

PLATFORM-BUILDING PROGRAMS
SPONSORED BY
DEMOCRATIC STATE COMMITTEES

A number of Democratic State Committees in recent years have adopted platform-building programs which have created widespread public interest in state Party platforms. Leaders in these states report that the projects have received broad support within the Party and that they will be repeated in 1960.

These platform-building projects are a refinement and extension of so-called "issues conferences" which have at times been sponsored by various state committees and at other times by women's organizations, Young Democrats or other Democratic groups. "Issues conferences" have frequently drawn up resolutions and reports which have been referred to Party policy-making bodies. However, there is an increasing trend toward issues meetings and conferences which are established by the State Central Committees as an integral part of the platform-building process.

Among the State Committees which have tried variations of platform-building conferences are Indiana, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Other states are reported as planning platform-building conferences as a part of their preparations for the 1960 campaign.

This memorandum deals with some of the experiences reported concerning this function and notes some of the alternative procedures which have been followed.

WHAT A PLATFORM-BUILDING PROGRAM CAN DO FOR THE PARTY

The platform-building program is reported by many state leaders as having a number of advantages and values for the state Party organization.



In the first place it insures a healthy, grassroots influence in the making of the platform, and reduces the possibility that the final platform can be criticized as unrepresentative or as hastily drafted by a small group just before presentation to the state convention.



The second value of platform building is closely related to the first: the platform, as a document expressing the philosophy and goals of the Party, takes on greater meaning for the candidates, the Party workers, and the public at large when it is constructed carefully and thoughtfully during the months before the convention.



A third advantage claimed for platform building is the opportunity it provides for building Party organization. It gives a sense of participation and responsibility to veteran workers throughout the Party structure, and also tends to bring into Party work new people whose interests are then expanded from issues and policy to other Party work such as canvassing and campaigning.



Finally, the platform building program has been an excellent source of good publicity both because it is oriented around issues and policy, and because the activity spreads out over several months and involves many individuals in various parts of the state.

PUBLICITY VALUE - AN IMPORTANT ITEM

The public relations value of platform building is seen in the following excerpt from a typical newsstory describing the New Hampshire program. From the Manchester Union-Leader (March 28, 1958):

NEW HAMPSHIRE DEMOCRATS STUDY
PLATFORM THIS SATURDAY

Laconia - An unprecedented pre-primary platform conference here Saturday is expected to draw more than 150 Democrats from all parts of the state to lay groundwork for an active election campaign.

A similar conference in Maine a few years ago, it was recalled, paved the way for a re-birth of the state Democratic organization there.

Another item in the same paper was headed DEMOCRATS PLANNING MAJOR STATE STUDIES. It described the ten problems and study groups which were set up for detailed consideration of the platform planks.

At the same time (Spring 1958) in Indiana, Party leaders were holding public hearings in advance of their platform drafting. The Louisville Courier-Journal reported:

DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM PLANKS ARE
PROPOSED AT GRASS-ROOTS MEET

Planks dealing with labor, education, conservation, and unemployment-compensation problems were recommended for the 1958 Democratic State Convention platform at New Albany last night.

The recommendations were made at a grass-roots meeting, the objective of which was to get first-hand information on what the people back home would like to see in the platform.

Other states, this year, are experimenting with platform-building techniques. The New York Times (May 1, 1959), reporting on the Party convention in New Jersey, noted: DEMOCRATS TO LET PUBLIC HELP DRAFT PLATFORM. The story pointed out that "the Democratic Party, meanwhile, decided to let the public participate in the preparation of its platform. It was the first time either major party in New Jersey had taken such a step in the memory of the oldest delegate."

HOW TO SET UP A PLATFORM-BUILDING PROGRAM

The following is a summary outline of possible procedures for state platform building. It is in no sense a detailed plan. Circumstances will obviously vary its application.

The suggestions here are derived from the experiences of several states. Greater detail on individual state practice is available from the Deputy Chairman for Political Organization, Democratic National Committee, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington 6, D.C., or from the Regional Representatives of the National Committee.

ORGANIZE A WORKING COMMITTEE

Of first importance in platform building is the gathering of a group of party leaders and workers. This group should include some people who are:

- ...able to give reasonable amounts of time and energy to the project;
- ...overall, representative of important element in the Party structure;
- ...able to chair subcommittees, task forces, and working groups concerned with subjects to be dealt with in particular planks of the platform.

Meeting six to nine months in advance of the State Convention the platform committee should:

- ...decide on an overall plan of procedure,
- ...divide the work of the subsequent period (up to the convention) according to the overall plan adopted.

ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF PROCEDURE

Whatever detailed operation is chosen by the platform committee the objective of platform building involves three major stages:

1. Sampling opinion

What do the Party members and workers think about the issues to be included in the platform?

What do the voters as a whole think?

2. Analysis and committee work

Committee discussion and "digestion" of data gathered in stage 1.

3. Writing a report

A careful report must be prepared for the Resolutions or Platform Committee of the State Convention, or for the Convention Delegates.

PLAN A

The following outline describes, in essence, the practices of a number of states:

Step One

A meeting of interested Party members is called by the State Committee. The notice of the meeting explains that a program of platform building is under way and operational procedures will be considered at this meeting.

At this meeting (or shortly thereafter) sub-committees are established to gather public opinion in the various fields which it is believed the platform should cover. Chairmen of these sub-committees are carefully picked for their knowledge in a particular field and for their ability as chairmen. The chairmen are authorized to add volunteers to their sub-committees.

Step Two

A series of regional and local open hearings (or "conferences," or just plain "meetings," if you like) are scheduled by the sub-committees. Meeting at convenient times---in the evening, Saturday or Sunday afternoons---these sub-committee hearings gather the opinions, verbally or in writing, of persons who ask, or are asked, to come before them. These are opinion gathering hearings in spirit as well as in name; they are not debates or occasions for argument.

Step Three

The individual sub-committees then report to the whole group of combined sub-committees (which, acting together, constitute the platform-building committees), and submit draft planks on the various fields of competence.

The platform-building committee, after appropriate general discussion of the sub-committee reports, may at that meeting hammer out and adopt recommendations for the platform or an actual draft of a proposed platform. It may be more appropriate to place the sub-committee reports in the hands of a drafting group or style committee for drafting into a general set of recommendations or into a proposed platform which will later be considered as a whole by the platform-building committee.

Step Four

The platform-building committee submits its final recommendations to the State Convention or to the Resolutions Committee or Platform Committee of the State Convention.

PLAN B

The following is an outline of the procedure used by Maine, a state with several years of experience concerning platform-building of the type here under discussion:

Step One

An Issues Conference is called ten months before the election by a "Steering Committee" (set up by the State Committee). A limited number of individuals are invited to this conference upon recommendation of county leaders. At this "Issues Conference" a number of sub-committees, or panels, develop questionnaires covering major topics of interest to the voters of the state. These partial questionnaires are reviewed and combined by a plenary session of the Issues Conference.

Step Two

The state Party headquarters distributes the printed questionnaires to opinion leaders throughout the state. The questionnaire asks for yes or no answers, for the checking of lists, for comments and discussion. A deadline is set for the return of these questionnaires.

Step Three

At a second Issues Conference (probably with the same persons in attendance as the first Issues Conference) the results of the questionnaire (previously tabulated) are analyzed. After discussion, preliminary draft planks are prepared by the subject-matter panels. Panels report the planks and the while Conference, after further discussion, submits the draft platform to the Steering Committee.

Step Four

After style changes and language clarification by the Steering Committee the draft platform is submitted to the Convention Platform Committee (chosen by the convention delegates). This committee goes over the draft and submits a final platform to the full convention.

It is apparent, of course, from the two sample procedures that there are many variations possible within the three overall stages of sampling opinion, analysis, and writing a convention report. Indiana in 1958 set up "listening posts" in each of their eleven Congressional Districts. From these public hearings came the recorded views of individuals and representatives of groups who wished to have their say on platform planks. The expressions of opinion from these Indiana listening posts were collected and blended by the State Platform Committee for submission to the full State Committee.

SOME GENERAL PROBLEMS IN PLATFORM BUILDING

Whatever procedures you adopt you may expect some general problems, more or less inherent in platform-building programs.

1. Will you limit your platform to state issues entirely, or will you include planks on national domestic issues and on foreign affairs?

The practice in Maine appears to be to limit consideration to state matters or to issues which closely concern Maine affairs. In the platforms of Kansas, Connecticut, Arizona and New Hampshire (not all of which have platform-building programs) the same limitations seem to obtain. This restricting of the contents to state questions seems to be the majority practice. In other states, however, there is no limitation of platform planks and the documents range from Berlin to the county court house.

2. How will you coordinate the state (and county, where the practice is to write a county platform) document with the national platform as to stands and timing?

One of the easiest methods of avoiding confusion has been to adopt the simple rule that nothing in the state or local platform should duplicate the national platform. This leaves room for statements on matters not covered by the national platform or for amplifying statements on topics covered by national.

3. What policy will you adopt with regard to open and closed meetings of your platform committee, your steering committee, your sub-committees, etc.?

All hearings must obviously be open to the public. Planning sessions and reporting sessions during your platform-building program may be executive (closed) sessions. On the whole the presumption should probably be for open meetings whenever possible, in order to avoid criticism from Party members, the press, and the public. Style and drafting meetings, as well as other procedural meetings, normally will be closed meetings.