Studies’, a series of surveys of convention delegates from 1980 to 1992, while Duane Oldfield looks at one particular set of activists, the Christian Right, using interviews and documentary evidence. McCann and Oldfield find some evidence of the influence of ideological ‘purists’, dedicated to narrow agendas, but also of ‘pragmatists’, concerned with winning elections. It is this variety of activists that makes the politics of improvisation possible, since would-be presidents can exploit different pools of supporters.

What would a book on the primary process be without a chapter on reform? Andrew Busch and James Caeser’s chapter does not disappoint. They ask provocatively: ‘does party reform have a future?’ They conclude that the reform and counter-reform impulses that produced the current nominating system are exhausted, and thus, only modest incremental changes are likely in the near future. Such changes are far from trivial, however. They point to the ‘front loading’ of primaries in the 1996 elections and the rise of ‘personalism’ in the form of Ross Perot and perhaps Pat Buchanan. Neither trend is likely to reduce the great dissatisfaction with the present system that is widespread, and the politics of improvisation will continue in the future. American presidential nomination campaigns will still need interpreters; one can only hope future books will be as helpful as this one.

John C. Green
University of Akron


Nelson Polsby has brought us a 9th edition of this classic text in anticipation of the 1996 presidential elections. Aaron Wildavsky’s name appears posthumously on this work as Polsby’s tribute to the importance of Wildavsky’s input in their long-term collaborative effort (the first edition appeared in 1964). Polsby tells us that he and Wildavsky discussed what this edition of Presidential Elections would look like in 1993, though Polsby waited until after the 1994 mid-term congressional elections to reflect on the 1992 presidential elections and to evaluate the environment in which the 1996 presidential elections would be fought.

Despite its title, Presidential Elections is quite a bit more than a textbook on the conduct of presidential elections in the United States. Polsby and Wildavsky lead us slowly into the presidential campaign arena by focusing on various facets of American politics such as the attitudes and behavior of American voters, the influence of interest groups in mobilizing voters and resources, and the modern transformation of the role of American political parties. The book contains three major sections. In the first, ‘The Strategic Environment’, Polsby and Wildavsky begin by presenting data on voting behavior and attitudes in compareTo perspective, then move into theories of how American voters formulate their choices. Next, they analyze the group composition of the presidential vote and discuss the role of party activists in the life of political parties and the role of third parties in presidential elections. The section concludes with a treatment of the rules and resources that apply to presidential candidates, focussing on money, media coverage, and the benefits and liabilities of presidential incumbency while seeking re-election.

The second part of the book, ‘Sequences’, details the nomination process for both parties, providing a series of historical vignettes on how previous presidential nominations were won. The authors emphasize the post-1968 phenomenon of presidential candidates campaigning for delegates directly to win the party’s nomination, circumventing party regulars and state party organizations. This results in the nominating convention doing no nominating per se, since candidates have generally secured enough delegates to win the party nomination outright. Instead, the convention functions as a business meeting that also advertises the general themes which will be emphasized by the nominee in the general election campaign. The chapter devoted to the general election campaign does an excellent job of explaining how technology and the media have transformed the nature of contemporary campaigning into a highly professional operation relying on statistics, demographics, advance work, and the ever-popular ‘spin control’. New features of presidential campaigns, such as presidential debates and the use of negative advertising, are tellingly conveyed.

The direction in which American politics has been taken – the reforms of nomination procedures and the accompanying separation of presidential campaigns from the interest groups and party organizations that have traditionally supported them – takes up the final section. Here the lament of many American political scientists is exposed: the quality of our democracy is deeply affected by the health of our political parties. Therefore, dissatisfaction with the status quo leads to one of two divergent conclusions. Americans would be better off if either the political parties were stronger (led more clearly by the elites who once led them) or if our democracy was truly participatory (making parties irrelevant). Polsby and Wildavsky reject both these proposals through a clever review of concrete reforms that have been proposed to clean up American politics, specifically the ideas of moving to a direct national primary for presidential nominations (and away from the three-month, state-by-state circus of present); abolishing the parties’ national conventions (which they believe should simply be modified by separating ceremonial and business functions); and abolishing the Electoral College (which should be kept because of its stabilizing and legitimizing properties). Ultimately, the authors debate whether the current presidential election system leaves our political parties as parties of advocacy or as parties of intermediation. Their conclusion is that American parties have lost their ability to function as parties of intermediation because of the personalization of presidential politics. Whoever wins the nomination reflects the demands of particular ideological groups and generally has no incentive to attend to the demands of the losing groups. This makes for parties of advocacy, which in turn have particular difficulty in governing since they have dropped their traditional inclination to broker solutions among disparate groups.

Presidential Elections is an excellent overview and introduction to American politics for many different audiences. It is extremely well written without being too
basic and contains exhaustive references to the various literatures of American politics. Thus it is an appropriate book for anyone who lacks an extensive background in American politics but wants to understand the tensions in American electoral politics in a straightforward and insightful manner. There is only one real nit I have to pick with this edition: it is surprisingly light on examples and lessons from the 1992 presidential election, particularly in the first half of the book, where examples from 1988 dominate. Though I am grateful for the historical insights the book provides consistently throughout, I am let down by the lack of contemporary insights which might help us better interpret the 1996 elections.

Robin Kolodny
Temple University

ISBN 0 19 828050 5.

The SDP proved to be a short-lived phenomenon, lasting a mere 7 years from 1981 to its merger with the Liberals in March 1988. Over that period, its profile aroused hope and enmity in broadly equal proportions. To supporters, the party represented a brave and honest attempt to change the system and challenge the establishment, while to many Social Democrats were regarded as apostles of pragmatism seeking to grab the main chance. Even non-aligned observers in the media and the City were enthralled by this novel third force challenging the entrenched Labour—Tory duopoly, with all the ramifications that victory held out.

Crewe and King address these different perspectives by asking questions about what the SDP was, what it achieved, and whether its impact was enduring or ephemeral. Also, the book offers a useful insight into the culture and practices of this militant centre party, which, as the authors acknowledge, owed its existence primarily to the estrangement of liberal middle-class society from the post-1979 Thatcher/Benn polarization.

What kind of party was the SDP in terms of policies, membership, constitution and electoral capacity? Crewe and King have given substantial treatment to all these areas of party development, and in the process produced an impressive array of charts, membership statistics and other reputable data on policy decisions, leadership standing and preferences among members of the governing Council for Social Democracy. Even the little-known area of factions and groups has been examined, as much for evidence of organized dissent as plurality within the party. In that sense, the book represents a sound scholarly inquiry, conducted by two academics whose proximity to the SDP’s founding quartet (Owen, Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers) was close enough for them to glean much primary information about everyday party life.

Appraisals of the SDP should take account of its history as a product of schismatic Labour right politics prior to 1981. In social democratic battles against the left during that period, two distinctive tendencies emerged. The Hattersley/Shore-led consolidator school comprised largely centre-right trade unionists, councillors and parliamentarians. They opposed the Bennite advance, and favoured rightist causes like Europe, multilateralism and a mixed economy. However, this same tendency kept a distance from the Jenkinsite, whom they considered too dogmatic, and after the SDP secession set up ‘Labour Solidarity’ in order to continue the battle against the Labour left. The other tendency was the Jenkinsite Libertarians, who hailed from revisionist ‘modernizing’ and Eurozealous traditions, being an offspring of ‘Crosslandism’. This relatively homogeneous fellowship enjoyed key common threads, including a dominant Oxford pedigree which facilitated cohesion, but also aroused the charge of elitism from elsewhere in the party. Their unflinching support for Europe and emphasis on civil liberties owed much to the ideological leadership of Roy Jenkins and lieutenants like Bill Rodgers, Shirley Williams and others of that same coterie. This school managed to dominate the revisionist ‘Manifesto Group’ at Westminster, and ‘Campaign for Labour Victory’ elsewhere in the party.

It has to be said that while Crewe and King’s treatment of the SDP’s Labour right progeny is fair, nevertheless it is less than thorough in the scale of inquiry. There is excessive reliance on a couple of relatively lightweight journalistic accounts, without reference to academic studies of the Labour right, 1975–83. Such skimming seems curiously remiss in an otherwise comprehensive study.

Another vital dimension of the SDP was the Owen/Jenkins rivalry, which the authors recognized as having pervaded most areas of party life. The latter included the National Committee, Policy Committee, Conference and the Council for Social Democracy, along with select party groups, and even extending to staff appointments at head office. This rivalry manifested itself in different guises, with disagreements over Alliance relations with Liberals and the SDP’s separate identity being the most prominent. Jenkins, the integrationist, found his strategy for medium-term merger blocked by a hostile Owen determined on preserving the SDP’s separateness. Owen viewed Liberals as an immature force with whom he had no wish to be in permanent coalition, and as admitted in his memoirs, he hoped for an electoral breakthrough that would enable him to discard the Alliance in search of new alignments. Accordingly, throughout his leadership period (1983–7), Owen and his followers sought a distinctive agenda and viable party institutions for the SDP, such as would prove durable in the face of combined Jenkinsite/Liberal pressures for merger.

Crewe and King were sufficiently close to SDP leadership circles to understand that policy differences do not tell the whole story about the Owen/Jenkins rivalry. In fact tensions were exacerbated by the contrasting styles of the two protagonists. To that end, the authors’ assessment of Jenkins’s intellectual patricianism and Owen’s autocratic manner, matched by a talent for policy precision, seems entirely apposite. No less insightful is their assessment of Owen’s impact on Alliance relations with the Liberals, with a special focus on the period 1985–7. In this period Owen’s veto on joint spokesmanship and candidate selections, along with ensuing Alliance divisions over defence, enabled the leader to demonstrate his authority. However, the long term effect was to arouse hostility which rebounded with the membership’s rejection of Owen in the merger ballot of July 1987.