

The Emergence of Candidates for Public Office in Nineteenth Century America

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Nineteenth century candidates for public office emerged through four quite different pathways: 1) nomination by a constituted political party convention; 2) nomination by ad hoc local committees; 3) self-nomination; 4) nomination by friends.

All nominations took place in a procedural context in which there was no official ballot paper. Individual voting was accomplished at the polling place either by depositing a party-printed list of candidates called a ticket or by announcing *viva voce*, by voice, the candidates preferred for the offices to be filled. Both procedures were conducted in public and neither was secret. The state did not regulate nominations in the United States until the (comparatively late) adoption of the Australian secret ballot in the 1890s; before then there were few hard and fast rules governing nominations at any level.

Nomination procedures tended to be most formal and regularized at the state level, decreasing at each political level down to municipal elections. The time interval from nomination to Election Day decreased along that grid just as radically.

Party remained important at all levels but the higher the office, the more likely was nomination by a constituted party convention well in advance of Election Day; the more local the office, the more likely was nomination by an informal association or, very much closer to Election Day, self-nomination or nomination by anonymous "friends."

Higher state-level offices came first, followed by congressional and state legislative nominations, and then county and municipal nominations. The rationale for this sliding nomination timeline was strictly pragmatic: higher-level offices were contested over a wider space that required greater time for campaigning. The more local the office, the more immediate was the notice of candidacy. Ward level nominations were the last to be determined, with announcements often only days before Election Day.

The mechanism for announcement of a party's candidates at all levels was a local newspaper, almost always a partisan and party-aligned newspaper for that is what almost all newspapers then were.

Though nineteenth century parties were powerful, the absence of an official state-printed ballot meant their control over the candidates standing for elections and the arrangement of candidates in slates or tickets was limited. Candidacy was quite open, especially for local office. Anyone could nominate or be a candidate and anyone could print a ticket. The only effective determinate of candidacy was whether the candidate consented to being nominated, conveyed at conventions or accepted (or declined) in the party press.

We can follow the complicated pathways by which candidates were nominated most easily in Alexandria where there was a daily paper (the *Alexandria Gazette*) that gave close attention to the minutiae of politics at all levels. There is no surviving newspaper for Newport and the coverage of local Kentucky politics across the Ohio River in Cincinnati papers was very sketchy. Even in Alexandria the insights are limited, for the *Gazette* was an Opposition paper that did not provide detailed coverage of nominations by the Democrat Party.

The following discussion focuses on the procedures by which candidates emerged for the March 1, 1859 municipal election and the May 26, 1859 general election. The March 1 election was held to select 16 city-wide offices and five representatives (one alderman and four members of the Common Council) for each ward. The May 26 election involved offices at three different levels: 1) state-wide executive (governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general); 2) congressional (member of the US Congress for the 7th District of Virginia); and 3) state legislative (member of the Virginia House of Delegates from Alexandria County).

A. Nomination of Candidates for State Wide Offices:

Opposition Party: The Party-organized **State Convention** was charged with the responsibility of choosing the Party's candidates for the three state offices up for election on Thursday, May 26, 1859 (governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general). The process was formal and regularized. The Alexandria branch of the Party called a meeting on January 20, 1859 to choose the delegates for the February 10 state convention to be held in Richmond. Another local meeting was called for February 17 to ratify the Convention choices of the state-wide candidates.

Time from first nominating step to election: 4 months; from nominating convention to election: 3 months.

Democratic Party: The Alexandria Democrats met on November 13, 1858 to appoint delegates to State Convention in Petersburg on December 2, 1859 which would nominate the party's candidates for the state-wide offices.

Time from first nominating step to election: 6 months; from nominating convention to election: 5 months.

B. Nomination of Congressional Candidates:

Opposition Party: The nomination of the party's candidate for Virginia's 7th Congressional seat was made by a **District Convention**. At the February 17 meeting to ratify the nomination of state level candidates, delegates were chosen for a District Convention to be held in Alexandria on March 3 which would also choose candidates for Alexandria County positions to be elected at May 26 election. The *Gazette* reported on March 4 the nomination of Henry Thomas as the party's candidate for Congress by the District Convention and provided the minutes of the Convention.

Time from first nominating step to election: 3 months; from nominating convention to election: 2 months.

Democratic Party: The Democratic Party did not hold a District Convention to nominate a Congressional candidate. Former Virginia Governor William "Extra Billy" Smith (Governor of Virginia January 1846-December 1848) had been elected to Congress in 1853 from Virginia's 7th District, winning against the *Gazette's* editor, Edgar Snowden on the Whig ticket, and was re-elected in 1855 and 1857, winning again over Snowden (now on the American Party ticket) in the 1857 election. In March of 1859, after the Opposition Party's nomination of Thomas, Smith announced he would seek another term and that as an incumbent, no nominating convention was necessary. Henry Shackelford had declared his candidacy for the seat in October 1858, and the *Gazette*, still with editor Snowden, agitated this issue, arguing the necessity of a convention. The Smith faction was unyielding and Shackelford was forced to run as an Independent Democrat. He lost badly and Smith held the seat against Thomas.

Time from first nominating step to election: 7 months from Shackelford's declaration; 2 months from Smith's declaration. No nominating convention.

C. Nomination of Virginia House of Delegates Candidates:

There were no reports of conventions in either party to determine House of Delegates nominations. On May 6 (20 days before the election) the *Gazette* printed "cards" – two or three line statements – from three groups putting forward three candidates for House of Delegates: Lewis McKenzie (Opposition Party), Hugh Latham (Democrat) and Henry C. Ward (Democrat). The competition between the two Democrats in the House of Delegates race mirrored the Congressional split between Smith and Shackelford. This was avoided on May 23 (three days before election) when further "cards" from Ward and Latham appeared in the paper now stating the decision of each not to run for the House of Delegates. In the same issue of the paper appeared a card from Francis L. Smith saying that he would stand for House of Delegates. Two days before Election Day, Francis Smith and McKenzie meet in a debate at Liberty Hall in Alexandria.

Time from first self-declared nominating to election: 20 days; time from self-nomination of final list of candidates to election: 2 days. No nominating convention.

D. Nomination of Municipal Candidates:

Candidates for the Alexandria City election held on Tuesday, March 1, 1859 also came before the people in four different ways: 1) selection by political party conventions or committees; 2) nomination by ad hoc groups; 3) self-nomination; 4) nomination by friends. A considerable number of candidates appeared via the last three nominating pathways with the result that the interval between nomination, by one means or another, and Election Day was greatly compressed.

a) Selection by Political Party Conventions for City Wide Offices:

Opposition Party: On Thursday evening, February 24, a meeting of "Whig and American Party" supporters met in a **City Convention** to nominate candidates for the 16 city-wide municipal offices to be elected on Tuesday March 1. The "Whig and American Party" nomenclature was not used at offices above the municipal level with "Opposition Party" being preferred. In recognition of the informal nature of the nominations, the Convention resolved, "[t]hat each candidate be required, either in person – if present – or by an authorized friend, to pledge himself to abide by the decisions of this Convention."¹ In other words, the nominee or the friends of the nominee were to accept the nomination at the Convention. This did not always occur, creating confusion. On Monday, February 28, the day before the election, Caleb Hallowell inserted a card in the *Gazette* saying he was not a candidate for city surveyor, one of the city-wide positions, and that, "the use of my name before the Convention was not authorized."² But his name nevertheless went before the voters and he was elected to the office.

Twelve of the city-wide offices were filled by acclamation at the City Nominating Convention; there were multiple candidates for the other four offices (City Attorney, Superintendent of Gas, Superintendent of Police, Chief Engineer of the Fire Department) and a vote was taken to determine a candidate for each.

Democratic Party: The *Gazette* did not report a nominating convention of the Democratic Party to select city-wide candidates for the March 1 municipal election. The Democrats did not contest the offices of Mayor, City Auditor, or Clerk of the City Market; the party fielded candidates for all other city-wide offices.

¹ *Alexandria Gazette*, February 25, 1859.

² *Alexandria Gazette*, February 28, 1859.

b) Selection by Local Committees for Ward Level Offices:

Opposition Party: On Friday evening, February 25, American and Whig supporters met in each of the four wards to nominate one candidate for Alderman and four for the City Council from each ward. The *Gazette* announced these tickets on Monday, February 28, the day before the election.

Time from first step in nominating candidates and from nomination to election: 3 days; time from announcement of candidates to election: 1 day.

Democratic Party: The *Gazette* did not report meetings of the Democratic Party to nominate ward-level candidates for the March 1 municipal election. The party fielded candidates for Alderman and members of City Council in all four wards.

c) Other sources of candidates for office:

The Opposition (or Whig and American) Party nominated complete slates of 36 candidates for all city-wide and ward-level offices and the Democratic Party for 33 of those offices. Together party nominations accounted for 69 of the 103 candidates presented to the voters of Alexandria at the March 1 city election.

The level of interest in contesting the local elections in Alexandria was high: “Most of the voters, it would appear, are candidates for some office,” was the somewhat disparaging comment from one *Gazette* correspondent.³ In fact the number of voters, like the number of candidates, was quite high with the maximum number of votes being the 1104 given for Tax Collector in Wards 1 and 3: a turnout estimated at 44 percent of the likely eligible electorate.

The other 34 candidates in the March election came along the three different nomination routes:

1) **Ad-hoc groups:**

On Thursday, February 24, there appeared the first mention of the “Citizens” ticket and the “Independent” ticket with candidates for Alderman and members of the City Council from Ward 1. On Monday, the day before the election, a full “Citizen” ticket appeared in the *Gazette* with candidates for all city-wide offices except Surveyor and Superintendent of Gas as well as candidates for alderman and council candidates in all wards. Six of the men on the Citizen ticket for city-wide offices were nominees of the Opposition (or Whig and American) Party, another six were Opposition voters nominated against the Party’s nominees and four were Democratic voters. All but one had self-nominated at the outset of the canvass. This listing by an ad hoc party may have served those candidates well as all of the Opposition nominees won office as did four of the Citizen nominees: Democrats John L. Smith for Chief Engineer of the Fire Department and George W. Brent as City Attorney and William H. Smith as Collector of Taxes. Also winning was James P. Coleman an Opposition voter who prevailed in the contest for Measurer of Wood against the Party nominee William C. Reynolds. At the ward level, I. Louis Kinzer appeared as a nominee of both the First Ward Citizen’s ticket and the First Ward Independent ticket.

The activities of ad hoc political organizations like the “Citizens” and the “Independent Citizens” simultaneously reinforced and undermined the established parties, supporting some candidates while undermining others and advancing names

³ *Alexandria Gazette*, March 1, 1859.

from the opposite party. The capacity of any group to advance its selection of candidates by printing tickets that could be deposited or declared by voice at the polling was an important feature of the elections, opening the nominating process while limiting party control over it.

2) Self-nomination:

As with the emergence of Shackelford at the Congressional level and Francis Smith and Lewis McKenzie at the Virginia House of Delegates level, individuals nominated themselves for municipal office by inserting a notice in the local paper. Sometimes these self-advertisements claimed the support of “many voters;” other candidates drew attention to their experience, or their distance from party politics. That an individual’s public declaration in a newspaper was sufficient to be nominated for a public office is a measure of the limits of party control over nominations in the long history of US elections before the adoption of the state-printed (and secret) ballot

As noted, the Whig and American Party held its city-wide nominating meeting on Thursday, February 24 and published the names of candidates the next day. On Saturday, February 26, two days before the election, 16 men had printed in the *Gazette* the announcement of their candidates for city-wide offices. Each had printed a “card” stating in two or three lines the office for which they had declared themselves candidates. Six of those self-nominations were for the position of Superintendent of Gas, one of the best paying city positions with an annual salary of \$800, the same recompense as the mayor. Some of those men had already been nominated by the Opposition or Democratic Conventions, but several were new entries into the field. The Opposition Party’s candidate for Superintendent of Gas, Jacob Roxbury, carried every ward and easily won the office.

3) Nomination by “friends:”

In other cases, “many voters” signed the card announcing candidates for office. This was a problematic route as it was sometimes even less clear than in a local party nomination that the individual nominated had consented to be nominated. Again confusion was frequently the outcome. Individuals nominated could of course decline. But this did not always bring clarity either: I. Louis Kinzer inserted a notice on February 28 saying he was not a candidate for City Council from Ward 1 and then on March 1 that he was. He won the election with the highest vote of any of the 14 candidates.

The end result of these many roads to nomination was an Election Day with a plethora of nominations from parties, groups, individuals and friends. Thus in Ward 4, as an example, there were five different slates of candidates for Aldermen and Council, involving 17 candidates with 12 appearing in only one constellation and two as pure independents, appearing in none. Across the city there were 55 candidates for the 16 Council positions.

Opposition (or Whig and American) Party candidates prevailed in 8 of the 13 contested city-wide elections and 11 of the total of 16 offices if we include Mayor, City Auditor, and Clerk of Market, which were uncontested. At the ward level, Whig/American/Opposition candidates prevailed in 13 of the 20 elections for Aldermen or members of City Council.

Observation:

Political parties served more as the brokers for the nomination of candidates than recruitment agencies. However, nomination by a political party remained the surest path toward election.

1. Were there specific backgrounds requirements for office?

There were no stated occupational requirements for office. At the higher levels of political office, party fidelity mattered a great deal in securing a party nomination. Shackleford, and Snowden, saw an opportunity to weaken William Smith, the Democratic candidate for Congress, by asserting his closeness to the American Party in the 1855 Congressional election. Shackleford emphasized his Democratic Party fidelity as central to his claim of legitimacy as the Party's Congressional nominee.

At the local level, a few occupational expectations were evident, including the city attorney office in both Alexandria and Newport and the position as city physician in Newport. In Alexandria, both George Brent and John Marshall, the party-nominated candidates for City Attorney, were lawyers. The same was true in Newport where William Boden and J. Floyd Lewis were lawyers and the candidates for City Attorney. Even Oliver W. Root, who received only two votes, was an attorney. The candidates for City Physician in Newport, R. H. Thornton and W. O. Smith, were both medical doctors. But there were few other examples of credentialism being central to becoming a candidate for municipal office: John L. Smith, elected as the Chief Engineer of the Fire Department in Alexandria, was a shoe cutter by trade.

Some but not all candidates for other technical offices placed "cards" in the local press, citing their experience in the area. In the most extensive card placed in the *Gazette* during the run-up to the municipal election, Opposition Party candidate John Roxbury reminded voters of his years of dedicated experience as Superintendent of the Gas Works in Alexandria and said that he had, "visited several of the principal Gas Works in the country, endeavoring to acquire a knowledge of the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of Gas, and have brought what information I have acquired to perfecting the Works which I have in charge."⁴ Candidates at the local level emphasized their commitment to the city's well-being.

2. Did candidates run for office because they knew they were socially close to voters and believed they had sufficient supporters to make their candidacy plausible?

Our data does not permit us to speculate on why candidates ran for office. Most candidates for office probably believe they have a chance of winning, but some secured so few votes as to suggest that other motivations were operating. Twenty of the 55 men who stood for Alderman or member of the City Council in Alexandria secured fewer than 10 votes.

There is little direct evidence of candidates calculating that they would run for office because they believed they had a social network that would deliver the office. Candidates running under a party label would believe they would get the vote of their party and would probably not calculate on a divergent social network. Perhaps then the most interesting group to consider, in looking for expectations of sustaining social networks, are individuals who self-nominate for city wide offices and do not run on a party slate.

The best example we have of this is the candidacy of W. J. Higdon, who was the most prominent non-party self-nominated candidate in the Alexandria municipal election. On February 26 Higdon placed a card in the *Gazette* saying that, "Believing that the best interests of the community demand that party politics should be excluded from municipal affairs, I have uniformly condemned all caucus party meetings, in which the interests of the

⁴ *Alexandria Gazette*, March 1, 1859.

city were concerned, and having full confidence in the intelligence and capacity of my fellow-citizens to select the best qualified to fill the several offices without dictation, I offer myself as a candidate for the office of Superintendent of Gas, without regard to party affiliations." But on Election Day, Higdon inserted a very different message in the *Gazette*, saying, "To relieve my friends from all embarrassment, I respectfully withdraw from the canvass."⁵ Higdon's declarations perhaps provide an example of a candidate announcing a run for office based on the belief that he had a network outside of party to sustain his candidacy, but probably finding that he did not. His is a solitary example.

Despite all the difficulty that parties had in controlling the nomination process, almost all candidates who won office were supported by a political party and voted for that party. Social networks appear to have been more important to voters in deciding whom to vote for than to candidates in deciding whether to run for office.

⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, February 26 and March 1, 1859.