
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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FDR Speech File

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This is the draft for a
speech on the voters and the
primaries by Mr. Roosevelt,
when New York state senator,
1911-1913.

Albany, N.Y., about Aprilth 1911



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As a general proposition, the number of persons who go to primaries and caucuses under the old system of nominating candidates is only from ten to fifteen percent. of the total number of voters who cast their ballots on election day. It is therefore fair to state that the candidates for public office are nominated by from only ten to fifteen percent. of the electorate. In those states which have adopted direct primaries in one form or another, it is probably safe to say that in an average election less than fifty percent. of the voters attend the primary election for the nomination of candidates, and here again it is true that the candidates for public office are nominated by less than half of the electorate.

The whole question of securing candidates who will be capable of fulfilling their positions should, of course, theoretically be determined by the whole number of people who cast their votes on election day. Under our theory of government by parties the chief object of the party is twofold:

First, to enunciate principles of government, and

Secondly, to nominate candidates for the purpose of carrying out these principles of government.



It is, of course, inevitable and necessary that each party have its leader and leaders, but its leaders should also, under the theory of our government, hold their position because of the fact that they represent the will of the people. Here one comes to a clear-cut distinction between the leader and the "boss." The leader is an American institution conforming to the theory of government representing the will of his party and maintaining his position because of the work which he does for the party and with the consent of the party. The other type which has arisen is the so-called "boss" who by various means has come to be looked on first, perhaps, as the leader of his party because of his ability to represent their wishes, but afterward as a man who forces his wishes upon the rest of the party.

The reason that the "boss" in our public life is able to become a boss and represent his own wishes is because of the fact that, first, in nine cases out of ten he maintains his position by the use of power evidenced by patronage, and secondly, because of the fact that he represents, not his whole party but that small proportion of the party who under all conditions, year in and year out, are ready and willing to do their duty in going to the polls at the caucus or the primary and because the majority of the party itself failed to do its duty by attending these caucuses and primaries.



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In New York State, in the country districts under conditions today where there are no direct primaries it would be an exaggeration to say that more than seven or eight per cent. of the party can be called organization men. Not more than seven or eight per cent. on the average attend the party caucus for the nomination of delegates to conventions and for the nomination of county and local officers. It is by this means that the "boss" in our politics has arisen. The people as a whole have today a remedy. The remedy where direct primaries do not exist is in attending the caucuses, but it has been fairly well shown to my mind that it is a practical impossibility under modern conditions to expect that conditions in this respect will change. There is one solution offered - the direct primary.

Briefly, under the direct primary the candidates are nominated by the people themselves and not by delegates. In theory the direct primary offers not a solution but an innovation. Under the old system there was the solution at all times of attendance by the voters as a whole at the caucuses. The only difference under the new system is that the voters at the primary elections will be able, in a more direct and efficient manner and within a shorter time,



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to turn down the aspirations of any boss by a direct vote themselves, but it is entirely conceivable that after the novelty of direct primaries has worn off the electors will not attend the primary elections in any greater numbers than they have heretofore the caucuses.

The question in a nut shell comes down to one thing; whether the electors as a whole by one means or another can be persuaded that it is their duty to take as much interest in the selection of their candidates as they do in the final selection of their officials. Until some such result is accomplished I think it is fairly safe to say that the government of the Country will not advance to any material degree in honesty and efficiency. The boss will exist as he has heretofore; he will have the same control at the primary elections as he has had at the caucuses and he will be just as much a boss and just as little a leader as ever. The question of how to arrive at this result is a difficult one. To my mind it is as much as anything a question of education - education into a realization *which each & every citizen has - This realization once existent* of the duty ~~which existed~~ in this Country, and more than anywhere in Massachusetts in the days before the Revolution and up to, let us say, fifty or sixty years ago. Anyone who has read the inspiring history of the Massachusetts town meeting in the days before the Revolution, who has read of the attendance at these meetings of every citizen in the town; of the importance which every man felt of bearing his share of the responsibilities of government, one can almost



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say that at that period an ideal democracy had been obtained. It is true, of course, that conditions were at that time very different from what they are now. Each community was to a certain extent dependent upon itself and its own efforts. Means of communication were slow, and population did not shift from place to place as today.

Every man was dependent solely on his own efforts to carve out his life, and he felt responsibility for himself. But the reaction came - With the opening up of the West, with new inventions almost every hour, with new scenes and new methods, people's minds turned away from the running of their every day commonplace old Government. Professional politicians offered to run things for them, and they were so busy with new things they did not even stop to answer "All right". They just let them