



Edward Ashbee assesses the rise and fall of Howard Dean in the 2004 presidential primaries and the role of the national nominating conventions.

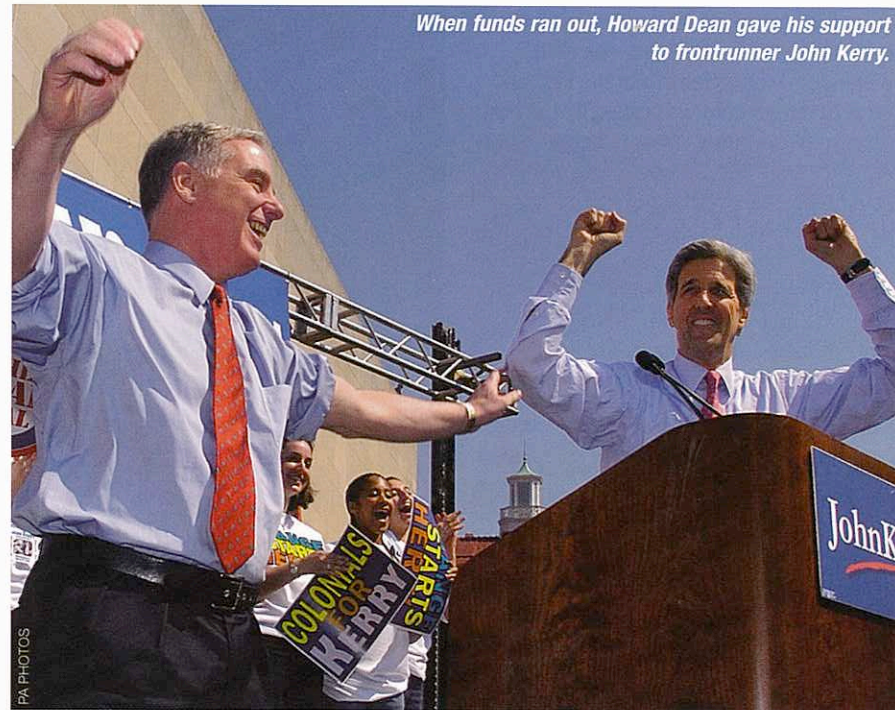
The 2004 presidential primaries

Over the past few years, commentaries and textbooks have given increasing attention to the period preceding the presidential primaries and caucuses. Although the primaries — which allow members of the public to determine who will stand as their party's candidate — only begin in January of election year, there is a period of intense political jostling during the preceding months and years.

This period of jostling — which involves the launching of exploratory committees by potential candidates, the winning of name recognition, the accumulation of campaign funds, participation in debates, attendance at meetings in key states such as Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, as well as appearances on television and talk-radio shows — has been dubbed the 'invisible primary'. Recent studies have suggested that the invisible primary has become pivotal in deciding the party nominees. Almost invariably, the candidate leading in the opinion polls at the conclusion of the 'invisible primary' and the beginning of election year has gone on to win his party's nomination.

The rise of Dean

However, 2004 proved to be different. The Democrats' 'invisible primary' was



When funds ran out, Howard Dean gave his support to frontrunner John Kerry.

dominated by the rise of former Vermont governor, Howard Dean. Dean's bid for the presidency began early when, in May 2002, he filed the initial paperwork with the Federal Election Commission. It had a grassroots character and was built using the internet and on the basis of small-scale contributions of money from relatively large numbers of people. The average overall donation size was just under \$80. Dean's

campaign had a radical edge to it. As governor, he had signed legislation establishing civil unions, offering some of the legal benefits of marriage, to same-sex couples. He had opposed the Iraq war from its inception and seemed to offer an alternative to those other presidential contenders who, as members of the Senate, had voted for the war and appeared mired in a process of concession and compromise with the Bush White House. As Dean liked to put it in a purloined phrase, he represented the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party.

On this basis, Dean's campaign increasingly seemed unbeatable. He was ahead in terms of campaign funds, having raised \$25.4m by the end of September 2003. He had the backing of some powerful interest groups allied to the Democrats, including the

Service Employees International Union, which has a membership of 1.6 million, and the support of influential figures, most notably former vice-president and 2000 presidential candidate, Al Gore. Dean led in the public opinion polls and, at the end of 2003, had a 13-point lead over those in second place. Although this lead narrowed as the first caucuses in Iowa approached, he was still at the head of the pack just days before voting took place.

The fall of Dean

However, the forecasts proved wrong. Once the primaries and caucuses began, Dean's campaign quickly fell apart. His vote fell far behind expectations and he won only his home state. Once it becomes evident that a primary candidate is unlikely to win, the financial contributions dry up, thereby restricting his ability to continue campaigning. Dean eventually recognised the inevitable and withdrew from the race on 18 February. He threw his support behind the

frontrunner, Senator John Kerry who, in the closing stages of the Iowa campaign, had come from nowhere to take first place. This created a momentum that allowed Kerry to win in New Hampshire a week later and secure a victory in almost all the subsequent contests.

Dean's demise explained?

- Dean's personality, which was increasingly placed in the spotlight as the primary season approached, seemed erratic and unpredictable. These perceptions were intensified following a number of poor interview performances, some unguarded comments and a much publicised yell that he gave at the conclusion to a speech in the wake of his defeat in Iowa.
- Although many Democratic Party supporters sympathised with Dean's radicalism and, as the situation in Iraq deteriorated, his opposition to the war, it was increasingly felt that such sentiments

would lead to defeat in the November contest with George W. Bush. Dean, it was said, could not attract middle-ground opinion, which would prove crucial to winning the White House. Many primary voters therefore turned instead to John Kerry. In contrast to Dean, he appeared to offer gravitas, military credentials and experience of Washington. The shift from Dean to Kerry was neatly captured by one observer: grassroots Democrats 'dated Dean, but married Kerry'.

- Dean had some difficulties with the core of radical activists who might have given him the strongest backing. His thinking lacked political consistency and could not be defined with certainty. Although portrayed as a radical and opposed to the Iraq war, he was a fiscal conservative, who had balanced Vermont's state budget. Dean had, furthermore, been endorsed by the National Rifle Association (NRA) in successive elections for the Vermont governorship.

National conventions

In the past, the delegates from the state parties who attended each of the parties' national nominating conventions selected the presidential candidate. There were

prolonged behind-the-scenes discussions between influential power-brokers. However, as the twentieth century progressed, the delegates were increasingly chosen on the basis of the primary results in their state. The selection of the candidate at the convention thereby became a formality.

Conventions still play a pivotal role in determining the policies that will be included in the party platform, setting the tone for the subsequent election campaign, attracting media coverage and providing a springboard that supporters hope will enable their candidate to secure victory in November. After a national convention, the campaigns look for a 'bounce' in the public opinion polls, although, in a period when voting loyalties have become rather more fixed and indeed polarised, this may be small.

Who are the convention delegates? A *New York Times* survey suggests that the party activists who attended the Democrats' 2000 and 2004 conventions were politically unrepresentative of broader US society (see Table 3). The delegates were much more liberal. Comparable studies of Republican national conventions found that the delegates were significantly more conservative than mainstream USA.

Why does this matter? It is important because delegates must hold themselves back if the convention is to be a political success. They have to keep their own opinions in the background so that the candidate can direct the campaign to the relatively small numbers of moderate, middle-ground voters. As the 1992 Republican national convention illustrated, when more abrasive or extreme sentiments are unleashed, presidential candidates are almost certainly in trouble.

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Table 3 Democratic National Convention delegates, 2000 and 2004, %

	2000	2004	All voters (July 2004)
Active in party politics less than 10 years	13	21	—
10–19 years	20	20	—
20–25 years	26	21	—
Over 25 years	40	37	—
'Government should do more to solve national problems...'	73	79	42
'Government is doing too many things...'	8	12	52
'Government should do more to promote traditional values'	20	15	40
'Government should not favor one set of values over another'	66	78	57
The USA 'did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq...'	—	7	46
The USA '...should have stayed out'	—	86	51
Political views — very liberal	14	22	7
Somewhat liberal	20	19	13
Somewhat conservative	2	3	22
Very conservative	2	0	13
White	69	68	78
Black	19	18	14
Hispanic	12	12	11
Asian	3	3	2

Source: adapted from *The New York Times/CBS New Poll – 2004 Democratic National Delegate Survey*, *New York Times*, 25 July 2004

Table 1 Democratic primary voters: percentage of respondents backing each of the principal candidates, December 2003

	Wesley Clark	Howard Dean	John Edwards	Richard Gephardt	John Kerry	Dennis Kucinich	Joseph Lieberman	Al Sharpton
	10	23	2	6	4	1	10	5

Source: adapted from CBSNews.com (2003), *CBS News/New York Times Poll — The Democratic Nomination*, (December 14–16), www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/CBSNews_polls/democrats_poll.pdf, 4

Table 2 Results (percentage of votes) of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, 2004

	Wesley Clark	Howard Dean	John Edwards	Richard Gephardt	John Kerry	Dennis Kucinich	Joseph Lieberman	Al Sharpton
19 January Iowa caucuses	—	18	32	11	38	1	—	0
27 January New Hampshire primary	13	26	12	—	39	1	9	0

Source: adapted from CNN.com (2004), *America Votes 2004: The Primaries*, www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/special/primary/