

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

### A Primary Debate; How Would You Vote?

Archives perform numerous functions. One role is to provide context to our decisions, actions and dialogues. Context also provides a tool for measuring the consequences of our decisions. This archival role was recently used by Nancy Remsen of the Burlington Free Press ("Vt. primaries feature few races," Free Press, August 3, 2004, Section B). Ms. Remsen counted, among Vermont's three parties eligible to hold primaries this year, only a dozen contests to select candidates for eight statewide offices, 30 senate seats in 13 senate districts, and 150 seats in 110 House districts.

While her story focused on the current paucity of choices, as well as the costs of holding primaries, she directed readers to the Archives website for the legislative debate over creating a primary in 1914 (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/Primary/direct.htm>) and the results of statewide primaries since 1916, exclusive of presidential primaries (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/elect/primary/prindex.htm>).

As you prepare for the September 14<sup>th</sup> primary it might be fun to revisit some of the key 1914 arguments over whether to create a primary or stick with the party caucus system. The Legislative Reference Bureau, a precursor to today's Legislative Council, summarized those arguments in a January 1914 report to the general assembly.

One of the key debates was whether a direct primary would unduly advantage larger municipalities in selecting candidates (small towns benefited under the caucus system). Supporters of the primary argued that the "direct primary does not weaken the power of the small town. It strengthens the power of the individual voter..." Opponents responded that larger municipalities would dominate candidate selection: "At a nomination by direct vote of the people the vote for Chittenden County would be practically dominated by Burlington and Winooski...and similar domination by the large towns would be the result throughout the state. The vote of Essex County would be more than balanced by the vote of either Bennington, Brattleboro, or St. Johnsbury."

Ironically, given the limited number of contested races, caucus proponents thought that, "there are so many candidates at the primary that the voter cannot vote intelligently on any but the most important officers." So what, replied primary supporters, "primaries enlarge the field of public service by increasing the range of men [this was prior to women suffrage] who can have hope of getting into office. And it is not a fact that voters...are so unintelligent as to be unable to choose their officers."

Somewhat inconsistently caucus supporters also argued that the primary would limit the pool of candidates because the "willingness...of adequate men to serve the public in office is rare enough" and would be further tested by having to "undergo one protracted and necessarily expensive campaign of personalities for the right to under go another protracted and expensive campaign" in the general election. This was "more than can be expected normally except from those at once very rich and very patriotic." Bah, said the primary forces, "unless a man has interest enough in a governmental office to work to get it, he isn't the man we want in that office." They pointed to the 1902 Republican caucus contest that was very expensive and tainted with charges of bribery.

Speaking of expenses, primary supporters asserted that "a primary law properly guarded by requiring publicity [disclosure] and limitation of campaign expenses would make clear to everyone just how much money was spent, and that in itself would cure the extensive and improper use of money." Jeezum, returned the caucus fans, "no law can be

framed which will adequately limit the expenditures of candidates" and "there are many indirect ways of spending money" that have "been found impossible to reach by publicity laws."

Nancy Remsen's article noted that it will cost the State \$120,000 to print and distribute three sets of primary ballots this year. In 1914 the caucus forces decried the fact that State expenses would be doubled by having to print primary as well as general election ballots. "It is quite proper that the state should bear the expense of candidacy," replied the primary defenders. After all, having the State bear the cost undid "one of the principle evils of the convention system" which was "that the candidate must pay his own expenses or allow them to be paid by some interests under obligation to who he will thereby be placed."

Back and forth the two sides debated. Finally, after several legislative votes and a couple of statewide referenda the direct primary was adopted. The record of that debate, which I hope you will visit, provides a measure to see how each side's arguments played out over the years. And that is why archival records can be useful in understanding such basic democratic responsibilities as selecting candidates.