

THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

For 115 Years the South's Standard Newspaper

James M. Cox, Chairman 1950-1957—James M. Cox Jr., Chairman 1957-1974

David E. Easterly
President

Jim Minter
Editor

Tom Teeppen
Editorial Page Editor

Edward Sears
Managing Editor

Minor J. Ward
General Manager

PAGE 18-A, FRIDAY, JULY 15, 1983

Reviewing the runoff system

If not for the reasons cited by the Rev. Jesse Jackson *et al.*, it may be time anyway to review the electoral system which requires runoff elections when no candidate receives a majority in a primary. Does this system serve the electorate as well as a one-shot primary would do, with nomination by plurality if that's the way the cookie crumbles?

The primary runoff is a uniquely Southern offering to the nation's political evolution, and, interestingly, the rest of the nation has begged off. Only nine states have it, all either Southern or nearly so (Oklahoma).

Jackson, joined by other black leaders, including Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, suspects the system of working against — and of being intended to work against — black voters. They point out that a black candidate who might win a plurality, when white votes split among several candidates in a busy primary field, can then be ganged up on by white voters in the runoff.

True, but the system sometimes works for black candidates, too. Without it, in some jurisdictions black candidates might never even get into a runoff, a platform from which black-community concerns can be placed into political play. Jesse Jackson has grabbed a double-edged blade.

The argument for the runoff has been that in *de facto* one-party states — you will recall the Solid South — the requirement for a majority vote in the primary or its runoff

compels consensus-building and prevents rule by cliques. Reserving majority decisions just for the general election was meaningless. Republicans never won.

But if only tentatively so far, two-party politics are coming to the region with their blessings — the opportunity to trade scoundrels periodically before either party gets elbow-deep in the till. There are now sometimes real bipartisan elections for state and local offices. By focusing a vastly greater amount of public attention on Democratic candidates — Republicans, both less numerous and more ruly, rarely have runoffs — the system retards development of the full two-party system which the region needs.

The system is expensive, increasing election costs to the public by 50 percent (and to candidates' contributors by maybe as much as 100 percent) — and it incites the very problem that it is designed to manage: A plethora of candidates. Longshot candidates angle for the second spot in the runoff, hoping lightning will strike down the leader; even sure losers run, hoping to parlay their primary loss into political power by horse-trading their followers, or trying to, to one of the runoff battlers.

Maybe the primary runoff is still the thing to do. But however questionable his claims against the system may be, Jesse Jackson at least reminds us that the system is only familiar, not sacrosanct. If it is sound, it will survive the review it deserves in the light of contemporary politics.