

# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

## THE NEW JERSEY CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OF 1966

Ernest C. Reock, Jr.

**D**espite a new constitution in 1947 giving the governor sweeping executive powers and creating a strong court system, state government in heavily urbanized New Jersey remained small and weak, dominated by a rural-oriented legislature. With the nationwide apportionment revolution of the 1960s, the state turned to its unfinished constitutional business. The limited convention of 1966 rewrote the legislative articles, bringing modern concepts of equal representation permanently to the state and paving the way toward a greatly enhanced role for the state government.

Established by a Democratic governor and a Republican legislature under court order, the convention included an equal number of delegates from each party but required only a simple majority for action. Party discipline thus became paramount, and party leaders at the convention—mostly legislators—struggled to hold their delegates in line. Rank-and-file efforts for innovative reforms, such as a unicameral legislature, were opposed by both leaderships. With stalemate appearing inevitable, the two party leaderships eventually combined to reach a compromise and then fight off the dissidents on each side. Although the product of the convention underwent some modification by the courts in subsequent years, the procedures established in 1966 have governed the composition of the legislature and its periodic revision after every census since then.

Written in lively prose by a veteran observer of New Jersey's political history, this book examines the events leading to the convention, the selection of delegates, the political maneuvering during the convention's course, and the revision and implementation of its proposals over the next three decades. The study is based on the documentary and press record, on extensive interviews with delegates at the beginning and end of the sessions, on interviews with surviving political leaders, and on the author's own observations as a staff member of the convention.

Local and state government officials, political scientists, lawyers, and historians will find this eyewitness account of a unique moment in history a most interesting read.

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“Two by two they found their seats at desks on the state university's gymnasium floor. For every Democrat, a Republican. For every Republican, a Democrat. The setting, converted for the moment from the sweaty atmosphere of sneakers and gym shorts with flags, bunting, and flowers, was the political focal point of New Jersey. This was the opening of the 1966 New Jersey Constitutional Convention—only the third in the state's history. And while it was rigidly partisan, it was perfectly balanced, with the same number of Republican and Democratic delegates from every county. Even where a county, by the size of its population, was entitled to a single vote, there were two delegates: a Republican and a Democrat, each authorized to cast only half a vote.

The floor of the convention was divided by a broad center aisle, with Democrats on one side and Republicans on the other. Interaction among delegates of different parties was discouraged, for the equal strength of the two party delegations made party discipline paramount. The defection of only one delegate could upset that delicate balance, and each party leadership treaded such a prospect.

By March of 1966 the old pattern of representation had already been modified slightly in New Jersey under judicial pressure. No longer could the 48,555 inhabitants of Cape May County have the same representation in the State Senate as the 923,545 residents of Essex County. Now a permanent plan was needed. As the delegates gathered on March 21, 1966, it was easy to recognize that the old order was gone. But it was not so obvious what should follow.”

— Ernest C. Reock, Jr.

**Ernest C. Reock, Jr.**, a faculty member of the Rutgers University Center for Government Services since its establishment in 1950, served as its director from 1960 until his retirement in 1992. He is the author of numerous reports, including the first *Handbook for New Jersey Assessors* and the annual series of *Legislative District Data Books*. In 1976, the New Jersey State Senate and General Assembly adopted resolutions commending his work as secretary of the joint education committee and the joint committee on the public schools. His 1980 report on the state's school budget caps was awarded the Governmental Research Association's "Most Distinguished Research" award. He was the recipient of the Rutgers Presidential Award for Distinguished Public Service in 1988 and the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service under the Governor's Pride Award Program in 1997. Dr. Reock has served as a member of state task force and as a consultant to various state and local commissions.

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by  
**Ernest C. Reock, Jr.**

**F**ew changes were made in the basic pattern of representation in the New

Jersey State Legislature between the establishment of a state government in 1776 and the revisions implemented in the 1960s. The New Jersey Constitutional Convention of 1966 was the climax of events that enabled New Jersey state government to begin meeting the demands of the late twentieth century.

—Ernest C. Reock, Jr.

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