Perception of the Parties and the 2016 Presidential Nominations¹

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Even as Donald Trump racked up win after win and enlivened a significant segment of the Republican primary electorate, GOP party elites were tepid, and in many cases downright disparaging, about his candidacy. By early May 2016, Trump had amassed a sizable delegate lead — large enough that his competitors had withdrawn, ensuring that he would almost certainly be crowned the Republican nominee. Despite the writing on the wall, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) announced publicly that he was “not ready” to endorse Trump and that the Republican Party needed a “standard-bearer that bears our standards” (Steinhauer and Burns 2016). Further reflective of the deep chasm existing between Republican Party elites and voters over the 2016 Republican candidate, Republican Senators Sasse (NE), Collins (ME), and Kirk (IL), as well as Republican Governors Baker (MA) and Hogan (MD), all announced that they either did not support Trump or would not vote for him in November (Reilly 2016).

On the Democratic side, an analogous divide between voters and elites emerged. Super delegates were overwhelming supportive of Hillary Clinton, with many announcing their support for her before the primaries even began. According to Democratic Party rules, super delegates are unbound and free to support whichever candidate they choose. In fact, they were designed, in part, to provide a counterweight to the preferences and whims of the masses while bringing their knowledge and expertise to the selection of a presidential nominee. Yet, with so few super delegates announcing their intention to support Sanders, his vocal supporters raged that their candidate was disadvantaged by the system and the rules. Some super delegates reported instances of harassment, including phone calls, emails, accusations of bribery, and negative reviews of their businesses, from angry Sanders supporters (Lerer 2016). One Sanders supporter went as far as to compile a “Superdelegate Hit List,” a website to share the contact information of super delegates so they can be pressed to switch their votes” (Lerer 2016). So ubiquitous were claims of an unfair Democratic nomination that headlines such as “Is the Democratic Primary Really Rigged?” (Foran 2016) and “Democratic Super Delegates: The Villains of a ‘Rigged’ System, According to Sanders’s Supporters”
abounded. In fact, Sanders’ supporters brought a class action lawsuit against the Democratic National Committee “alleging that the Democratic National Committee worked in conjunction with Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign to keep Bernie Sanders out of the White House” (Riotta 2017). Though Clinton was expected to, and ultimately did, secure the 2016 Democratic nomination, the process was not as smooth and harmonious as many envisioned.

Both nominations in 2016 illustrate deep-seated disagreements rooted within the parties. And not just philosophical, ideological conflicts, but a divide between factions of the party over how to select the major party’s candidates for the highest office. Therefore, in this paper, I investigate Americans’ perceptions of the parties, their nominating processes and procedures, and the impact of Trump and Sanders on their parties. The political parties have spent decades reforming, tweaking, and transforming the process for selecting the presidential candidates, but, as is evident by the most recent nominations, they have clearly not landed on a system that is able to nominate a popular, electable candidate that generates enthusiasm and loyalty while pleasing and inspiring confidence among both party elites and rank-and-file party members. Both parties are considering reforms for the 2020 nominations, and many of the possible revisions to the rules may influence the extent to which party elites and citizens participate in and affect the outcome of the nomination. Consequently, understanding Americans’ attitudes about the parties and the current nomination processes is critical.

In the section that follows, I provide a brief overview of the history of the presidential nomination system, focusing on reforms that altered the balance of power between elites and citizens in the selection of presidential candidates. Then, I discuss the parties’ ability to decide their own nominating procedures despite a public demand for a democratic, citizen-led process. After describing some of the specific features of the complicated post-reform presidential nomination process and theorizing about how they may be perceived among the public, I discuss the survey I utilize to assess Americans’ perception of the parties and their
nominating processes and procedures. In the analysis section, I present results about how much confidence Americans have in each of the major political parties and their nominating processes. I also examine whether Americans believe primaries or caucuses are the fairer method, whether open or closed contests are fairer, and how people feel towards super delegates. Finally, I assess whether people believe Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders had positive or negative impacts on their respective parties. In order to assess any partisan differences that may exist, I control for party identification throughout my analyses. For some investigations, I consider the nominating rules that are in place in each respondent’s state. I conclude with a discussion of what the parties can glean and apply from this analysis, as they try once again to find a process for 2020 that pleases both party elites and rank-and-file party members while nominating a popular, electable candidate.

Striving for Balance

The friction between party elites and citizens over which candidate should become a party’s presidential candidate is not new. Throughout most of American history, a small group of select individuals chose the nominee behind closed doors; those permitted to have some formal say in the selection of the nominee has expanded over time. First, members of Congress gathered to choose the nominee, but eventually state leaders were included in the process [Johnson 1968]. In the early 20th century, voters were given a role in the process, with some states holding primaries where citizens could cast a ballot for a preferred candidate. However, even following the introduction of primaries, party elites and elected officials maintained control over the process. While the results of the primaries did not necessarily have any impact on the ultimate choice of a nominee, it was seen as a way for a less-favored candidate to prove his popular appeal [Haskell 1996, Polsby 1983].

Frustration with these important selections being made with minimal voter input erupted in 1968, with incensed protestors gathering outside of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Democratic voters were angry — up in arms over the Johnson ad-
administration’s Vietnam War policy, and irate that Hubert Humphrey, Johnson’s handpicked successor, became the Democratic nominee without participating in a single Democratic primary or caucus. Their irritation was fueled by a tumultuous nomination season, where Robert Kennedy was assassinated after winning the California primary, and a significant number of delegates were chosen before most candidates even declared their intentions to run (Haskell 1996; Bode and Casey 1980).

In an effort to repair and unify the fissures that could not be ignored, the Democratic Party set out to alter the presidential nomination process. These momentous reforms aimed to take the selection of its highest candidate away from party elites in smoke-filled rooms and relinquish it to rank-and-file party members. Initiated at the 1968 Democratic National Committee and clarified and carried out by the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (more commonly known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission), these reforms certainly represent a significant step forward in ensuring all Democratic voters had a “full, meaningful, and timely opportunity to participate” (McGovern and Fraser 1970).

Through the work of the McGovern-Fraser Commission, the Democratic Party was successful in radically changing the selection process for presidential candidates prior to 1972. It constructed a nomination system where voters select delegates in a series of primaries and caucuses held over the course of several months, and those delegates gather in the summer at the National Convention to nominate a candidate. The key difference between the previous system and this post-reform system is that in the latter the preferences of voters, expressed in the primaries and caucuses, directly affect the choice of the delegates at the Convention. In other words, there is a much closer connection between voters and the outcome at the Convention. The shift in power away from elites and towards citizens was so significant, that years after the McGovern-Fraser Commission completed its work, Tom Donilon, a prominent Democrat, described the Commission as having “a convulsive reaction against the role of Party leaders and elected officials in the delegate selection process.”

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Donilon made this comment while serving as a member of the Democratic Party’s Fairness Commission.
Though the link between citizens and the selection of a nominee has been tightened, at the expense of party elites, that is not to imply that voters have the ultimate say in who becomes their party’s presidential candidate. Cohen et al. (2008) argue that party elites exert significant influence over the process through their ability to coalesce around a candidate during the invisible primary stage. By essentially crowning a candidate the front-runner, elites can send a strong signal to voters about who is the preferred candidate. Jewitt (nd) also demonstrates that the post-reform nomination system is characterized by a convoluted web of rules, which vary across states, parties, and years. Through the ability of party elites and elected officials to influence the electoral rules, at both the national and state level, they can exert powerful guidance over which candidate is nominated.

The post-reform presidential nomination system is complex, in large part because of the near-constant reforms to the process. In the decades that followed the McGovern-Fraser Commission, the Democratic Party initiated several additional reform commissions to examine, re-evaluate, and revise the rules governing the new nomination process. An overarching goal was to create a system that consistently nominated a popular, electable candidate who could win the presidency while also pleasing and engaging both party elites and rank-and-file party members. In an attempt to achieve this (likely unattainable) objective, the Democratic Party had to grapple, time and time again, with determining the optimal balance - between the knowledge, insight, and wisdom of party elites and the preferences and sentiments of voters.

As a result of the McGovern-Fraser Commission’s recommendations and other changes to the nomination process, the number of governors and members of Congress in attendance at the National Convention decreased dramatically. Thus, in addition to examining other features of the system, the Commission on the Role and Future of Presidential Primaries, which later became the Commission on Presidential Nomination and Party Structure (1974 Official Transcript Proceedings Before the Democratic National Committee Fairness Commission. June 26, 1985. Washington, D.C. 5
- 1978), chaired by Morley Winograd, reevaluated the role of party elites in the nomination process. The Winograd Commission ultimately created PLEOs, delegate seats reserved for party leaders and elected officials. These delegates reflected voter preferences, as they were pledged to candidates based on the results of the primary or caucus held in each state. This reform ensured that party leaders and elected officials were able to bring their “experience and knowledge as to what we [the Democratic Party] need in order to win.”

In addition to ensuring that party elites maintained a presence at the National Convention and in the nomination of the presidential candidate, the Winograd Commission also tinkered with the role of citizens participating in the process. The Commission recommended all nominating contests be closed to voters who did not affiliate themselves with the Democratic Party. In other words, it advocated for closed contests, rather than open or semi-open contests, which allow for Republicans and/or Independents to participate. The actual implementation of this recommendation proved more difficult, as many states do not register voters by party. Nevertheless, this proposal made it clear that the Democratic Party wanted citizen input in the process, as long as those citizens identified as members of the Democratic Party.

While the Winograd Commission fiddled with the balance of power between elites and citizens in the nomination process, the Commission on Presidential Nominations (1981 - 1982), chaired by Jim Hunt, swung the pendulum of influence strongly back towards elites. Though the desire for a greater function for party leaders had been simmering for years, the Democratic losses in the 1980 presidential and congressional elections thrust it to the forefront. The Hunt Commission reviewed several different aspects of the presidential nomination process but was specifically tasked with increasing the role and influence of party leaders in the selection of a presidential candidate (Mayer 2009). The Hunt Commission injected peer review into the nomination process by creating unbound delegate slots reserved

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for party elites and elected officials. These super delegates, as they became commonly known, are not required to make their candidate preferences known (though many do), can change their mind throughout the nomination season, and are in no way tied to the results of the primary or caucus held in their state. In other words, they do not represent the preferences of citizens — they are free to vote for the candidate that they believe would be the best choice for the party. The addition of the approximately 550 slots reserved for super delegates in the 1984 nomination race ensured that party elites had a clear voice in the selection of the nominee — the decision was not solely in the hands of the voters.

Super delegates, or these unpledged party leader and elected official delegates, first attended the 1984 Democratic National Convention, where Walter Mondale was nominated as the Democratic presidential candidate. Supporters of Jesse Jackson and Gary Hart, as well as Jackson himself, complained that the rules governing the 1984 nomination process, specifically the provisions allowing for super delegates and the delegate allocation rules, disadvantaged their candidacies while protecting front-runners (Jewitt nd). In response, the Democratic Party did what it had becomes quite adept at doing over the past sixteen years — it formed a commission to reevaluate the presidential nomination system and recommend changes once again.

The Fairness Commission, chaired by Don Fowler, was charged with (among other tasks) considering proposals to eliminate or reduce the number of newly created super delegates. Ultimately, it recommended increasing the number of super delegates, an action that inflamed Jackson (Jewitt nd). A 1988 Washington Post article acknowledges the extent to which this action signifies a rearrangement of influence,

The presence of super delegates in Atlanta, where they will account for about 15 percent of the convention delegates, represents the culmination of a 16-year odyssey by the Democrats that began at the chaotic 1972 convention, where such party stalwarts as the late mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago were stripped of their delegate status in bitter credentials battles. Since those days of revolt against the influences of party “bosses,” beginning with the 1984 convention that was the first to include a major superdelegate presence, the Democrats have come full circle, hoping that a large contingent of unpledged elected and party officials will provide an anchor of experience and political savvy amid the unpredictable forces that move through a national political convention (Walsh 1988).
For years the Democratic Party sought to strike the opportune equilibrium between the preferences of citizens and party elites in the selection of the Democratic presidential candidate, engaging in significant movement in one direction only to reverse course shortly after. Following the 1988 nomination, the Democratic Party backed off of large scale national reforms to the nomination process, though super delegates remained a crucial part of the process. The number of superdelegate slots has increased from nomination to nomination, though as a percent of total Democratic delegates the number has typically hovered between 15 and 18%. For the most part, super delegates have not played a consequential role, though their function is often questioned. The 2016 Democratic nomination, where party elites favored Clinton and impassioned voters claimed the system was rigged against the outsider candidate, demonstrates that the balance between elites and citizens is still elusive.

The Republican Party has not been as actively involved as the Democratic Party in the reforms of the presidential nomination process in the post-reform period. This is true for a variety of reasons: there was not a strong faction within the Republican Party lobbying for reforms like what existed within the Democratic Party (Fraser 1980 Kamarck 2009 Norrander 2010), particularly because the Republican Party was more successful in winning the White House in the 1970s and 1980s (Cook 2004); the Republican Party’s philosophical position on states’ rights has meant that it is more apt to leave the details of the process up to the states (Fraser 1980 Davis 1980 Jones 1981); and, it is typically more difficult for the national Republican Party to change its rules and procedures (Cook 2004 Kamarck 2009 DiClerico 2000).
Despite fewer national directives, the Republicans have not been immune to many of the rule changes that have been implemented (Haskell 1996). The GOP generally did not resist the changes that the Democratic Party initiated. The movement towards more direct and participatory democracy for a wide segment of the population was popular, and the Republican Party may have faced backlash and negative attention if it tried to resist a democratization of the system. Whether owing to complacency, a desire to not be seen in a negative, undemocratic light by the media and voters, or the changes made at the state level, the Republican Party’s nomination process also became more open and democratic, with more meaningful citizen participation and input, in the post-reform era.

Private Organizations and the Role of Citizens

The national parties are private organizations. Nowhere in the United States Constitution is there mention of political parties or direction provided as to how the parties should nominate candidates for office. The parties, theoretically, could return to a nomination process where citizens have no input in the selection. If the parties wanted to return to the system where members of Congress alone had the sole responsibility for nominating the presidential candidates, they could do so. If one of the parties decided that from here on out, its highest ranking member of Congress would become its presidential candidate, it would be free to make that decision. If one of the parties felt that the best course of action is to allow the current president to select the next nominee, it would be within the party’s prerogative. Of course, resorting to any of the aforementioned practices for selecting a candidate for the highest office would not be the wisest, or most popular, decision, as citizens now expect
to have a role in the selection of the nominee. Generally, there has been support among Americans for “more democracy” (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016; Stimson 2004; Dahl 1961), which for many equates to more opportunities for Americans to participate in the political process. When the people have more involvement in the selection of presidential candidates, it is in line with the representative democracy philosophy, under which power stems from the people (Steger 2015).

Despite this pervasive popular belief advancing citizen involvement in political decisions and the selection of candidates, Schattschneider (1960) acknowledges that political elites serve a crucial function in defining and restricting the choices presented to Americans. “Democracy is like nearly everything else we do; it is a form of collaboration of ignorant people and experts” (Schattschneider 1960, 137). He contends that many Americans are simply not up to the tasks necessary for a functioning democracy. Based on the attempts to balance citizen input with elite expertise in the nomination process, the parties seem to be cognizant of this limitation. Though there may be valid reasons (especially from the parties’ points of view) to include elite input in the presidential nomination process, doing so reduces the amount of democracy present in the process (Steger 2015). Consequently, voters may be less likely to subscribe to this school of thought and more likely to demand the presidential candidates be chosen by citizens in a democratic process. For that reason, combined with the negative attention they received in 2016, I expect that voters are unlikely to support the idea of super delegates. Strong partisans, because of their commitment to the party, its policies, and its success, may be more likely to recognize the value super delegates bring to
A Complicated System

Due to near-constant tinkering, the post-reform presidential nomination system is convoluted. As the national Democratic Party reformed, and then adjusted and readjusted the newly altered rules, the states and state parties also modified their rules. In the federalist system, as long as the states abide by the national guidelines, they are permitted to determine their own rules governing their nominating contests. Thus, some states have maintained relatively consistent rules over the course of the post-reform era while other states have less stable rules.

Neither the national Republican Party nor national Democratic Party has ever dictated to the states the type of contest that can be employed (though the national Democratic Party has vocalized at times some of the perceived advantages of caucuses). Consequently, states are free to opt for a caucus or a primary to select delegates to the National Convention. For instance, North Carolina has held a Republican presidential primary each year since 1972. Meanwhile, in Kansas, the Republicans held a caucus in 1976, a primary in 1980, a caucus in 1988, a primary in 1992, 1996, and 2000, and a caucus in 2008, 2012, and 2016. As a result, for some citizens, the nomination process can look very different from year to year, even if they remain in a single state; the process may also be quite distinct for residents of different states, even if they are members of the same political party.

I expect that most citizens will prefer a primary over a caucus. The costs associated with a primary are certainly higher than the costs associated with a general election. Voters
lack party identification as a cue and there may be numerous candidates on the ballot for a single office in primary elections. Despite this, a primary is a recognizable familiar type of Election Day activity, where people have many hours on a designated day to cast a secret ballot and the process may take mere minutes. Primary elections are also far more ubiquitous in the post-reform era. As Polsby (1983) describes, the presidential nomination process transformed “from a system in which primaries played a supporting rather than a leading role in the United States rapidly... toward a nominating system in which primaries dominated the process” (63). If citizens have voted in a general election and have some basic level of political knowledge, then there is not a great deal of mystery about how a primary functions.

A caucus, on the other hand, may seem complicated, confusing, and impenetrable, especially to those who lack familiarity with the process. In 2016, the media certainly tried to explain the process to citizens. The New York Times ran a story with the headline, “Our Man in Iowa: How the Iowa Caucuses Work” (Gabriel 2016), the Huffington Post posted a story entitled, “How Does a Caucus Work?” (Noble 2016), and local CBS affiliate KUTV 2News provided citizens with necessary information in a piece, “Want to Caucus? Here’s how in Utah” (Cancio 2016). The mere presence of these user guides indicate that significant portions of the public may not understand the purpose and procedures of a caucus.

Of course, caucus rules vary widely by state, and even by precinct location within a state, which certainly contributes to the confusion. Generally though, in a caucus, voters have to show up at a designated time, such as 7:00 in the evening, and may be required
to stay for several hours (Norrander 1992). In addition to deliberating on party business (which may be tedious, boring, and banal to many citizens), at caucuses, voters typically make their candidate preference publicly known. To those accustomed to casting a secret ballot in a primary or a general election, publicly supporting a candidate in front of one’s friends, neighbors, and co-workers may seem peculiar. Norrander (2015) points out that the number of citizens willing to participate in this type of democratic exercise is likely to be much smaller than those willing to vote in a primary. In sum, due to the complexity and the higher costs associated with a caucus, the lack of familiarity many have with the process, and the prevalence of primary elections, most citizens are more likely to prefer primaries to caucuses. Because of the complexity and mystery surrounding caucuses, I also anticipate that citizens who live in states that hold caucuses will see more value in caucuses than citizens who live in states that hold primaries.

However, a portion of the electorate may believe caucuses are a superior nominating mechanism. Caucuses are often touted as being “different” and “requiring voters to be more attentive” (Redlawsk et al. 2011, 8). Redlawsk et al. argue that the dynamics and requirements of a caucus mean that participants are “generally more aware and involved than voters elsewhere” (2011, 8). Some scholars acknowledge that because of the demands associated with caucuses, less educated citizens are less likely to participate (Citrin and Karol 2009; Haskell 1996). Citrin and Karol (2009) point out, “since passion is seldom associated with moderation, there is reason to believe that caucus attendees are more extreme in their views than primary voters” (p. 10). Though in some localities caucuses operate much like
primary elections, they also provide citizens an opportunity to discuss candidates and issues, as well as an opportunity to weigh in on party business and issue positions (Steger, 2015; Norrander, 1992). Thus, citizens who are more committed to the party, or are stronger partisans, may be more likely to see the value in caucuses, even if they require more time than do primaries.

The openness of the contest also varies across states. In an open contest, any registered voter, regardless of party affiliation, is able to participate in the state’s primary or caucus. In a semi-open contest, party members and Independents are allowed to participate while opposite party members are excluded. In a closed contest, only party members are allowed to voice a preference to select the presidential candidates; Independents and opposite party members are not permitted to vote (or caucus). Advocates of open primaries often tout that this allows citizens to choose which party’s nominating contest is most interesting and engaging (Davis, 1980). Opening up the selection of the nominee may make it more likely that the party’s presidential candidate has wide appeal, rather than only having the support of a small segment of ideologically extreme partisans (Hedlund, 1977–1978). On the other hand, many believe that open contests lend themselves to the possibility of raiding, or opposite party members voting insincerely for a less preferred, less electable candidate in an attempt to spoil the party’s chances in the general election (Lengle, 1981).

There have been investigations into whether the open or closed format affects turnout (e.g., Jewitt and Kenney, 2014; Kenney, 1983; Ranney, 1977; Norrander and Smith, 1985) and how these rules influence the types of candidates selected (e.g., Kanthak and Morton, 2001; Lengle, 1981).
Additionally, the parties, and in particular the Democratic Party, have spent significant time debating the advantages and disadvantages of opening or closing the process. In fact, these discussions continue today - with both parties considering reviewing these rules prior to the 2020 nominations [Siegel 2017; Putnam 2016a,b]. Despite this, there is little discussion (or understanding) of which type of rule citizens prefer or view as the fairer method.

If citizens are self-interested, I expect that strong partisans would prefer closed contests. Assuming strong Republicans and strong Democrats prefer more ideologically extreme candidates, they should seek to advantage those types of candidates by closing off the process to opposite party members and Independents, who are more likely to prefer more moderate candidates. Correspondingly, Independents should prefer the opportunity to participate, which they cannot do under closed rules; therefore, they should prefer open contests. Partisans who only lean towards the parties (but not affiliate strongly) may be more likely to want to vote in the opposite party’s primary at some point. For instance, a voter who leans towards the Democratic Party may have preferred John McCain in 2000 to any of the Democratic candidates and would have wanted the opportunity to cast a ballot for McCain (over Bush) in the Republican nomination. Consequently, I expect leaners to prefer open contests to closed contests as well.

Methods

In order to assess Americans’ perceptions of the parties and the 2016 presidential nominations, I rely on a national survey conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public
Affairs Research. The sample includes 1,060 adults, who are part of a larger AmeriSpeak Omnibus survey. Respondents were selected based on a “probability based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population” (AP-NORC 2016, 13). 761 respondents completed the survey online, while the other 299 were contacted via phone. “A poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under and oversampling resulting from the study specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and household phone status. The weighted data...reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over” (AP-NORC 2016, 13). The weighted data was utilized in the analyses that follow.

The survey was conducted between May 12 and May 16, 2016, as the 2016 presidential nominations were ongoing, but nearing completion. At that point, all of Trump’s major competitors (including Cruz, Kasich, and Bush) had withdrawn from the race, leaving him as the de facto nominee. However, Trump had still not secured a majority of delegates\(^4\) so there was still some discussion swirling about the (increasingly unlikely) possibility of blocking his nomination at the Republican National Convention. The 2016 Democratic nomination was still technically competitive in mid-May, as Sanders had not withdrawn and Clinton had not yet secured the necessary delegates\(^5\). However, it was looking more and more like Clinton would inevitably become the nominee, as she had secured 2,093 out of the necessary 2,383 delegates after the West Virginia contest on May 10, whereas Sanders only had 1,432 delegates.

\(^4\)He would do so on May 26, 2016.  
\(^5\)She would do so on June 7, 2016.
The publicly available data set and accompanying materials can be found on the AP-NORC website. Respondents were asked questions about their confidence in various U.S. political institutions, their feelings about the upcoming 2016 presidential election, their confidence in the political parties and their nominating processes, and their perceptions of the parties’ responsiveness and openness. They were also surveyed about their feelings about specific aspects of the nominating process, including the use of super delegates, primaries and caucuses, open and closed rules, and their perceptions of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders on their political parties. Standard demographic variables, such as party identification, ideology, gender, race, marital status, region, education, and income, were queried and included.

In addition, AP-NORC also provided me an amended data set that includes the state each respondent lives in. This expanded data set allows me to assess whether the rules within each state affect people's perceptions of the parties and the nominating processes.

Analysis

Confidence in the Parties and their Nominating Processes

Before assessing the public’s attitudes towards the parties’ nominating processes and some of the 2016 presidential contenders, I begin by examining confidence in the parties, by party identification (Figure 1). As one would expect, Republicans have very little confidence in


Due to re-identification risk and the terms of the data supplier, each respondent’s state of resident cannot be disclosed.

I greatly appreciate the assistance of the AP-NORC staff, particularly Dan Costanzo, in obtaining this expanded data set, which makes this analysis possible.
the Democratic Party; about 75% of Republicans report having hardly any confidence in the Democratic Party and less than 3% report having a great deal of confidence in the Democratic Party. Using the 7 point party identification scale, the trend is as one would anticipate — with stronger Republicans having less confidence in the Democratic Party than Republican leaners. Independents are also not overly enthusiastic in their confidence towards the Democratic Party, with 48% reporting hardly any confidence, 47% reporting only some confidence and less than 5% reporting a great deal of confidence. Democrats are more confident in their own party, but even among Democratic identifiers, there is not overwhelming confidence. 13.5% of Democratic leaners, 27% of weak Democrats, and 47% of Strong Democrats express a great deal of confidence in their party. Nearly a quarter of Democratic leaners indicate that they have hardly any confidence in the Democratic Party.\footnote{The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and confidence in the Democratic Party is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 412.98, and F(10.95, 11268.79)=22.32, p<.0001.}

Though Americans are not overflowing with confidence in the Democratic Party, their confidence in the Republican Party is even more tepid (Figure 1, right panel). 75% of Democrats and 57% of Independents report hardly any confidence in the Republican Party, and less than 3% of Democrats and Independents report a great deal of confidence in the Republican Party. More specifically, about 83% of strong Democrats, 70% of weak Democrats, and 77% of Democratic leaners have hardly any confidence in the Republican Party. Republicans, of course, have more confidence in their own party, but there are sizable segments of Republican identifiers expressing a lack of confidence in the GOP. About a quarter of Repub-
Republican leaners indicate they have hardly any confidence in the Republican Party; about 71% of Republican leaners indicate they have some confidence in the party. Only 3% of Republican leaners indicate they have a great deal of confidence in their party. Weak Republicans are more supportive, with about 19% indicating they have a great deal of confidence. 38% of strong Republicans profess a great deal of confidence in their party. Overall, Americans are generally not very confident in the parties, with the Republican Party faring a bit worse, though many respondents express at least some confidence in the parties.

If Americans are not satisfied with the state of the parties generally, how do they feel

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\[\text{The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and confidence in the Republican Party is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 353.70, and } F(10.59, 10961.99)=19.09, p<.0001.\]
Figure 2: Confidence in the Parties’ Nominating Processes

about the nominating processes, used to select the presidential candidates? In short, not very confident (Figure 2). Americans report slightly more confidence in the Democratic nominating process than in the Republican process. About 39% of respondents indicate hardly any confidence in the Democratic nominating process, with 18% expressing a great deal of confidence. Nearly 45% of Americans (a plurality) report hardly any confidence in the Republican nominating process, and only 12% indicate a great deal of confidence.

Of course, it is vital to examine confidence in the nominating processes by party identification, which is done in Figure 3. As is to be expected in these polarized times, Republicans have little confidence in the Democratic nominating process. Republican leaners are the least enthusiastic in the Democratic nominating process, with nearly 60% indicating they
have hardly any confidence. Weak and strong Republicans are not much more confident in the Democratic process, with 56% and 54% respectively, proclaiming hardly any confidence. For Republican identifiers, depending on the strength of their affiliation, between 6% and 10% indicate a great deal of confidence in the Democratic Party’s nominating process. Independents are not as negative as Republicans, but they are also not very confident. Half of Independents express only some confidence in the Democratic Party’s nominating process, and 46% report hardly any confidence, with less than 4% indicating they have a great deal of confidence. Democrats, of course, are more confident in their party’s nominating process, but even among Democratic identifiers, there are not overwhelmingly levels of confidence. A majority (52%) of weak Democrats and (55%) of Democratic leaners profess only some confidence in the party’s nominating process. However, a majority (51%) of strong Democrats indicate a great deal of confidence in their party’s nominating process.\footnote{The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and confidence in the Democratic Party’s nominating process is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 231.25, and F(11.63, 11977.18)=10.81, p<.0001.} It seems that Americans are not very confident in the process that was utilized to select Hillary Clinton as the Democratic presidential candidate, but Democrats have more faith in their party’s process.

Mirroring trends regarding the parties generally, confidence in the Republican Party’s nominating process is lower than that of the Democratic Party’s. About half of Democratic identifiers (50% of strong Democrats, 48% of weak Democrats, and 54% of Democratic leaners) indicate that they have hardly any confidence in the GOP’s process. Interestingly, between 13 and 14% of strong and weak Democrats indicate a great deal of confidence in the
Republican nominating process, reflecting higher levels of confidence than Republicans had in the Democratic process. A majority (59%) of Independents have hardly any confidence in the process used to select Republican presidential candidates; less than 5% of Independents report having a great deal of confidence. Though Republicans are, of course, more positive about their party’s nominating confidence, the majority of each category of Republican identifiers profess only some confidence in that process (50% of Republican leaners and weak Republicans; 55% of strong Republicans). Less than 29% of strong Republicans report a great deal of confidence in their party’s nominating process — this stands in sharp contrast to the 51% of strong Democrats who declared a great deal of confidence in their party’s

Figure 3: Confidence in the Parties’ Nominating Processes, By Party ID
Thus, the Republican process, used to nominate Donald Trump does not inspire much faith and assurance from most Americans, even among the party faithful.

**Attitudes towards Specific Features of the Nominating Process**

Clearly, Americans are not enamored with the parties’ nominating procedures. Perhaps this is not surprising given that the post-reform nomination systems are exceedingly complex, and the rules and procedures used to select delegates to the National Conventions vary across states, parties, and years. In an attempt to understand these opinions more fully, I next investigated attitudes toward specific aspects of the nominating processes, including whether Americans favor primaries or caucuses, how they feel about open and closed contests, and their beliefs about super delegates.

Americans overwhelmingly think primaries are more fair than caucuses, with about 83% of respondents reporting this opinion (Figure 4). Only 17% declared caucuses as the fairer type of nominating contest. Though many caucus proponents promote the aspects of deliberative democracy, with the opportunity for debate, discussion, and party-building in caucus meetings, Americans are more familiar with primaries, as they are more common and resemble general elections much more closely.

Within the parties, there have been numerous discussions about who should be allowed to participate in the nominating contests. Some prefer to close off the process, allowing only registered (or declared) party members to participate. Other advocate for an open process,

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12The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and confidence in the Republican Party’s nominating process is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 75.08, and F(11.59, 11946.59)=3.60, p<.0001.
where opposite party members and Independents are welcome, as it is seen as an opportunity to grow the party and nominate a popular candidate that will fare well in the November general election. Though there are valid arguments on both sides, Americans strongly prefer open contests, allowing any registered voter to participate. Figure 4 shows that about 70% of respondents believe open contests are fairer than closed contests.

Of course, these straightforward depictions of Americans’ preferences may obscure information that would be valuable to the parties. For instance, it is possible that Democrats and Republicans feel differently on these issues, or strong identifiers and partisan-leaners have varying opinions. When considering rule changes, the parties may want to take this type of distinction into account. Therefore, Figure 5 explores respondents’ attitudes toward
nominating procedures, controlling for party identification. Given that caucuses are a place to conduct party business and typically attract a smaller, more committed pool of participants, I suspected strong partisans would be the most likely to laud their advantages, which is not supported by the data. The results show that strong partisans are the most supportive of primaries, and Independents are the most likely to believe that caucuses are the fairer type of contest; the results follow a fairly normal curvilinear pattern. 92% of strong Democrats and 86% of strong Republicans consider primaries fairer, compared to only 72% of Independents.\footnote{The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and attitudes towards the fairer type of contest is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 30.04, and $F(5.46, 5587.46)=3.07$, $p=.007$.}
I expected Independents to be the most favorable of open contests, and for strong partisans to be the least supportive. Considering one’s self-interest, Independents should prefer open contests because it would allow them an opportunity to participate in the nominating process if they so desire. Strong partisans should be more likely to want to close off the process, in an effort to ensure that a more ideological, strongly committed group of voters is choosing their party’s presidential candidate. The results (shown in Figure 5), more or less, support this line of thinking. 57% of strong Democrats and 59% of strong Republicans think open contests are fairer than closed contests, whereas 75% of Independents profess this opinion. The relationship is not exactly as I expected, however, as a higher percentage of weak Democrats (78%) and Democratic leaners (86%) than Independents believe open contests are the fairer procedure. Nevertheless, it is clear that strong partisans are the most likely to support closed contests, and Independents are more likely than strong partisans to favor open contests.\(^{14}\)

In an effort to further explain people’s attitudes toward nominating procedures, I also explored the relationship between exposure to various rules and opinions of the fairness of the type and openness of the contest. Given that caucuses are more complex (and costly in terms of effort) than primaries, I expect that voters who have been exposed to a caucus, and thus should be more likely to understand the procedures, may be more apt to see them as fairer than primaries. In other words, I anticipate that people living in a state that held a

\(^{14}\)The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and attitudes towards the openness of the contest is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 50.33, and F(5.95, 6093.72)=4.49, p=.0002.
2016 caucus will be more likely to see them as fair than those that live in a state holding a primary election. As is shown in Figure 6, this expectation is not confirmed. People living in a state where a caucus was held in 2016 are less likely to think a caucus is the fairer procedure than people who live in a state where presidential primaries were held in 2016. Of people who were not exposed to a caucus, 19% think a caucus is the fairer procedure; of people who were exposed to a caucus, 11% think a caucus is the fairer procedure. Thus, it appears that exposure to a caucus does not improve people’s opinions about the fairness of the selection method — in fact, it has the opposite effect.

Unlike the other relationships explored in this analysis, there appears to be no significant relationship between exposure to various rules regarding who is allowed to participate and attitudes towards whether open or closed contests are fairer (Figure 6). There is no evidence of differences in attitudes about the fairness of open and closed contests, regardless of whether respondents live in a state where both parties held open, semi-open, or closed contests, or whether respondents live in a state where the parties employ different rules. It may be

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15 The operationalization of caucus exposure presented simply codes for whether a caucus was held by either party in 2016. In ten states, both parties held a caucus. In another six states, one of the parties held a caucus and one party held a primary. Thus, any respondent living in one of these sixteen states was coded as having been exposed to a caucus. I also operationalized caucus exposure by party, where I considered the party identification of respondents living in the six states where one party uses a primary and the other uses a caucus. For instance, in Washington, the Democratic Party held caucuses whereas the Republican Party used a primary. Therefore, I categorized Washington respondents identifying as Democratic as having been exposed to a caucus, but Republican respondents were coded as not having been exposed to a caucus. One of the limitations of this operationalization is that it requires omitting Independents who lived in these mixed states. The results under this operationalization did not differ substantively, so I chose to present the more straightforward operationalization that utilizes the largest number of cases.

16 The relationship between caucus exposure and attitudes toward the type of contest is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 7.03, and F(1, 11031)=4.6, p=.032.

17 The relationship between the state’s openness rule and attitudes towards whether open or closed contests are fairer is not statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 0.53, and F(2.98, 3076.72)=0.0940, p=.963.

18 Similarly to the analysis conducted for exposure to primaries and caucuses, I also operationalized the openness rules in the state based on whether the respondent’s party held an open, semi-open, or closed
Figure 6: Attitudes Toward Nominating Procedures, By Exposure to those Rules

that attitudes about fairness of inclusion or exclusion of various segments of the electorate are broader and more tied to people’s views of democracy than their personal experiences and state rules. It is also possible that voters, particularly partisans, may not be aware of whether Independents and opposite party members are permitted to participate in their state, and so it has no impact on their opinions.

An aspect of the nomination process that may be more known to Americans, particularly given the context of the 2016 Democratic nomination, is the use of super delegates. As can be seen in Figure 7, most Americans do not think super delegates are a good idea. Only 5% of respondents report that super delegates are a very good idea and only about 12% indicate they are a somewhat good idea. A little less than a third (29%) feel neutrally toward super contest in his or her state. This operationalization reduces the sample size, as it excludes Independents. Regardless of which version of the variable is employed, no significant relationship between exposure to various rules surrounding who is allowed to participate and attitudes about the fairness of open and closed rules emerges.
delegates. Most believe they are not a good idea; more specifically, a plurality (32%) of Americans feel that super delegates are a very bad idea, with another 22% of respondents expressing that they are a somewhat bad idea. It appears that it is not only Sanders’ supporters decrying the practice of super delegates; on the whole, Americans are decidedly against super delegates.

Figure 7 shows attitudes towards super delegates, broken down by party identification. In order to make the findings easier to interpret, in this analysis, I collapsed the very bad and somewhat bad categories as well as the very good and somewhat good categories to create a three-category ordinal variable. These findings illustrate interesting partisan dynamics. Republicans are more decidedly against super delegates than Democrats, and Independents
feel the most neutral to these unpledged party and elected officials serving as delegates. More specifically, about 20% of strong Republicans and 11% of weak Republicans and Republican leaners think super delegates are a good idea, as opposed to less than 9% of Independents. A majority of Independents report that they feel neither good nor bad regarding the use of super delegates. Democrats are clearly more in favor of the practice, though not overwhelmingly so, with about 23% of Democratic leaners and weak Democrats and 32% of strong Democrats thinking super delegates are a good idea. Strong Democratic identifiers are the most supportive of the idea of super delegates, and this may be because they are more likely to understand how elite input could ensure that their nominee reflects the values and positions of the party and the party faithful. In 2016, there were discussions about
whether the Republican Party would benefit from having super delegates, as illustrated in a *Chicago Tribune* headline declaring, “Super Delegates Exist for a Reason. Just Look at the Republicans” (Lane 2016). Despite these conversations and the elite outcry over Trump’s success, Republican respondents are not as supportive of super delegates as I expected. Given this, I turned to analysis examining the impact of the two more controversial, surprisingly well-performing candidates on their parties.

**The Impact of Trump and Sanders on their Parties**

![Figure 9: Perceived Impact of Sanders and Trump on Their Parties](image)

Trump was clearly perceived to have a much more negative impact on the Republican Party than Sanders was viewed as having on the Democratic Party (Figure 9). Only about

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17% of respondents said Sanders had a very bad or somewhat bad impact on the Democratic Party; this stands in sharp contrast to the almost 51% of respondents reporting that they believe Trump had a very bad or somewhat bad impact on the Republican Party. A plurality of respondents (33%) suggested that Sanders had a neutral (or no) impact on the Democratic Party. A much smaller percentage (16%) said the same about Trump. These results beg the question - if Trump is perceived as having such a negative impact on his party, how did he become the nominee?

Looking at the perceived impact of the candidates on their parties across partisan identification lends some insight. Democrats and Republicans feel very differently (Figure 10). Republicans believe that Trump had a good impact on the Republican Party, while Democrats
overwhelmingly think Trump had a very bad impact on the Republican Party. 68% of Strong Democrats, 51% of weak Democrats, and 56% of Democratic leaners think Trump had a very bad impact. In contrast, only 18% of Republican leaners, 16% of weak Republicans, and 9% of strong Republicans report Trump has having a very bad impact on the party. Strong Republicans are the most positive about Trump’s impact on the GOP, with 46% reporting he had a very good impact, and another 28% reporting he had a somewhat good impact on the GOP. Independents were more mixed, with a plurality (42%) reporting that Trump had a very bad or somewhat bad impact, and only about a quarter of Independents reporting his impact was very good or somewhat good.\(^\text{19}\) Republican elites may not have been pleased with the Trump candidacy and the effect that they think he had on the Republican party, and Democratic identifiers would tend to agree, but this sentiment is not mirrored among rank-and-file Republicans, who feel his impact was positive.

The partisan differences in attitudes about Trump’s impact on the GOP are much more pronounced than those that exist about Sanders’ impact on the Democratic Party. All segments (strong, weak, and leaners) of Democrats overwhelmingly felt that Sanders had a somewhat good or very good impact on the Democratic Party. Independents were neutral about Sanders’ impact, with a majority feeling that he had no difference on the party. Republicans were less enthusiastic about Sanders’ impact on the Democratic Party, but overall, they still felt he had a positive to neutral impact on the party (and were certainly

\(^{19}\)The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and attitudes about Trump’s impact is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 329.87, and F(22.01, 22916.21)=8.10, p<.0001.
less negative than Democrats were about Trump). About 43% of strong Republicans reported that Sanders had a very or somewhat good impact on the Democratic Party, with only 21% indicating he had a very bad impact on the party.

**Conclusion**

Neither 2016 presidential nomination can be described as smooth or unifying. 2016 was not a year where party leaders and elected officials rallied around candidates in the invisible primary to have the electorate enthusiastically support the chosen candidate during the nominations. The 2016 nominations were not ones that struck that perfect balance: where they were competitive enough to draw new voters into the process and stimulate interest, attention, and enthusiasm; yet resolved quickly and peacefully enough to not create divisiveness that would trouble the parties and threaten their electoral fortunes in November and beyond. Instead, discord between party elites and rank-and-file party members was evident among both parties: as Trump secured the nomination, GOP elites expressed distress about what it meant for the future of the Republican Party. Meanwhile, Clinton secured the nomination that was seen as destined to be hers, with considerable support from super delegates and the establishment of the Democratic Party. Yet, a more sizable than expected segment of the electorate, supporting Senator Sanders, vocally protested the practices they saw as inequitable and unfair.

Certainly, it is not solely because of the events that took place over the course of the

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The relationship between party identification (7 point scale) and attitudes about Sanders’ impact is statistically significant, with an uncorrected chi-squared statistic of 168.32, and $F(21.67, 22538.6)=3.90$, $p<.0001$. 

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2016 presidential nominations, but it is undeniable that Americans have a fairly pessimistic view of and lack confidence in the parties and the processes they use to select presidential candidates. Based on the analysis presented here, which relies on a May 2016 survey administered by AP-NORC, the Democratic Party generally inspires slightly more confidence than does the Republican Party. However, even among rank-and-file members of each party, the parties don’t fare particularly well, with large segments expressing only some or hardly any confidence in their party. This analysis also revealed that Americans view primaries as fairer than caucuses and open contests as fairer than closed contests. Strong partisans are actually the most supportive of primaries, and Independents are the most likely to say that caucuses are the fairer type of contest. Exposure to a caucus, which can seem complicated and confusing, does not result in an increase in support for this type of nominating mechanism. Instead, people who live in a state that held a caucus in 2016 are less likely to think that a caucus is the fairer mechanism than people who live in a state that held primaries in 2016. When it comes to open contests, Independents are more likely to favor open contests than strong partisans, who are more likely to believe that closed contests are the fairer method. Americans are also not enamored with the idea of super delegates, with more than half of respondents stating that they are a very or somewhat bad idea. Only about 17% report that they are a somewhat or very good idea. Democrats, and particularly strong Democrats, were the most likely to see the advantages of super delegates.

When assessing the impact of Sanders and Trump, Trump was seen as having a much more negative impact on the Republican Party than Sanders had on the Democratic Party.
In fact, the vast majority of respondents believe that Sanders had a positive or neutral impact on the Democratic Party, whereas a majority reported that Trump had a very or somewhat bad impact on the Republican Party. Republican identifiers, however, broke sharply with their Democratic counterparts in their feelings towards Trump’s impact, with Republicans supportive of his impact and Democrats harshly negative of it. Republican elites may think that Trump’s candidacy damaged the Republican Party, but rank-and-file party members disagree — and they selected him to be the nominee.

Over the course of history, the parties have gradually ceded control over the selection of presidential candidates to an expanding group. If the parties retained a system where party elites chose the nominees, 2016 would have played out very differently, certainly on the Republican side. Yet, the parties no longer make that choice in a smoke-filled room, where only elites are allowed. While they could, theoretically, revert back to that type of system, it would be an unpopular decision, seen as undemocratic.

Instead, the parties will, once again, make small adjustments to the nomination system, hoping to create a process in 2020 that chooses a popular, electable candidate, who represents the party on its issue priorities, while pleasing and energizing party elites and rank-and-file party members. The Democratic Party is attempting to do so through the Unity Reform Commission, which will try to bridge the divide between the Clinton and Sanders camps. The Commission will consider (among other aspects of the nomination system) the role of super delegates, the delegate allocation procedures, and the participation of citizens, particularly as it applies to the openness of contests [Putnam 2016a, 2017; The Democratic Party 2017].
At the 2016 National Convention, the Republican Party also left the door open for reforms. It created a temporary committee that is expected to examine aspects of the nomination process from the scheduling of contests, to delegate allocation rules, to which voters should be allowed to participate in the process (Putnam 2016b). When reviewing and revising the process, the parties may wish to take the attitudes of Americans into account if they want to increase confidence in the party generally, or their nominating process. Of course, the parties may have other goals — namely, selecting a popular, electable candidate that reflects the party’s values — that they prioritize over inspiring confidence and faith among the American public.
References


