

The Parties Decide Among Candidates

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Political parties decide who their presidential nominee will be, but they choose from the candidates who enter the race.¹ Presidential nominations are determined by a winning coalition of those members of a political party who participate in the selection process. The coalition building is an interactive process in which presidential aspirants seek the support of party elites, activists, and groups aligned with the parties who in turn seek a winning candidate who will champion their political and policy priorities. The nominee is selected when a critical mass of party insiders, activists, groups, and party identifiers unify behind a candidate.

Historically, the process of unifying behind a candidate occurred during the national nominating conventions when party bosses negotiated with each other and with representatives of the candidates in exchange for patronage and policies (e.g., David et al. 1960). Overtime, the period before the convention became more important as candidates and their supporters sought to secure commitments of delegates before the conventions (e.g., Keech and Matthews 1976; Reiter 1985). The reforms of the early 1970s moved the formal selection of presidential nominees from the conventions to the caucuses and primaries that select convention delegates pledged to candidates (e.g., Aldrich 1980). During the 1980s and 1990s, subsequent modifications to the rules and increasing coordination among party insiders and activists enabled winning coalitions to form even before the caucuses and primaries (e.g., Cohen, et al. 2008; Steger 2014). When and how parties coalesce behind a presidential candidate, however, varies across elections.

In some nomination cycles, political parties coalesce in support of a candidate *before* the caucuses and primaries, during the “invisible primary” phase of the campaign. The 2000 Republican presidential nomination campaign exemplifies this pattern. George W. Bush emerged as a strong front-runner, if not the prohibitive favorite, well before the Iowa Caucuses

¹ This paper draws heavily on Steger (2014) which elaborates on the themes of party coalition coalescence and political opportunism by presidential candidates aspiring for the nomination.

and New Hampshire primary—the first states to select delegates to the party conventions. Bush held substantial leads in endorsements, fund-raising, news media coverage, and he consistently registered a majority in national public opinion polls of Republican Party identifiers in 1999. The Republican caucuses and primaries of 2000 largely confirmed the decisions made earlier by party insiders, activists, and groups.

In other years, however, party insiders, activists, and groups fail to coalesce sufficiently to produce a front-runner strong enough to win the nomination. In such years, party insiders and activists either divide their support among the candidates or remaining uncommitted until the caucuses and primaries begin (e.g., Steger 2008, 2013). The 2008 Democratic race illustrates this kind of presidential nomination. Senator Hillary Clinton was the front-runner during the invisible primary with more endorsements, support in polls, money, and media coverage than any of her rivals, including Senator Barack Obama. While Clinton sought to create an aura of inevitability, however, only a plurality of party insiders gave public endorsements. Clinton's support in national opinion polls consistently fell short of a majority. Also by 2008, the internet had obliterated the traditional fund-raising advantage of front-runners since candidates could raise large sums of money in short order. The invisible primary of 2007 did not yield a winning coalition of Democrats behind Clinton's candidacy. In such circumstances, campaign momentum during the caucuses and primaries can play a bigger role in determining the nominee. Obama's victory in the Iowa Caucuses gave him substantial momentum and party insiders, activists, and identifiers slowly coalesced around his candidacy.

These two kinds of campaigns reflect different processes of intra-party coalition coalescence as well as differences in who exercises power over the selection of the presidential nominees. Presidential nominations that are effectively decided *before* the caucuses and

primaries reflect an insider, coordination in which party elites, activists, and aligned groups play the dominant role in the selection of the nominees. When the invisible primary is indeterminate and the nominee is effectively decided *during* the caucuses and primaries, then we can infer that the active portion of the mass membership of a political party played a dominant role in selecting the nominee. Understanding why one pattern emerges in a given election requires figuring out why party insiders, activists, and groups are able to unify behind a front-runner to a greater degree in some years than in others.

Coalition coalescence before and during the primaries

While a candidate is labeled the front-runner during every campaign, front-runners vary in the extent of their advantage going into the primaries. Since the McGovern-Fraser reforms of 1970, the process of forming a winning coalition begins during the invisible primary and finishes during the caucuses and primaries. The argument that the invisible primary is the critical period in the nomination essentially holds that a winning nominating coalition forms before the caucuses and primaries. If the invisible primary is indeterminate—that is, no candidate obtains the support of a winning coalition within the party, then the competition shifts to formal voting in caucuses and primaries. The coalition formation process fundamentally changes with respect to participants and dynamics. Party insiders, group leaders, and party activists are joined by more of the mass membership of the political parties, especially in primary states. The expansion of the scope of conflict adds uncertainty to the race, as increasing numbers of prospective party voters pay closer attention to the candidates and the results of early nominating elections affects media coverage, fund-raising, candidate behavior, and voting in subsequent caucuses and primaries.

Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller (2008) have described the invisible primary as a “long national discussion” among party insiders, activists and groups who send signals to each other about which candidate they believe will be able to promote party policy positions and can win the election. In this respect, the invisible primary—the year or so before the caucuses and primaries functions as the equivalent of the pre-reform conventions. Party insiders, group leaders, and activists signal their preferences and come to agreement on which candidate should be selected as the nominee. This discussion among party insiders, activists, and group leaders usually yields movement toward a candidate who becomes highly likely to gain the nomination during the caucuses and primaries.

The McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms of 1970 ushered in a new era of presidential nomination politics. The changing nominating rules codified the role of party activists, reflecting a structural shift in political parties in which local and state political parties, long anchored by local and state patronage-fueled organizations, were giving way to parties with a more central role played by policy-demanding activists with a national focus. The post-reform era features a new kind of political party in which networks of political activists and groups play an increasingly important role in the selection of candidates (e.g., Bawn, et al. 2012). Although we have only limited and relatively dated evidence on the decision-making of caucus and primary voters, studies indicate that these voters select candidates whose perceived ideology and issue beliefs align with those of the voters, whose personal characteristics or qualities are desirable, and who are expected to win the nomination and the general election (Wattier 1983; Abramowitz 1989; Kenney 1993). While both activists and party insiders want candidates who can win, party activists appear to give greater weight to the candidates’ policy stances and their personal characteristics (e.g., leadership, charisma, integrity, competence) (Butler 2004). Party

and elected officials, however, are beholden to their own constituents so they tend to support a candidate who will appeal to the activists in their electoral districts or states (Hasecke, Meinke, and Scott 2013). Thus there is substantial similarity in the aggregate patterns of support by party elites, party activists and group leaders.

This is essentially an argument about information and coordination among large numbers of people operating in different states, but the effects are both direct and indirect. Informational cues given by party insiders and activists may be particularly important when voters cannot use party labels to differentiate candidates and when prospective primary voters have little information about candidates' policy positions (Jamieson, Johnston and Hagen, 2000). Political elites play a greater role in the formation of public opinion when the information environment is less dense and public awareness is low as occurs in presidential nomination campaigns. Caucus and primary voters do not evaluate all of the candidates and pick the best candidate. Rather, most voters in the earliest nomination elections limit their choices to the nationally credible candidates (Hull 2008). They reduce the costs of becoming informed about the candidates by focusing on a few candidates for which they need information; eliminating candidates from serious consideration on the basis of awareness and viability (Stone, Rapoport and Atkeson 1995). The aggregate pattern of endorsements, reflecting intra-party support for individual candidates, is a leading (rather than lagging indicator) of media coverage, fund-raising, and public opinion polls (Cohen, et al. 2008; Steger 2014).

Thus to the extent that party insiders, activists and groups coalesce early, they can have a substantial direct and indirect effect on candidate odds of winning a presidential nomination. The preferred candidate gains a substantial lead in elite and activist endorsements, media coverage, fund-raising, and support in national public opinion polls and goes on to win the

nomination during the caucuses and primaries, even if he or she is upset in one or two of the early caucuses or primaries (see also Steger 2000; Adkins and Dowdle 2004).

A lot of modern presidential nominations conform to this story, but quite a few do not. Party insiders, activists and group leaders sometimes fail to unify sufficiently behind a candidate during the invisible primary, a fact that indicates a limitation of the “invisible primary” explanation of presidential nominations. Party elites, activists, and groups may divide their support among the candidates or they may remain uncommitted until the caucuses and primaries begin. When party elites, activists, and aligned groups are divided or undecided, they deprive each other, the media and rank-and-file partisans of a clear signal about which candidate should be supported. Uncertainty about which candidate will win the nomination affects the strategies and behaviors of candidates, party insiders, campaign contributors, the media, and voters in caucuses and primaries. Candidates are more evenly matched in fund-raising and the news media give multiple candidates enough coverage to become known to party activists and identifiers. Public opinion polls indicate that the leading candidate’s support reflects a plurality rather than a majority of the party’s mass membership. These nomination campaigns are comparatively open and competitive when the caucuses and primaries begin.

In this scenario, support for candidates can shift from primary to primary, and eventually one or two candidates emerge to the top while other candidates drop out of the race. Campaign momentum reflects a dynamic process in which a candidate “beats expectations” in a presidential caucus or primary and gains momentum while candidates who finish below expectations lose momentum (e.g., Aldrich 1980; Bartels 1985, 1989; Popkin 1991). Expectations are set by the political commentators, journalists and others who comment on the campaign in the media. Candidates who beat expectations in a caucus or primary usually experience a surge in fund-

raising, media exposure, and support. As the caucuses and primaries progress, there is increasing pressure on “losing” candidates to drop out of the race and help unify the party. Candidates who fail to meet expectations typically experience declining fund-raising, media exposure, and support. For candidates who lack campaign funds, this usually means that they have to drop out of the race. The willingness of candidates to drop out of the race affects the competitiveness of the campaign (Norrander 2006). Traditional candidates who hold or previously held elective office tend to drop out sooner, making it easier for the front-runner to secure the nomination. Non-traditional candidates tend to remain in the race longer to put pressure on the party to address some issue or adopt some policy.

Both of these patterns of coalition coalescence occur to some extent in every election because elites, activists, and groups vary in the extent to which they unify behind a candidate before the caucuses and primaries. Variation in when and to what extent the parties unify before the caucuses and primaries creates differences in *how nominees are selected*, even though the rules for electing delegates to the national nomination campaigns have remained largely the same since the mid-1970s. If elites, activists, and groups come to agreement on a candidate before the caucuses then the nominee is essentially selected in an “insider” game through a process of signaling and coordination among these players. If elites, activists and groups fail to unify sufficiently, then the nominee is essentially selected in an “outsider” game in which people participating in the caucuses and primaries select the nominee. The locus of power differs when nominations are determined before and during the caucuses and primaries. Party insiders and the leaders of aligned groups are the major players when a winning coalition emerges during the invisible primary. Notably, elite endorsements of candidates are a significant predictor of the nominee prior to the onset of the caucuses and primaries, but these endorsements do not have a

significant predictive effect in models of the primary vote occurring after the Iowa Caucuses and the New Hampshire primary (Steger, 2013). Rank-and-file partisan voters in the caucuses and primaries are the key players when nominations are effectively decided during the primaries.

Competition as an Indicator of Party Coalescence

The changes in the rules and procedures for selecting presidential candidates during the early 1970s moved the selection of presidential nominees from the conventions to the caucuses and primaries. The nominations of the 1970s appeared to be driven by campaign momentum in which candidates who beat expectations gained more and more favorable media coverage, increased fundraising, and increasing support in and at the polls (Aldrich 1980; Bartels 1988). During the 1980s and 1990s, however, adjustments in behavior by candidates, the media, and party leaders along with increasing coordination among party elites, activists, and groups enabled winning coalitions to form even before the caucuses and primaries (Cohen et al. 2008). *When and how* party constituencies unify in support of a presidential candidate varies across elections.

In nomination campaigns in which the political parties unite behind a candidate *before* the caucuses and primaries begin, there will be relatively less competition and fewer viable candidates during the caucuses and primaries. As one candidate gains support of insiders, activists and group leaders, there will be less potential to win for other candidates, less ability to raise money, and less ability to generate support among the party voters in caucuses and primaries. In campaigns in party constituencies divide their support or remain uncommitted until after the caucuses and primaries begin, there will be relatively more competition and more viable candidates in the caucuses and primaries, in which case campaign momentum will play a bigger role in determining which candidate will emerge as the nominee and which candidates will drop out of the race. These basic expectations can be tested.

The number of viable candidates and the level of competition in a nomination race have been measured with variants of the Hirshman-Herfindahl Index (HHI) (Steger, Hickman and Yohn, 2002). The index can be used in two ways to provide insights about elections. One, the reciprocal of the index provides a measure of the number of effective candidates that voters select among across the presidential primaries (Taagepera and Shugart 1989). To illustrate, consider the 2000 and 2008 Democratic presidential nominations. In 2000, Vice President Al Gore won 76% of the vote across all of the primaries while former Senator Bill Bradley earned 20% of the overall primary vote. The remainder of the vote reflects uncommitted, none-of-the-above, or write-in candidates each with a very small number of the vote. The 2000 race yields a race with 1.49 viable candidates, reflecting the presence of a dominant candidate and a second, weaker candidate along with some other candidates who didn't attract enough votes to matter. In 2008, the two dominant candidates were Hillary Clinton getting 48% of the vote while Barack Obama won 47.3% of the vote, with the remainder of the primary vote divided among minor candidates like John Edwards and a few others.² The 2008 race yields a score of 2.15 viable candidates, reflecting the presence of two strong candidates with a few minor candidates.

The HHI can be normalized to generate an estimate of market competition while controlling for different numbers of candidates in different election years.³ The normalized HHI is interpreted under the assumption that *low* concentration scores indicate *more* competition. Markets in which the normalized HHI is between .15 and .25 are considered to be moderately

² Although Hillary Clinton narrowly won more votes in the presidential primaries, Barack Obama won the caucuses by a large margin and also received the support of more “super delegates” which together enabled him to win the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. The movement of super-delegate support during the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries is clearly one of campaign momentum as Obama established himself as a viable alternative to Clinton in the Iowa Caucuses.

³ The formula is given by $H = \sum c_i^2$, where c_i = a candidate's share of the vote across all of the primaries and $HHI^* = (H - 1/N) / (1 - 1/N)$, where N is the total number of candidates in the race. All individual candidates receiving more than one-tenth of one-percent of the aggregate primary vote were included in the analysis. The inclusion of candidates with a fraction of a percentage point of the vote has almost no impact the resulting HHI scores, so the specific cut-off point is fairly inconsequential.

competitive and scores above .25 to indicate relatively little competition.⁴ Levels of competition in presidential nominations are rarely highly competitive (a score below .15). In two races mentioned above, the normalized HHI for the 2000 Democratic nomination race discussed above is .34, indicating limited competition. The 2008 Democratic race yields a score of .26, indicating a more competitive race than was the 2000 Democratic presidential nomination. Both races, however, reflect constrained competition.

Figure 1 shows the number of viable candidates in Democratic and Republican presidential primaries in the post-reform era (1972 to 2012). The number of viable candidates provides a number of insights about these presidential primaries. First, presidential nomination campaigns with an incumbent president seeking renomination usually have fewer viable candidates than “open” nominations—those nomination without an incumbent seeking reelection. Incumbent Presidents Nixon (1972), Reagan (1984), Clinton (1996), Bush (2004), and Obama (2012) faced no serious opposition to their renomination. Presidents Ford (1976) and Carter (1980), however, did face serious challengers to their renomination. The race between Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan in 1976 was the most competitive presidential nomination in the post-reform era (see Figure 2). These renomination challenges both involved presidents who arguably were out of step with the dominant ideological sentiment of their political party by the 1970s. Ford had the additional problem of having never been elected president or even vice president, having ascended to the office by appointment after the scandal-driven resignations of both Vice President Agnew and President Nixon.

Figure 1 about here

⁴ The Anti-Trust division of U.S. Justice Department uses the normalized HHI to determine whether a merger of corporations would excessively restrict market competition. <http://www.justice.gov/atr/public/guidelines/hhi.html>

Open nomination campaigns—those without an incumbent president seeking renomination, usually are more competitive and voters have more viable candidates to choose among during the presidential primaries. Open nominations in the post-reform era have had more viable candidates ($\mu = 2.77$) than in presidential renomination races ($\mu = 1.28$). Most open nomination campaigns are competitive compared to those races with an incumbent president seeking renomination (see Figure 2). Open nominations have had an average normalized HHI score of .27—or close to the threshold indicating a moderately competitive race. Nominations with an incumbent president have had an average normalized HHI score of .72, indicating that renomination campaigns usually have almost no competition. Only the highly atypical case of Gerald Ford seeking nomination for the first time as a sitting president was highly competitive through the caucuses and primaries.

Figure 2 about here

Beyond the distinction between open nominations and renominations, there are temporal patterns involving inter- and intra- party differences in competition in presidential primaries. The trend lines in Figure 1 indicate the basic pattern in Democratic and Republican presidential nominations. Democratic presidential nomination campaigns (the dotted line) have become less competitive with fewer viable candidates in the presidential primaries in the last decade. Republican nomination campaigns (the solid line) have become somewhat more competitive with more viable candidates seeking votes in the primaries in the last two election cycles. The Democratic nomination campaigns of 1972 and 1976 and the Republican race of 1976 were

really wide-open, competitive races with a historically high number of candidates. That wide-open character of these races declined in the 1980s for both political parties (see below).

In sum, party elites, activists and even mass identifiers responding in polls were able to coalesce to a large extent, before the caucuses and primaries in the 1972, 1980, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 Republican presidential nominations and the 1984, 1992 and 2000 Democratic nominations. The 1972, 1976, 1988, 2004, and 2008 Democratic nominations and the 1976, 2008, and 2012 Republican nominations were essentially indeterminate at the end of the invisible primary phase of the campaign. The question remains as to why political parties were able to coalesce behind a front-runner to a greater degree in some years but not others.

Party Coalitions and Opportunistic Candidates

Whether the political parties unify *before* or *during* the caucuses and primaries depends in part on: 1) the relative cohesion of the political party coalitions and 2) the candidates who enter and remain in the race. Nominations involve the interaction of party elites and activists who seek satisfaction of their preferences and priorities, and opportunistic politicians seeking to advance their own ambitions with appeals to constituencies that can form a winning coalition within the party.

The party side of the explanation requires recognition of two aspects of political party coalitions. One is that the political parties are broad coalitions of groups and constituencies in a durable but impermanent collectivity. These coalitions can and do change. The politics of presidential nominations differ between eras in which the party coalitions are in flux as occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, and eras in which the political parties are more internally unified and externally polarized as in the 1990s and 2000s. Second, there are multiple possible winning

coalitions in any broad collective of people and groups (e.g., Riker 1986). Winning presidential nominating coalitions need to be assembled or reassembled every four years.

Political parties are coalitions that evolve as the various groups and constituencies that form the membership of a political party changes (a long term effect). Party groups and constituencies also vary in how involved they are in a given presidential nomination campaign (a short-term effect). Normally, party coalitions are largely the same from election to election but there is some variation or difference from election to election in terms of the involvement or engagement of different party constituencies. It is easier to coalesce around a candidate when a political party coalition is relatively stable and unified. It is harder to hold a party coalition together when a party is changing or when a party is internally divided among factions that may not share the same policy priorities.

While political party coalitions are durable, some measure of party coalition change occurs in every presidential election (Key 1959). The political party coalitions have undergone several transformations of their membership or electoral bases as a response to cataclysmic events such as a depression; as new groups entering the electorate through generational change and immigration; and as a response to issue evolutions as party leaders seek to use issues that cut across existing party cleavages (Burnham 1970; Sundquist 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1989). Changes in the electoral bases of the political parties affect the mixture of constituencies and groups that will participate in the selection of a presidential candidate.

One reason for declining competition is that the political parties were in a period of considerable transition during the 1970s as the political parties realigned at the presidential level (e.g., Paulson 2007). The 1960s and 1970s were a period of instability in the Democratic and Republican Party coalitions as a result of the movement of electoral constituencies. These

transformations of the electoral and activist bases of the two political parties correspond to the competitiveness and outcomes of presidential nomination campaigns as noted above. The presidential nomination campaigns of both political parties in the 1970s were more open and competitive through the caucuses and primaries compared to those occurring later. The realignment of the political parties continued through the 1980s into the in 1990s for elections to lower level offices, and likely affected which groups participated in the presidential primaries of both political parties.

The nomination and election of Ronald Reagan seems to have settled or at least reduced the intraparty conflict on the Republican side. From 1980 until 2008, the Republican nominations exhibited less competition, less uncertainty, and tended to be settled before the caucuses and primaries began. This coincides with a period of greater coalitional stability in the Republican Party. While social moderate candidates sought the Republican nomination, these candidates did have much success. That the Republican nominations of 2008 and 2012 appear to be different could indicate that this peace within the within the Republican Party coalition may be coming to an end. There is a similar pattern of transition in the Democratic Party coalition although it is less clear that the Democratic Party attained the same kind of coalitional stability as the Republicans since the 1960s. The Democratic Party coalition that emerged in the 1930s during the “New Deal” of Franklin D. Roosevelt fragmented beginning in 1938 and increasingly so by the 1960s and remaining divided at least through the early 1990s (e.g., Mayer 1996).

The ease with which winning nominating coalitions form before the primaries also depends on which constituencies are motivated to participate in the selection of a presidential nominee. The mix of constituencies that participate and form a winning coalition may shift across presidential nominations. While there are many possible winning coalitions within a

broader political party coalition, some combinations of party groups and constituencies align together more readily than others. Thus we usually see more similarities than dissimilarities in the winning nominating coalitions across presidential elections of the modern era. None-the-less, party groups and constituencies also vary in their involvement in a given presidential nomination campaign in response to short-term influences.

Participation in politics is costly in terms of the time spent learning about candidates, encouraging associates to support a candidate, volunteering, contributing money, and so on which are not available for other activities. As a result, people may participate in some years but not others. A person may be motivated to participate in a presidential nomination because they care intensely about an issue. For example, many of the people who supported Howard Dean in 2003 were strongly opposed to the War in Iraq. Some of these anti-war Democrats had actively opposed the War in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s but had dropped out of activism since then. The Bush Administration's War spurred some of these "old hippies" to renewed participation. The presence of a particularly appealing candidate may spur some people to activism who might otherwise sit on the sidelines. Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008, for example, motivated young adults to participate in Democratic caucuses and primaries more than had happened in prior nomination campaigns.

The unity of political party coalitions can be altered by a changing issue environment. The emergence of new issues that cut across political party lines can divide a political party or create opportunities for a candidate to change the membership of a party. Candidates vary in their appeal on different issues and a given candidate might be a strong contender in one election but not in another. Democrats John Kerry in 2004 and Barak Obama in 2008 were aided by opposition to the Iraq war by large numbers of Democratic Party activists.

Most of the people who vote or who can be prodded to vote in a presidential caucus or primary are party activists or party identifiers who are inclined to pay attention to and accept the messaging of candidates who preach party orthodoxy. There is little question that some candidates bend to the orthodoxy of their party as they gear up for a presidential campaign—witness the conversion of Senator Ted Kennedy from a pro-life to pro-choice positions in the late 1970s or a similar conversion of Dennis Kucinich in the early 2000s. Similarly, Bob Dole (leading up to 1996) and John McCain (leading up to 2008) changed their tune on the relative primacy of tax cuts and balanced budgets. But political parties are coalitions of diverse groups and individuals with interests and preferences in a multidimensional policy space. Partisan voters with complex mixes of policy preferences can be tilted in a direction of a candidate by triggering certain latent value orientations of targeted populations by raising the salience of certain issues, emphasizing certain candidate characteristics, and framing political discourse in ways that plays to the advantage of a candidate. Candidates contribute to patterns of political party coalition formation, maintenance, and fragmentation (Herrera 1995; Karol 2009).

Participation in presidential nomination campaigns also have been changed by technological innovations in computing, communications, and the internet which continue to transform the economy, social interactions, and the culture of the country. These changes have also had profound effects on how political campaigns are conducted in the United States. Political campaign organizations have gained incredible ability to identify and communicate with potential voters in caucuses and primaries. These advances have changed who participates in presidential caucuses and primaries as a function of campaign resources and candidate appeal. Barack Obama, for example, succeeded in increasing voter participation among young people in the 2008 Iowa Caucuses, an expansion of the electorate that helped him win the state and gain

momentum going into subsequent primaries. Obama's use of the internet and social media is often credited for his campaign's success in organizing and mobilizing individual supporters in the 2008 caucus states. While Obama narrowly lost to Hillary Clinton in the total number of votes in Democratic primaries in 2008, he beat Clinton by about three to one in the caucus states, which enabled him to amass a majority of delegates to the national convention.

In sum, the coalition building process varies across elections even for a given political party. Changes in rules that expand or restrict participation can affect the kinds of people who are involved in selecting a presidential candidate and the kinds of candidates who will have a chance of winning the nomination. There also have been long-term changes in the electoral bases of both political parties, particularly in 1960s and 1970s when there were substantial changes occurring in the voter bases of both political parties. There also are changes in the coalitions of party members that actively participate in the selection of a presidential candidate in a given year. These changes relate to issue, candidates, and even campaign strategies and methods of campaigning. Thus the mix of constituencies that actively participate in the selection of a presidential candidate can change from election to election. These variations can affect the formation of a winning nominating coalition. A final, critical ingredient is the candidates who seek the presidential nomination of a political party. The political parties select a presidential nominee, but party insiders, activists, groups and identifiers choose among the candidates who seek the nomination.

Candidates are active agents in the coalition building process. Ambitious politicians who want to be president look for circumstances in which their chances for success are good, but they also try to improve their chances through innovative strategies, persuasion, and even changing their political party coalitions. The various constituencies of a party seek a champion of their

causes and candidates usually compete to be the champion of the existing constituencies. A few candidates may seek to disrupt the coalitional structure of the party to advance their own agenda or to further their own ambitions. Presidential candidates probably have greater potential to influence the formation of a new majority coalition within a political party during periods of coalitional instability and low polarization.

Every candidate brings a unique package of personal characteristics, policy positions, and ideological image to a campaign. Personal characteristics like integrity, charisma, competence, leadership, and authenticity affect citizen's preferences for candidates. Political characteristics refer to a candidate's reputation and position within the space of a political party. Political parties historically have had factions so a candidate's position within the party's membership matters. Candidates associated with a "minority" wing of the party rarely do well in presidential nominations. Policy characteristics are similar, but refer to a candidate's ideological and policy promises. Candidates for a political party nomination often adopt similar policy stances on important issues, but they differ in their priorities and credibility. Party activists and insiders want to know how strongly a candidate is committed to their issue concerns and what the candidate will do if there is a tradeoff between policies. Of course, candidates say they are committed to all of their positions, but party activists want to be sure the candidate can be trusted and can fulfill the promises being made.

Some candidates will have broader appeal among the different constituencies that make up the political parties than do other candidates. While all candidates think that they have the right stuff to be president, their self-image and policy vision may not be shared by all segments of their political party. A candidate like Ron Paul, for example, believes that the Republican Party and America more generally, would be better off if his party followed his vision of public

policy. Only a minority of Republicans, however, share that vision on important matters of public policy like defense and social issues like gay marriage. Candidates who have broader personal and policy appeal have an easier time rallying support from the major segments of the political party than do candidates who have narrower, but potentially strong appeal to certain segments of a political party. Even candidates who try to make broad appeals, like Mitt Romney, may have difficulty attracting the support of some political party constituencies that may have doubts about a candidate's personal character or their commitment to certain policy positions. People who identify with political parties, however, usually unify in support of their party's nominee even when presidential primaries are contested to the very end. Conservative Republicans may have had doubts about Mitt Romney's commitment to their principles, but they supported him in the general election when the alternative was a Democrat who they opposed.

Who runs and does not run matters in a presidential nomination campaign. While many high profile elected officials could run, most do not—even if they might want to be president. A critical factor for understanding “who runs” is recognizing that the politicians who make the strongest candidates are strategic about their willingness to run. Strategic politicians are ambitious and opportunistic. Political ambition is usually demonstrated through a career path of seeking a more prominent elected office and then using that office as a platform for rising to an even higher office (e.g., Schlesinger 1966). Strategic politicians calculate their chances of winning and they run when they have a good chance of winning. Strategic politicians may forego a run for the presidency if they don't think the window of opportunity for victory is big enough. Potential candidates tend to be dissuaded from running for president by the presence of a popular candidate in the race (Adkins, et al. forthcoming). With few exceptions, Senators and Governors tend not to run when a popular incumbent president or vice president is in the race.

If some of the popular politicians who could run decide not to run, then the one or two stronger candidates who do run have an easier time of winning the nomination. For example, Mitt Romney's campaign for the 2012 Republican nomination was made easier by the decisions of Governor Mitch Daniels (Indiana) and Governor Chris Christie (New Jersey). These governors were considered by many commentators to be strong candidates for the Republican nomination. With these politicians out of the race, it became much easier for party elites and activists to see that Mitt Romney was a potentially stronger candidate against Barack Obama than the other Republicans in the race.

Who seeks (and does not seek) the nomination has major consequences for the competitiveness of the race, the outcome of the campaign, and the ideological direction of a political party. Who decides to run (or not run) affects the decisions of other potential candidates and how the field of candidates shapes up. Candidates vary in their appeal to party constituencies on the basis of their personal character (e.g., charisma, competency, integrity, and leadership) as well as issue or policy positions. Some candidates more readily appeal to the various segments of a political party's membership compared to others. The absence of a candidate who has known appeal with the various constituencies of a political party makes it more difficult for party insiders and activists to come together in support of a given candidate.

There are differences in campaign dynamics and outcomes for different kinds of candidate fields (Butler 2004; Keech and Matthews 1976). In particular, the race-entry decision of the early favorite—the candidate leading in national preference polls two years prior to the primaries—affects PNCs in several ways. First, a decision to run by the early favorite may affect the decisions of others considering a run. If by running, the early favorite deters just one or two potentially strong candidates, then the early favorite is left competing against weaker candidates

who were willing to take the chance that the early favorite stumbles. A decision not to run by the early favorite opens up the race for other candidates, making the race more competitive with more evenly matched candidates going into the primaries.

Second, early favorites tend to gain the resources, exposure and support needed to run strong campaigns. As Keech and Matthews (1976, 53) put it, “anticipations of victory stimulate a flow of publicity, money, experienced staff and other resources toward the probable winner.” For example, going into the 2000 Republican nomination, candidates like Senator Lamar Alexander were unable to raise much money. Most of the big fundraisers and donors in the Republican Party were holding their contributions until George W. Bush entered the race. Without an early favorite in the race, money and media coverage distribute more widely among the candidates.

Third, early favorites tend to do well because they are relatively well known and have established images, which give them two advantages. Well known candidates need fewer resources to establish themselves among voters which enables them to conserve resources for the primary season. Their support also tends to be stable compared to lesser known candidates. There is remarkable stability in polls from the first quarter of the year prior to the primaries through January of the election year for presidential nomination campaigns in which the early favorite is a candidate (Dowdle, Adkins and Steger 2009). From the perspective of party insiders and activists, the presence in the race of the early favorite reduces uncertainty. An early favorite is generally known to the party membership and has an established image, which enables elites to estimate whether that candidate will play well with their constituents. Without an early favorite in the race, there is greater uncertainty about which candidates will be viable contenders for the nomination and how well each candidate will play with constituents in the general

election. In this more uncertain environment, party elites have less incentive to endorse early and they are more likely to divide their support among several candidates.

In nomination campaigns that have a strong candidate who can attract broad support among party members, the nomination is usually determined before the caucuses and primaries begin and voting in these elections can be viewed as a ratification of decisions made informally during the prior year. The 1980, 1988, 1996, and 2000 Republican nominations and the 1984 and 2000 Democratic nominations illustrate these kinds of races. In each of these cases the front-runner who attracted widespread support in the year leading up to the primaries had been a well-known politician with a prestigious position and who had polled better than any other potential candidate three years out. When this candidate ran, it was fairly straightforward for party elites and activists, campaign contributors, and the media to figure out which candidate would be the front-runner going into the caucuses and primaries. When party insiders, activists and groups rally around one candidate during the invisible primary, that candidate can emerge with an insurmountable lead even before the caucuses and primaries begin.

Party insiders, activists, and groups have a harder time figuring out which candidate will be the most viable, electable, and preferable when either the “apparent” front-runner does not run or when more than one strong candidates enter the race. In nomination campaigns without a strong candidate, or when a political party is highly divided, there is usually no candidate who enters the caucuses and primaries as a clear front-runner. The 1972, 1976, 1988, 1992, and 2004 Democratic nominations and the 2008 and 2012 Republican nomination campaigns illustrate this kind of race (Adkins et al, forthcoming).

Beyond deciding to enter or sit out the race, opportunistic candidates can affect who participates in the Democratic and Republican nominations. Politicians who are ambitious and

opportunistic try to gain the support of individuals and groups who can help advance their cause. Candidates who are not associated with the more mainstream or “establishment” faction of the Democratic and Republican Parties could increase their chances of success in the reformed nomination systems by bringing into the party or by activating those individuals and groups who were not participating previously. Thus whether party activists are veterans or newcomers to the process, support for particular candidates plays in an important role in shaping the parties’ aggregate ideological orientation (Herrera 1995).

Candidates appeal to policy seeking activists to expand their own base of support within the party in order to improve their chances of getting nominated. Short of having a realistic chance of getting nominated, candidates might appeal to activists as a means of self-promotion—to establish themselves as a voice of a cause. Both goals may lead candidates to appeal to and try to mobilize specific constituency groups in their political party.

Candidates themselves may seek to promote a broader ideological vision of public policy. Ronald Reagan was particularly bold in seizing on issues like abortion, gun control, and crime to expand the appeal of the Republican ticket among white evangelical Christians. Reagan was ahead of the Republican Party in this regard, working with representatives of the Moral Majority, a group founded by Reverend Jerry Falwell in 1976, to bring white evangelical Christian activists into the Republican Party through the 1980 nomination campaign. Candidate efforts to redefine their political party and draw in new voters are not limited to Republicans. Presidential candidates like George McGovern, Ted Kennedy, and Jesse Jackson attracted liberals to the Democratic Party. The liberal activists of the 1970s were associated with liberal social movements on issues with civil rights and civil liberties dimensions. Presidential candidates thus

became the vehicle by which the Democratic Party became distinctly more liberal on social issues while the Republican Party became the party of social conservatives.

Policy activists are drawn to candidates who promise to champion their causes. By opening presidential nominations with primaries and caucuses open to party activists, the political parties provided a vehicle by which issue activists enter the party organization—through the candidate’s campaign organization (Herrera 1995, 293). Presidential candidates Ronald Reagan (1980) and Pat Robertson (1988) brought social conservatives into the Republican Party networks. Although he did not have a realistic chance of winning the Republican presidential nomination in 1988, Pat Robertson’s presidential nomination campaign was at least in part motivated by a desire to expand the voice of Evangelical Christians in the Republican Party. Once integrated into political party networks, these party activists demand that candidates adhere to positions. Thus by 1996, prominent Republican presidential aspirants like California Governor Pete Wilson could no longer campaign for the Republican nomination and have a realistic chance of winning the nomination.

In sum, the strongest politicians who might run for the presidency are those in high prestige public offices, who have national name-recognition and support in public opinion polls taken years before the caucuses and primaries. These politicians tend to be strategic and opportunistic. They try to figure out their chances of winning and they are more willing to enter the campaign if they estimate that they have a good chance of winning the nomination and general election. The decision of these candidates to enter the race or to remain on the sidelines has considerable effect on the competitiveness of a presidential nomination campaign. Other strategic politicians may be deterred from running in a presidential nomination campaign that has as a candidate a particularly popular politician. That makes it relatively easy for party insiders

and activists to figure out who they should support for the nomination. This scenario tends to have party elites endorsing one candidate disproportionately more than other candidates and the “anointed” front-runner receives a disproportionate share of media coverage, fund-raising, and support in public opinion polls of party identifiers. That is, the party insiders and activists decide who should be the nominee during the invisible primary, but they choose among the candidates in the race. When the early front-runner is one of the candidates, then the various constituencies of the political party unify or coalesce around the front-runner.

Candidates thus play a critical role in presidential nominations campaigns as active participants in the coalition-building process. Political parties are broad coalitions and who actively participates in the presidential nomination campaign varies somewhat in each election year. Candidates have the potential to influence the constituencies and policies of their political party by affecting who participates in the selection of the presidential campaign. They seek to build a winning coalition within their political party to secure the nomination.

Conclusions

The appeal of a candidate is in the eye of the beholder. What makes a candidate appealing depends heavily on the values, interests, beliefs, and preferences of the people who evaluate the candidates. Participants select among candidates who have their own unique set of personal, political, and policy characteristics. Personal characteristics like integrity, charisma, competence, leadership, and authenticity affect citizen’s preferences for candidates. Political characteristics refer to a candidate’s reputation and position within the space of a political party. Political parties historically have had factions so a candidate’s position within the party’s membership matters. Candidates associated with a “minority” wing of the party rarely do well in presidential nominations. Policy characteristics are similar, but refer to a candidate’s ideological

and policy promises. Candidates for a political party nomination often adopt similar policy stances on important issues, but they differ in their priorities and credibility. Party activists and insiders want to know the strength of a candidate's commitment to their issue concerns and what the candidate will do if they face tradeoffs between policies. Of course, candidates say they are committed to all of their positions, but party activists want to be sure the candidate can be trusted to fulfill the promises being made.

The people who participate in presidential nominations are mainly party activists who have strong preferences for policy. Candidates promise to deliver those policies. A candidate's personal characteristics give voters clues about a candidate's ability to deliver on those promises should he or she be elected. A candidate's friends within a political party's constellation of factions and interests provide additional information about a candidate's ability and credibility to deliver on promises. Finally, the campaign itself matters. Candidates today have at their disposal—if they can raise the money to afford it, a wide range of marketing tools and techniques that can be used to maximize their appeal to voters. Voters' preferences for candidates can be manipulated to some extent by campaign appeals that, for example, tap into voters' feelings of patriotism, family, etc., or emphasize certain values by priming voters to think about a topic like abortion rather than civil rights.

When and how presidential nominees are selected tells us about power and democracy in society. Having more people involved in the selection of presidential nominees is consistent with the republican principle of democracy, which holds that power should derive from people directly or indirectly. Within the context of the partisan electorate, presidential nominations can be said to be less democratic as party insiders exert more influence over the selection of the nominees, and more democratic as the choice depends on the decisions of caucus and primary

voters. In one vein of democratic theory, it is competition among political organizations and leaders that provides people with the opportunity to make meaningful choices in elections (e.g., Schattscheider, 1960; Schumpeter 1942). The early coalescence of party elites, activists, and groups in support of a front-runner reduces the effective competition among candidates during the caucuses and primaries (Steger, Hickman and Yohn 2002). In a nomination campaign with early coalescence behind a candidate, primary and caucus voters basically have a plebiscitary vote of confidence (or no confidence) of the candidate preferred by party elites, activists, groups and campaign contributors. If party elites, activists, groups and campaign contributors remain undecided or divide their support among different candidates, however, then caucus and primary voters become the arbiters of the nomination competition. Presidential nomination campaigns can be considered more democratic when caucus and primary voters are able to exert more power over the selection of the eventual nominee—that is, when there is more than one serious candidate to choose among.

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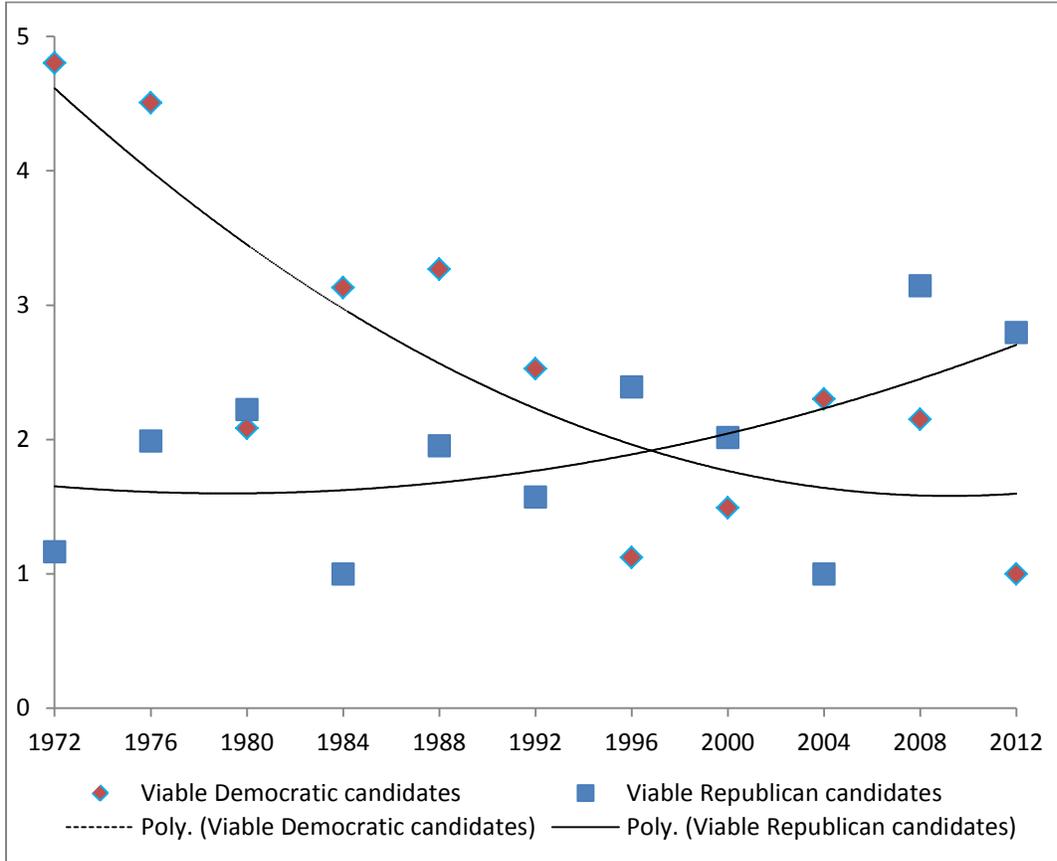
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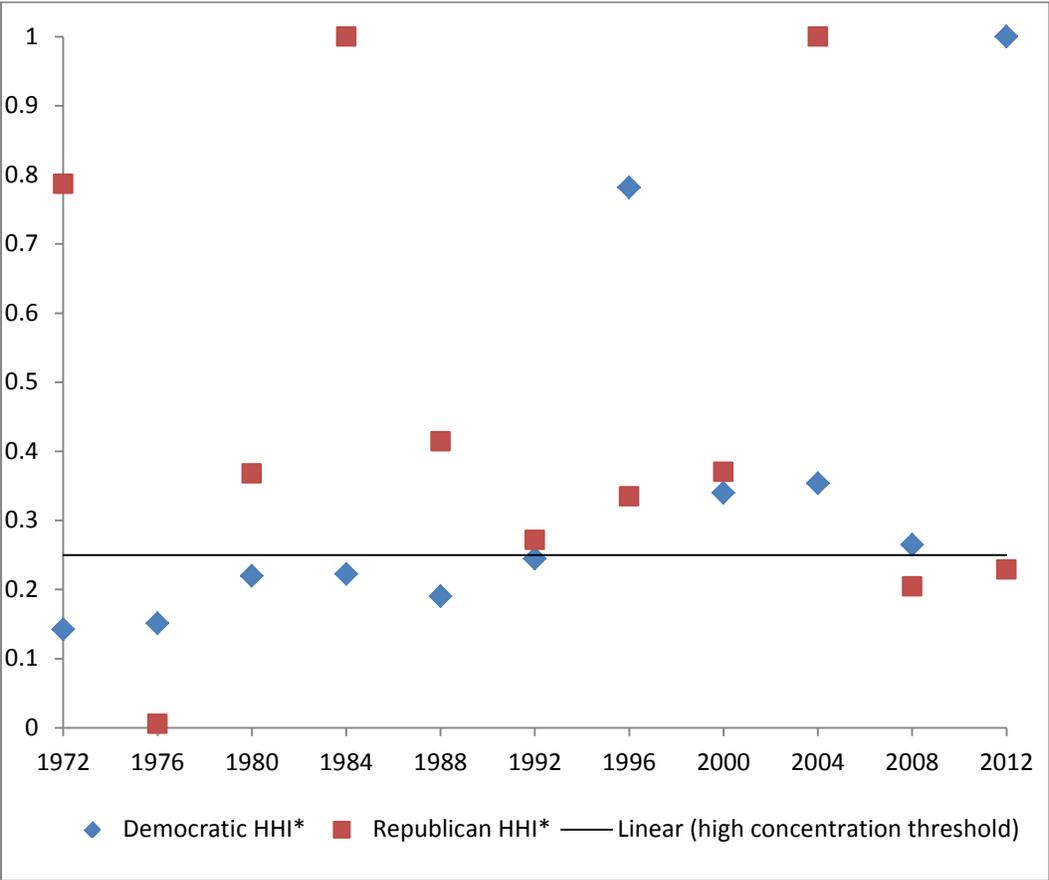
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Figure 1: Number of Viable Candidates in Presidential Primaries, 1972 to 2012



Source: author's calculations using the Hirshman Index of market share

Figure 2: Competition in Democratic and Republican Presidential Primaries, 1972 to 2012



Source: author’s calculations using a normalized Hirshman-Herfindahl Index of candidate shares of the vote in presidential primaries.