, press attention will be focused on the results of the Democratic primary; its winner can count on receiving a windfall in terms of free media.

After New Hampshire the impact of the primary and caucus calendar is hard to read, because the calendar has not been finalized. Some Democrats in California, like state Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, are still pushing to move its primary date up from June 2 to March 3. With almost 350 convention delegates at stake, a decisive winner of an early California primary would have the nomination practically wrapped up. That was the hope of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) when it decided in 1989 to change its rules and allow California to move its primary up to March 3. The idea was to deemphasize the impact of Iowa and New Hampshire. The DNC's thinking was not only that this would reduce

the period of intra-party fighting by shortening the nominating process, but that the California winner would be someone who appealed to voters on a "wholesale" basis, via television. That attribute is a better indicator of likely general election success than the retail, one-on-one skills which are essential to winning Iowa and New Hampshire.

Still Likely a "Lagging Indicator"

This is also part of the Mario scenario. The DNC's planners reasoned that the candidate who was likely to win in California would not only have wholesale skills, but would have relatively high name recognition and the ability to raise money to pay for television advertisements in the state's costly media markets. In other words, the likely winner would not be an unknown quantity, but rather someone like Cuomo, Bradley, or perhaps, Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen. The betting in Sacramento today, which has changed from month to month, is that the state will *not* move its primary to March 3. That has some Democrats relieved, given the fact that former Governor Jerry Brown has indicated that he might want to take a third try at the Democratic presidential nomination instead of running for the Senate. Few in the party want to see the unconventional Brown heading their 1992 ticket.

But two states have already taken advantage of that open date to move their primaries up to March 3, Colorado and Maryland. Minnesota already has caucuses on that day. Some western states, Arizona, Nevada, and Wyoming, are also looking to hold their presidential caucuses on March 7. Democrats are divided about the potential consequences of these pre-Super Tuesday events. Some think that because they are mileposts on the primary and caucus schedule, they will be events that winnow losing candidates out of the race and speed the selection of a nominee. Others, however, think that these contests will produce balkanized results, different winners in different states, which would simply prolong candidacies, not shorten them.

No Southern Favorite

Super Tuesday, the southern and border states primary bonanza, is slated for March 10, and still packs a political wallop despite the fact that several states have dropped out of the regional scheme. So far Super Tuesday's remaining Dixie representatives are Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas—altogether, states with some 700 pledged delegates. Right now those delegates are up for grabs. Polling by Mason-Dixon Opinion Research in a number of southern states has indicated that voters there have no strong preference for the nomination. Bentsen is backed by 45% of the primary electorate in Texas. Before he announced that he would not seek the Democratic nomination this year, Gore was seen as a strong contender for the affections of southern voters. But even with his decision to back the use of force in the Persian Gulf, Gore's support was limited to the low 20s and high teens. Outside of Arkansas, polls show hardly any regional support for another native son, Clinton, who is simply not well known.

If Jackson doesn't run, who would inherit his supporters? Wilder might attract black voters, but his emphasis on self-help conflicts with the views of most blacks, who expect more from government. None of the likely white candidates has a long history in the civil rights movement which would provide an entré to these voters.

A critical turn in the nominating process will probably come on March 17, when both Illinois and Michigan, for the first time, hold their primary on the same day. A candidate who wins both of these big industrial states and New York on April 7, might be propelled to the nomination, by being able to lay claim to the support of labor and ethnic voters who are critical for any chance of success in the general election. Whether any of the Democratic candidates running next year is strong enough to pull together the traditional elements of the party by that stage in the nominating process is still unclear. Some party strategists speculate that their task might be complicated by favorite son candidacies. The latter have not had much success in the past, but against a weak field, the favorite sons might become attractive vehicles to keep delegates uncommitted going into the convention and provide the ballast to draft a stronger party standard bearer.

Of course many in the party won't wait until the convention to start shopping for an alternative to the lesser known Democrats who are running. With Gore becoming the third leading Democrat to forswear interest in the 1992 nomination, many party elites will begin this fall to sound out party leaders like Bentsen, Cuomo and Mitchell about running, promising to place significant political and financial resources behind them. However, in an interview after he announced he wasn't running, Gore discounted the possibility of a drafted nominee. He said: "People look at the hard realities and know the nomination is won in the primaries and nowhere else. There are no powerbrokers who control the nomination anymore; it's in the primaries. You have to get out there and run...."

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