

Judge: Reform dispute outside his jurisdiction

A federal judge ruled Wednesday that he doesn't have jurisdiction to decide who is the Reform Party's real presidential nominee. U.S. District Judge Norman Moon also threw out a court case brought by allies of presidential candidate Pat Buchanan.

The lawsuit had asked the U.S. District Court in Lynchburg, Va., to bar a rival Reform Party group from operating under the party's name and placing its nominees on the ballot as Reform candidates. Moon said he lacked jurisdiction because the power struggle didn't raise any constitutional or federal issue. In March, Moon presided over another rift between opposing party factions seeking control of \$2.5 million in the Reform treasury. He ruled then that Pat Choate, the 1996 running mate of party founder Ross Perot, was the party's legitimate chairman.

During the Reform Party's convention in Long Beach, Calif., earlier this month, delegates opposed to Buchanan declared his nomination illegitimate and walked out. That group then held its own convention across the street and nominated John Hagelin, who heads the Natural Law Party. Both sides hope to win the \$12.6 million in Federal Election Commission money waiting for the Reform nominee. Dale Cooter, attorney for the Buchanan faction, said he will take the issue to a state court, possibly next week. He wasn't sure in which state he would file. — Tom Squitieri

Lieberman religious post questioned

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a civil liberties watchdog group, called on Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman to resign as honorary chairman of an organization that criticizes public schools for allegedly suppressing students' religious expression. Lieberman is associated with the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. He serves as honorary chairman of the group's Center for Jewish and Christian Values. Americans United said the fellowship makes a number of false charges against public education and church-state separation.



McCollum: Applauds Lieberman.

Lieberman, who has faced criticism for injecting religion into the campaign, received support from an unexpected source: conservative Rep. Bill McCollum, R-Fla. He told the Anti-Defamation League that Lieberman's position is "intellectually honest, and I applaud him for speaking openly about a part of him and I consider to be so important." The ADL has urged Lieberman to avoid expressions of religious values in his campaign. McCollum told the ADL, "To speak of faith is to speak of a fundamental value of our society, and it is one that I hope you reconsider." — Jill Lawrence

Nader wins union's endorsement

Green Party presidential nominee Ralph Nader won the endorsement of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America union. The 35,000-member independent union, which represents workers in manufacturing, public sector and private non-profit sector jobs, said "the wasted vote in this election would be for the pro-business Democrats and Republicans." They endorsed Nader one day after he spoke during their convention in Erie, Pa. — Tom Squitieri

McCain attacks first lady's fundraising

Campaign finance reform champion John McCain is attacking Hillary Rodham Clinton's fundraising tactics at the same time President Clinton is trying to help his wife raise more money. Hillary Clinton is vying for a Senate seat from New York. In a letter on behalf of "the Senate candidate I know best," the president argues that his wife needs support because her opponents "especially on the Republican right, will spare no expense and respect no boundaries in their efforts to defeat her."

In an ad McCain filmed just after his skin cancer surgery earlier this month, the Arizona Republican senator looks straight into the camera and accuses the first lady of accepting "millions in soft money." Soft money is contributions that can be provided in unlimited amounts by individuals and corporations because of a loophole in the federal elections law. The commercial is the second that Clinton's Republican opponent, Rep. Rick Lazio, has released this week attacking her. He told reporters he's just countering her "disproportions" of his congressional record. — Kathy Kiely

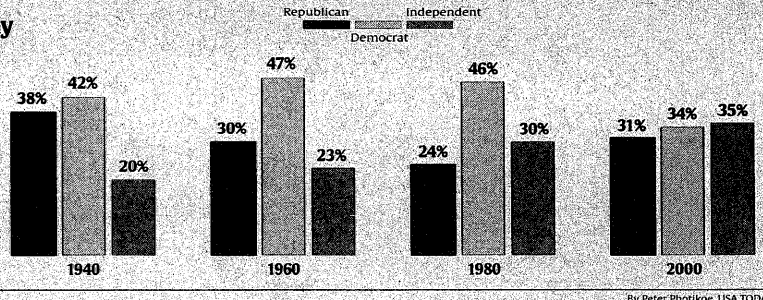
Written by Tom Squitieri with staff and wire reports

Voters shift away from parties

The percentage of people who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats has fallen. Party identification through the years:

Note: Historical data based on polls conducted in person; figures for this year based on telephone surveys.

Source: The Gallup Poll



By Peter Pholikor, USA TODAY

Parties are losing people power

GOP, Dems raising record amounts, but fewer voters say they can relate

By Jim Drinkard
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — As the Republicans and Democrats head into the most heated phase of the campaign season, there are widespread signs that the two major parties are less relevant to voters than ever.

The number of Americans who say they strongly identify with either party has been dropping, and by some measures, more people now say they are independent than call themselves either Democrats or Republicans.

Candidates increasingly depend on their own political networks and less on traditional party structures. Professional consultants have usurped many of the functions formerly carried out by the parties, from polling to message development. And the television ratings for this year's party conventions in Philadelphia and Los Angeles hit historic lows.

But there is at least one thing that the parties are doing better than ever: raising money.

"For all intents and purposes, the parties have become a vehicle to move money into elections," says Steve Rosenthal, political director of the AFL-CIO.

That role has been on display throughout this election year as the parties have regularly smashed fundraising records. The Republicans set the pace in April by raising \$21.3 million in a single night at their annual Washington gala. That record lasted less than a month, eclipsed by the \$26.5 million Democrats raised in one evening. And both conventions were awash in money, with fundraising events scheduled from breakfast until late at night.

'Capital-intensive'

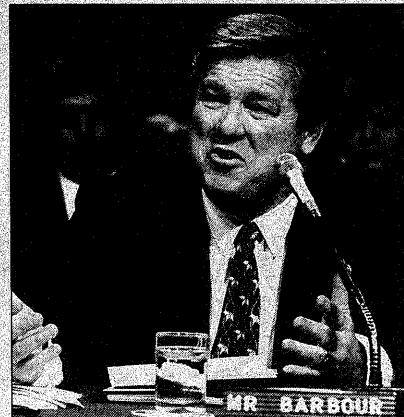
In many ways, political scientists say, dollar power has replaced people power, yielding what University of Akron political scientist John Green calls "capital-intensive politics." Among the signs of party decline:

► Americans are less likely to affiliate strongly with either party. Some polls show the number of people who call themselves independents tops those who have even weak party attachments: In 24 states, voters do not even register by party, skipping what used to be the main means of party identification. An appeal to inde-



By Seth Perlman, AP

Daley: Voters "don't want to know about the elephants and donkeys."



By Doug Mills, AP

Barbour: "The party system is in many ways weaker than it was 20 years ago, or 40 years ago."

pendents provided the fuel for Arizona Sen. John McCain's surprisingly strong bid for the GOP nomination in the spring primaries.

► Voters say they are more focused on personal qualities such as integrity and leadership than on specific issues when they make their ballot choices, making party labels less relevant. A USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll in January found 24% of voters said they were "certain" to or would "probably" vote Republican in the presidential election, 27% said the same of voting Democratic, and 47% said they "would consider the candidates equally without regard for party."

► Party mechanisms to deliver information and turn out votes have largely withered, supplanted by the news media and by television advertising, sophisticated direct-mail techniques and, increasingly, the Internet. "Parties used to be a neighbor who would knock on your door around election time, hand you a flier and talk to you," Rosenthal says. "Most places in the country, that doesn't exist anymore." Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., adds, "The bonding and the coalition are gone."

► Political consultants have taken over many of the functions parties used to perform, including providing strategic advice to candidates, advertising, polling and direct mail services. An American University poll last year found a majority of consultants said they believed the role of parties in electing candidates had declined, particularly at the state and local levels.

"The party system is in many ways weaker than it was 20 years ago, or 40 years ago," says Haley Barbour, a former national chairman of the Republican Party who is now a Washington lobbyist.

"We now have a system of candidates, by candidates and for candidates," says Martin

Wattenberg, political scientist at the University of California-Irvine. He notes that in 1996, GOP nominee Bob Dole said he had not read the Republican platform and wouldn't be bound by its positions.

At the state level, many party organizations have dwindled to almost nothing, political professionals say. "For organizations that have existed since statehood, they sometimes act as though they were going out of business tomorrow," says Dave Hansen, political director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. "Sometimes, all you want from them is their bulk-mail permit," which allows the party to send mail at preferred rates.

Impact of primaries

Another factor that has eroded parties, Barbour and other close observers say, is the development of the primary system for picking presidential candidates — particularly open primaries that invite non-party members to participate in the selection. Such a system tends to reward candidates who take moderate positions and appeal to crossover voters: hard-core appeals to party faithful may backfire.

Primaries have not always been part of the American political scene. They grew out of the Progressive movement in the early part of this century as a way to take nominating decisions out of the hands of party bosses in smoke-filled rooms and return them to the people. The number of primaries and their importance has grown over the past three decades.

The effect, says Roger Pilon, a scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, is to homogenize politics to the point where it's hard to distinguish between the parties. "They come across as being increasingly without principle," he says.

Despite their decline, parties still serve as an important

shorthand for voters — a brand name that generally says the GOP candidate is for lower taxes and less government, and the Democrat is for spending on social programs such as education and health care. And, at least at the national level, the parties serve in limited ways to recruit candidates and organize elections. They also serve as a rallying point for elected officials who battle over government policies.

But much of their remaining clout stems from their power as fundraisers, says Paul Beck, an Ohio State political scientist who wrote a leading textbook on party politics. "They have carved out for themselves a very important role, and I don't think it is a good role," he says. "They are the conduit for money to come into campaigns that exceeds what the candidates themselves can spend."

That provides a strong reason for candidates not to stray too far from their parties. Increasingly, campaigns are won not by money flowing directly to candidates, but by the flood of money flowing through outside channels — of which the parties remain the largest. "You hate to say that money is such a determining factor, but it is," Hansen says.

As one indicator of change, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley points to his party's tradition, forged in the Depression and the activist government policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. "That really formed the strong Democratic Party system, locally and at the state and national levels, more than anything else," he says.

Now, that generation — the generation of his father, Chicago Democratic boss Richard Daley — has faded. "Voters now have a totally different outlook. They are saying, 'We elect you to get the job done,'" he says. "They don't want to know about the elephants and donkeys. They just want to know about the issues."

Bush yet to agree to debate schedule

From wire services

WASHINGTON — Republican presidential nominee W. Bush rejected Clinton's Wednesday that he was to avoid debates with Democrat Al Gore. Bush insists he was eager to go head with the vice president in prime time.

However, Bush, the governor of Texas, declined to himself to the three encounters sponsored by bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates. The debates would be broadcast on the major TV networks many other outlets.

A team of Bush advisers making the Wednesday with television networks and other options that have extensions for presidential debates.

Ari Fleischer, a spokesman for Bush, said the team with CNN, ABC and CBS hold similar meetings and meet Friday with the of the bipartisan commission.

The Gore presidential campaign, which has agreed commission's proposal on Bush to accept the commission package.

"We're going to come to the meetings and look at all the various options," Fleischer said.

Independent expert Bush risked being too coward if he held out the commission's proposal too long.

Bush was asked in a question-and-answer session sponsored by CNN who would meet Gore in time.

"I intend to, you bet in the process of discussing the times with ferent networks. I look to the debates, I do," Bush said.

Gore and Bush officials ultimately will decide the debate format through negotiations, which have started seriously.

Communications professor Roderick Hart of the University of Texas said Bush probably have to accept much of the commission proposal, but he might be influenced by the debate.

Gore is generally seen as more experienced debater. "The traditional format having tough journalists is not ideal for Gore, not good on his feet, not good on details, and details are prime moments in that format," said Hart.

Hart said Bush might prefer a more relaxed interview-show such as King, with his tolerant rambling answers and formal questioning. The commission proposed three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate. The first presidential debate would take place in Boston. After that, the vice-presidential debate would take place in Danville, Ky., on Oct. 10. The final presidential debate would take place in St. Louis on Oct. 17.