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## Presidential Primaries

by Raymond Moley

**M**ILWAUKEE—It has added a special interest to be in Wisconsin shortly after President Truman referred to Presidential primaries as "eyewash," particularly since he declared himself willing to buy himself a treatment of said "eyewash" in New Hampshire. For Wisconsin enjoys a partial but proprietary ownership in this means of guiding the nomination of Presidents.

Like many other reforms collectively called progressivism, Presidential primaries originated in the early years of this century. In the generation of these reforms Wisconsin took a foremost place, and it still takes its primary very seriously.

The Presidential primary was born amid high hopes. It was designed to strike the shackles off the oppressed citizen and permit him to take over from the bosses and political machines. Democracy was to reign in selections as well as elections. In fact, enthusiasm rose so high that Woodrow Wilson prophesied that there would probably never be another national convention after 1912 and that primaries would prevail.

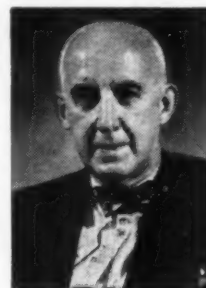
Indeed, the new Presidential primaries enjoyed a gusty initiation in 1912, for they provided Theodore Roosevelt and President Taft a fine forum for a bitter political contest. But after that Presidential primaries failed to spread, and now only fifteen states have them. The conditions and the legal requirements under which they are conducted differ widely.

No candidate is likely to enter all or even a sizable majority of the fifteen states that offer this means of preference. By tradition, certain states are left to the single candidacy of a favorite son, such as Warren in California this year. No candidate, moreover, is going to enter a primary in which he does not feel that he can win. And the expense and effort of participation bars candidates from spreading their campaigns to many of those states. Delegates can be obtained more easily and economically in convention states.

Hence, the results in primaries are never a clear indication of the strength of a candidate. In 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt generally avoided primary fights and in one of the few that he did enter he was soundly trounced.

Dewey did well in primaries in 1940 but lost the nomination. In 1948 he did badly in primaries, except in Oregon, but won the prize.

Occasionally, one primary seems to be decisive in eliminating a candidate, as in the case of Stassen in Oregon in 1948 and Willkie in Wisconsin in 1944. But in both of those cases success at the convention would have been impossible in any case.



The idea of extending primaries to all the states by Federal law is preposterous, despite its approval by President Truman in his letter to New Hampshire. A major party behind a single nominee can barely afford to spread its effort to all states in a Presidential election.

But a single candidate for the nomination could not possibly raise the money or find the time for such an effort; that is, no candidate except a President in office such as Truman whose machine is nationwide, composed of Federal jobholders, and paid for out of the Federal Treasury.

Thus while the Presidential primary seems to embody a perfect democratic principle, it falls far short of democracy in practice. The basic purpose of a primary, however, is not to measure the general popularity of a candidate but to permit the members of his own party to express a choice. And even this purpose is frustrated in some states where members of a party vote in the primary of their opposition to defeat a stronger candidate and approve a weak one who can easily be defeated. This practice tends to destroy party responsibility.

**T**HE primaries can serve to remind a lethargic electorate that an election year is coming and possibly to stir them to some political activity later on. For that reason alone there should be vigorous efforts to get out a big vote wherever there are primaries this year. The choice of the primaries may not be the choice of the convention, but that does not mean that they are as unimportant as the President says they are. Primaries may not be decisive in selecting the eventual nominee but they can nevertheless exercise a powerful psychological influence especially this year.