

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
RHODE ISLAND  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

---

1892-93



PROVIDENCE  
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY  
1893

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NOMINATING CONVENTION IN RHODE ISLAND.

The development of the Nominating Convention in Rhode Island is interesting to the student of history for two reasons.

First. It was the earliest or among the earliest developed.  
Second. Its different phases may be clearly traced.

Before marking its rise and progress in Rhode Island, it will be well to glance briefly at its development at large, for since its inception it has attained such proportions that it is now one of the most important parts of our American political system.

In its origin, the nominating convention is purely democratic and dates from about the year 1825. Its growth was rapid.

The period from its inception to that of its development covers little more than four decades. The various stages through which it passed are (a) self-nomination; (b) private caucus; (c) legislative caucus; (d) mixed legislative caucus.

The first stage, self-nomination, has disappeared, except in the "loosely settled South and extreme West," where this system still prevails and the "canvass is conducted by the personal solicitation of the candidates."

The private caucus has become the primary of the present system, and the legislative and mixed-legislative caucuses have to do only with legislative issues. From these originated the pure nominating convention which now prevails, and consists of delegates from all the primaries and chosen by the primaries, whose sole duty is to sit in the convention and nominate State, county and municipal officers. The line of demarcation between the three last mentioned phases is of importance in showing the growth of a strong democratic spirit.

In a legislative caucus of either party, the towns and portions of towns represented by men of the opposite party were not represented. In a Republican convention only those towns were represented which had Republican members in the legislature, those which had Federalists were unrepresented, and a like condition of affairs existed in a convention of Federalists.

Soon, however, in its process of development, the nominating convention consisted of legislative representatives of the party holding it, plus delegates chosen from the towns represented by the opposite party, and here we have the mixed legislative caucus. The pure nominating convention succeeded this and consists of delegates specially chosen from each town and county in the State without regard to its representation in the legislature.

In speaking of the earliest phase of the convention, Alexander Johnson says: "Before, during and after the revolution, the inception of political action was mainly controlled by a series of unofficial coteries of leading and kindred spirits in every colony. Their existence and the popular acquiescence in their action was due partly to the manner in which suffrage was then limited by property qualification, and partly to the still surviving respect for the influential classes."\*

However this may have been, it is obvious that after the formation of parties in 1790, there was a great need of some organization which would guide party action, and this need was more keenly felt by the growth of a democratic spirit. Furthermore, there was an increasing body of young men who wished a voice in the government of the State and this was naturally found in the legislative assemblies, out of which grew the legislative caucus.

The date of the first legislative caucus in the United States was 1796, according to Alexander Johnson,† but in the *History of Rhode Island*, by Arnold, we have evidence of a convention for the nomination of candidates for State officers as early as 1790. Certain is it, however, that in 1797, and after,

\*See *Lalor's Encyclopedia*. Art. "Nominating Convention."

†See *Lalor's Encyclopedia*. Art. "Nominating Convention."

the common mode of procedure throughout the country was by a legislative caucus. In 1813, the Tammany faction, Anti-Clintonians, in order to defeat Clinton's nomination by the legislature, proposed a convention, but the proposal was passed over by the party and nothing more was heard of it until 1817, when it was revived in a modified form by the Clintonians, who announced a convention and requested all those towns represented by the opposing faction in the legislature to send delegates to this convention. But in Rhode Island, seven (7) years previously, a like move had been made which gives evidence that Rhode Island was among the first, if not the first, to rise in its political development. The first nominating convention on the modern plan of which I have any knowledge, was that of Pennsylvania, in February, 1821, when Heister was nominated in opposition to Gov. Findlay. In Massachusetts the first step towards a nominating convention is said to have been taken on January 23, 1823, by adding to the mass-meeting of the Republican members of both branches, delegates from Republican towns not represented in the legislature. Five years later the Jackson-Republicans had organized on the convention plan, and in 1832, both parties. In New York the convention commenced about 1826; in Rhode Island 1825; and by 1840 it was the common mode of procedure in effecting nominations. Such has been the development of the convention at large, and we may now fix our attention on its development in Rhode Island.

The first nominating convention of which we have any account is that mentioned in the *Providence Gazette* of April 3d and 10th, 1790, and by Arnold in his *History of Rhode Island*.\* From these accounts we have evidence that there was called on March 31st, 1790, a nominating convention, consisting of the federal members of the legislature.

This convention met at East Greenwich and formed a coalition or Federal prox which contained the names of Arthur Fenner for governor and Samuel J. Potter for deputy-governor.

An Anti-Federal prox was also arranged in convention by those members of the legislature who opposed the Federalists.

\*Vol. II., p. 560.

Thus, as early as 1790, we have the nominations made in Rhode Island by a legislative caucus. From this time until the year 1810, it is probable that all nominations were thus made, and at this point it may be well to note the phraseology used in announcing the call for a convention. The following is taken from the *Phenix* of February 14th, 1807.

“ATTENTION !

“The Democratic-Republicans of Providence are invited to meet at the State House, on Monday evening next, at six o'clock, P. M., for the purpose of choosing delegates to meet in convention at East Greenwich, and fix on a prox of general officers for the year ensuing, agreeably to a recommendation of the last convention held in this town.”

In the date of March 7th, we read the following :

“DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN PROX.

“At a general convention of the Democratic-Republicans of the State of Rhode Island, holden at East Greenwich on February 25th, 1807, the following prox was unanimously agreed to be offered to the freemen of the State for the year ensuing: The Honorable Constant Taber, Esq., for governor; Seth Wheaton, Esq., for lieutenant-governor,” &c.

In the year 1810, there are evidences of a change in the make-up of the convention. The broadening of the conventions of the different parties to admit delegates from those towns not represented by their party, now takes place, and on February 28th, 1810, we have proofs of a mixed legislative caucus which Alexander Johnson says took place in New York in 1817, for the first time, and appeared in Massachusetts only in 1823.

In the *Phenix* of January 20th, 1810, we read the following :

“REPUBLICAN CONVENTION.

“A general convention of the Republicans of this State will be holden at the State House in Providence, on Wednesday, 28th day of February. Those towns in the State who are represented in the General Assembly by *Federalists* are therefore desired to elect delegates to attend the convention.”

At this convention James Fenner, Esq., was nominated for governor, and Isaac Wilbour, Esq., for lieutenant-governor. This was the first mixed legislative caucus in Rhode Island, and perhaps in the United States. The Federalists nominated their men this same year by a purely legislative caucus.

The question now presents itself, why this change? A remark in the *Boston Chronicle* of January 10th, 1810, gives us light upon the question. Speaking of the political condition in Rhode Island, it proceeds to say, "that here, the Republicans have all along had the government, but that now, the Federalists have a small majority in the legislature. The former are taking measures for securing union and exertion at the April election, and we have no doubt that they will be completely successful." From this we see that the Republicans were in the minority, and that a Republican legislative caucus would be far from representative. Moreover, there was a strong democratic spirit among men which was continually increasing, and it seems to me that both these causes were important factors in effecting the change. In the Fall of the same year, Republican representatives to congress were nominated by a convention made up in like manner. In 1811, the phraseology of the announcement of the Federalist convention leads me to believe that they, too, sought delegates from towns which were represented by Republicans.

Thus far, we have clearly traced the beginning of the legislative caucus, its development into the mixed legislative caucus, and it now remains for us to trace this latter development into the pure nominating convention of to-day. To do this will be a more difficult task, as all the evidence is opaque upon this point. Of this much, however, there can be no doubt that from 1810 until 1824, all candidates for county, State and national offices were nominated by a mixed legislative caucus, In 1811, the Federal announcement for their convention is as follows:

"COMMUNICATION.

"It is expected that during the session of the General Assembly at East Greenwich, a prox will be agreed upon for the ensuing year, to be supported by the Federal-Republicans.

And it is earnestly requested that each town in the State may be represented at a meeting proposed to be holden there, on Friday, the first day of March, on that interesting subject."\* The result of this convention was stated as follows:

"At a very numerous meeting of Federal-Republicans, composed of gentlemen from all parts of the State holden at East Greenwich, it was agreed to present the following officers to the freemen of the State for their election."† In 1812, the Republicans announced the convention in terms similar to those of 1810 and 1811.

"A general convention of Republican delegates from the several towns in the State, will be holden at East Greenwich on Thursday, 28th day of February, next. The Republicans of those towns represented in the assembly by Monarchists, (commonly called Federalists), are requested to choose their delegates to attend said convention."‡ Newport being Federal in the legislature at this time, we find this town calling a meeting for the appointment of delegates to attend this convention.

"The Republican citizens of Newport are requested to meet at the State House in this town, on Friday evening next, at early candle light, for the purpose of appointing delegates to attend the general Republican convention, which will meet in Providence.§ During this same year the representatives to Congress and the presidential electors were also nominated by a mixed legislative caucus.|| In calling a convention for the purpose of nominating the electors for president and vice-president of the United States, the language was the same until 1828, the closing lines of the announcement requesting all towns represented by Federalists in the assembly to send delegates. But, in the call for a convention for the nomination of candidates for county and State offices, the

\**Providence Gazette*, February 23, 1811.

† { *Newport Mercury*, March 13, 1811.  
 { *R. I. American*, March 8, 1811.

‡ *Providence Patriot*, February 16, 1811.

§ *R. I. Republican*, February 19, 1812.

|| { *R. I. Republican*, August 6, 1812.  
 { " " November 12, 1812.

language varied. Thus, in 1815, the announcement of the convention was placed as follows:

"At a meeting of a number of Republican citizens of the County of Providence, it was unanimously resolved, that their Republican brethren in the State be invited and urged to designate delegates from each town to compose a general convention for the purpose of forming a prox of general officers."\*

In 1816, it was thus announced:

"A general convention of the Republicans of this State will be holden at the State House in Providence, on Wednesday, 21st of February, during the session of the General Assembly. The Republicans in the several towns are desired to elect their delegates to attend said convention."† The language of this last mentioned call is used in all subsequent announcements, with but little variation, excepting the phrase "during the session of the General Assembly," which in all later announcements is left out.

From the phraseology of these several announcements of a convention, it is evident that we can decide nothing definitely.

That they do not signify pure legislative caucuses is certain, both from the announcements of town meetings for the appointment of delegates to attend said conventions and the fact, that, having mixed legislative caucuses in the years 1810, 1811 and 1812, it would be unreasonable to suppose that they would turn back in their political progress at this period.

Further, we may ask, what hinders us from believing that the conventions, say from 1816 on, were pure conventions? Take the call for the Republican convention for 1817, as an example.

"NOTIFICATION.

"The committee authorized by the general convention, holden in Providence in October last, hereby give notice that a convention of Republican-Democrats will be holden at the State House in East Greenwich, on Tuesday, 20th of February next, for the purpose of agreeing on a prox for general officers, to be offered to the freemen of Rhode Island for

\**Providence Patriot*, March 25, 1815.

†*Providence Patriot*, February 10, 1816.

their support at the ensuing election. The Republicans of the several towns of the State are respectfully desired to elect their delegates accordingly."\*

Judging from the language in which this call for the convention is couched, we are certainly led to think of a pure nominating convention. But later developments do away with any such belief. In 1824, when there was such great opposition to the congressional caucus that it was ejected from the American political system, there was on the part of the growing democracy a like repugnance to the legislative caucus in the various States. This feeling existed in Rhode Island, and it was in this year, as it seems to me, that there took place the first pure nominating convention ever held in the State. The following editorial by the editor of the *Independent Inquirer*, of January 8th, 1824, bears me out in the foregoing conclusions.

"That we are opposed to conventions for the nomination of general officers we distinctly deny. We think a convention for this purpose proper and expedient. But our objections to such a proceeding arises from the mode in which conventions are originated and from the manner of admitting the members which usually compose them. A general convention for the selection and nomination of suitable candidates for general officers, is one for an express and particular purpose. Its members, therefore, ought to be elected for this express and particular purpose. This would be truly Republican. But this is not the case. A convention is notified and the Republicans of the several towns are 'urged' to send delegates. One or two towns only comply with the request. The convention is holden consisting of seventy members or upwards, and not more than twelve or sixteen of this number are properly and duly elected for this purpose. To supply the serious and radical defect in this rotten system, members of the General Assembly are admitted. And pray, by what right are they admitted? Were they selected for this purpose? Have their constituents authorized them to sit in conventions? Have the people delegated to them the power of making governors and senators? Besides, the request for

\**Providence Patriot*, January 25, 1817.

the Republicans in the several towns in the notification for a general convention 'to elect delegates,' is entirely superseded by this practice and becomes a mockery upon Republicanism. Why should members of the assembly, elected in August, for the express purpose of legislation be admitted to vote and act in convention any more than other Republican citizens?"\*

This seems to me to clearly prove that mixed legislative caucuses prevailed up till 1824, and that there was on the part of some opposition to such a system. The call for the Republican convention for the nomination of candidates for State offices for this year 1824, is about the same as that of 1815, with the omission of the sentence "during the session of the General Assembly."†

That it was not a pure nominating convention, I think can be safely asserted, for in subsequent years we find towns indifferent as to the appointment of delegates to any convention and it is very probable that this year was no exception. During this same year there was a call for a general Republican convention for the nomination of electors for the presidency and vice-presidency of the United States, couched in the usual language which I have before mentioned.‡

There was great opposition manifested towards this convention. Many asserted that it was a mere legislative caucus for the purpose of nominating men who were friendly to Crawford the "caucus candidate," and another call for a convention was made as follows:

"Resolved: By the central committees of the counties of Newport and Providence, who were appointed by the general convention holding at Newport in June last, that the freemen of the several towns in this State in favor of the election of Hon. John Quincy Adams to the presidency of the United States, be and they are hereby requested to appoint delegates to assemble in convention to be holden in the State House, in Providence, on the evening of Tuesday, the 26th of October next, to nominate electors of the presidency and vice-presidency of the United States.

\**Independent Enquirer*, January 8, 1824.

†*Providence Patriot*, January 10, 1824.

‡ { *Patriot*, September 18, 1824.  
 † { *R. I. Republican*, June 22, 1824.

"Signed by the chairmen of the central committees of Providence and Newport counties."\*

This convention assembled, and every town but two was represented by delegates who chose four electors, and I think it may be safely called a pure convention, and the first instance of the kind in Rhode Island. My reason for this is that it originated with men opposed to the caucus system. The regular Republican convention, which was simply a mixed legislative caucus, met on the following day and agreed to the electors chosen by the aforementioned convention.

Thus passed the nominations for the year 1824, and they mark another advance to our present political system. After this we cannot make any sure line of demarkation and say this was or was not a pure nominating convention.

Of this much we are certain, however, that the events of 1824 had aroused the people to a sense of their responsibility and their privilege in nominating candidates for every office. If they did not perform this task it was because they were indifferent to their opportunities.

Consider now the conventions of 1825: The call for a convention of Republicans for the nomination of candidates for State offices was as usual, and concerning this convention we have the following in the *Providence Gazette* of January 15:

"STATE CONVENTION.

"This assembly, agreeably to notice, met in the State House at Bristol, &c. It was voted that the Republican members of the towns which had neglected to choose delegates be admitted to a seat. The towns from which no delegates appeared were ten in number."

In commenting on the call for a convention for the nomination of candidates for representatives to Congress, the editor of the *Enquirer* speaks as follows:

"The period, however, in which this system (legislative caucus) held dominion over the political destinies of the State has passed away. The time has, in fact, arrived when the power of caucuses has ceased to operate and freemen begin to act and think for themselves." Concerning this same

\**R. I. Republican*, October 7, 1824.

convention we have the following evidence from the *Warren Telegraph*, of June 29th, 1825.

"On Wednesday last, the delegates chosen to the Republican convention for the purpose of nominating candidates for the next congress, met in the State House in Newport. On the second ballot Messrs Dutee J. Pearce and Samuel Eddy were nominated. The caucus having been held with open doors a large number of members of the assembly and spectators attended the meeting."

Also this further evidence from the *Gazette*: "At the convention for the nomination of representatives, thirteen towns only appeared to have sent delegates, and after the members of the legislature had been voted in as members of the convention, they proceeded to ballot."\*

From the foregoing notices it is obvious that in 1825 the mixed legislative caucus had ceased to exist and that nominating conventions consisting of delegates expressly chosen for that purpose by their respective towns, had come into popular favor. We see, however, towns indifferent to their political privileges, which neglect to choose delegates, and we find the vacancies thus made filled by their representatives who are voted in by the delegates assembled in convention. Though for all practical purposes this may be considered a pure nominating convention, in theory it cannot be thus designated, and this question arises: "When did the convention cease filling vacancies from the legislature?" In answer to this question I adduce the following:

"REPUBLICAN NOMINATION.

"At a meeting of citizens from various parts of the State, June 28th, 1828, it was resolved:

"That the freemen of the respective towns in this State, be requested to appoint delegates, or to authorize their representatives to appear and act at a convention to be holden in the State House in Providence, on the Wednesday evening next succeeding the last Monday of October next, to nominate suitable persons for electors of president and vice-president of the United States."†

\**Providence Patriot*, July 2, 1828.

†*Providence Gazette*, June 25, 1825.

Also an announcement from the *Rhode Island Republican* of January 7, 1830:

"A general Republican convention of delegates and representatives will be holden at the State House in Providence, on January 14th. The several towns are requested to take seasonable measures to be represented in the convention by their delegates or representatives friendly to the Republican principles and measures. The number from each town to be the same as its number of representatives in the General Assembly."

From 1825 to 1828, the announcement for the convention was about the same, and indeed from 1825 on, was the same in some of the newspapers. In the call for a convention which I read from the *Patriot*, we have the towns from which no delegates are appointed, called on to authorize their representatives to serve as delegates. The *Rhode Island Republican* of 1838 also asserts a like condition of affairs. From these it seems to me reasonable to conclude that by 1828, all towns were responsible for the election of delegates or the appointment of their representatives to act as such, and though we may call the conventions of 1824 on, pure conventions for all practical purposes, yet theoretically they existed only from 1828.

Such, in detail, has been the development of the nominating convention in Rhode Island, which constitutes one of the most powerful machines in our political system, and to the State of Rhode Island is due the honor of taking the first step in its development.

NEIL ANDREWS, JR.