



The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform

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Throughout the contest for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, politicians and voters alike worried that the outcome might depend on the preferences of unelected superdelegates. This concern threw into relief the prevailing notion that—such unusually competitive cases notwithstanding—people, rather than parties, should and do control presidential nominations. But for the past several decades, *The Party Decides* shows, unelected insiders in both major parties have effectively selected candidates long before citizens reached the ballot box.

Tracing the evolution of presidential nominations since the 1790s, this volume demonstrates how party insiders have sought since America's founding to control nominations as a means of getting what they want from government. Contrary to the common view that the party reforms of the 1970s gave voters more power, the authors contend that the most consequential contests remain the candidates' fights for prominent endorsements and the support of various interest groups and state party leaders. These invisible primaries produce frontrunners long before most voters start paying attention, profoundly influencing final election outcomes and investing parties with far more nominating power than is generally recognized.

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Nate Huston says

LOVED the theory. DID NOT LOVE the research. Cohen, et al are on to something with their thoughts regarding the strength of today's American political party. I'm especially intrigued with the inclusion of interest groups in the mix, a group that many leave out of their definition. While I can see the argument for either, I think their inclusion here is very useful.

The research, both qualitative and quantitative, left me unsatisfied. As in Aldrich, I could have done without the "testing" against the origin story altogether. As for the focus on more recent periods, the evidence is simply lacking. With that said, the authors acknowledge this (almost ad nauseum), so points there. I just wish I could have something more solid to stand on.

Overall, enjoyable and thought-provoking. Straightforward and easy to understand.

Alex Whalen says

One of the single-most important books ever written on political parties in the United States. If you want to understand why so many political scientists before have gone wrong in their study of parties, read this. If you want to understand how parties operate in modern American democracy, read this. If you want to understand how network science is beginning to transform political science, read this. Seriously, just read this.

Colin says

The argument - heavily caveated throughout given the authors' concern over the weakness of their data on internal party working - is that political parties are networks comprised of "intense policy demanders", politically engaged individuals and groups with varying preferences, who all get a say in choosing nominees for elected office.

These individuals may not be officeholders or even formal party members, but collectively they form the broader "party" organization. (Other studies define the party much more narrowly. A post-Citizens United version of this book would, I imagine, have quite a bit more on the constellation of PACs and 501c4s that now shadow the formal party organization.)

Their goal is to support a candidate who "they can trust to advance their interests and agendas, who is acceptable to other members of the party coalition, and who can be elected in a general election." (Control over nominees is critical since policymaking decisions are delegated to elected representatives.)

The authors argue that contrary to other accounts suggesting a weakening of organized party control over nominee choices since the introduction of primary elections and other reforms in the early 1970s (replacing convention systems where an oligarchy of regional bosses negotiated a nominee with primaries open to all voters) these party insiders continue to have the biggest impact in choosing a nominee, both in the "invisible

primary" to narrow the field and in actual primaries and caucus voting. The makeup of exactly who constitutes this influential base of insiders and activists has changed, however, in some cases due to changes in communications technology and in some cases due to new cleavages within the policy coalitions. (The book, unfortunately, predates the Tea Party.)

Insider choices are primarily signaled (and measured here) through endorsements, with endorsements from party factions a candidate does not belong to being some of the most significant, as a means of demonstrating broad acceptability within the party coalition. Even popular candidates who bring their own wealth, media coverage, dedicated activist base, or public opinion polling are not likely to secure the nomination if they lack sufficient endorsement from the insider base.

The most generalizable takeaways (and the most interesting for me) here relate to how fairly non-centralized organizations (such as American political parties) coordinate to make decisions. While a hierarchical party led by a single boss might be better able to allocate resources and apply a strategy for selecting a winning candidate, in practice securing the nomination and winning the election to the US presidency requires such a broad range of local-level organizing that it's effectively impossible to do so as a single candidate. Local networks led by the intense policy demanders must be tapped instead; winning their support again requires a combination of fealty to group interests, ability to unite factions, and credibility as a candidate with broad appeal. With pre-reform closed nominating conventions now a thing of the past, endorsement signals from other members of the coalition are apparently the main way in which consensus is reached.

There's more food for thought in here that I think could be applied to other large networked organizations, even ones that appear to be more hierarchical, but by and large this study does not aim to be comparative outside of American political science. This would probably be more highly rated if I was more familiar with the field - 3.5 stars is more accurate.

Erik K says

An excellent challenge to the conventional wisdom (as least as I was taught in college) about how presidential nominations are decided.

In short, the authors argue that rather than being driven by voters, presidential nomination contests are shaped by party actors: highly motivated partisans who include partisan media personalities, fundraisers, elected politicians, and activists in outside issue groups.

These party actors engage in a loosely coordinated negotiating and sorting process before the first primaries take place, eventually coalescing behind the candidate who best represents the various interests the party cares about. Voters tune in late in this invisible primary, taking cues from the sorting process. Rather than pay attention to polling bubbles driven by media coverage (Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich both enjoyed such bubbles despite never being serious contenders), one should pay attention to who these party actors are, and are not, supporting.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure party actor support objectively and the authors are forced to rely on

counting endorsements by elected officials and gauging how partisan media treat the various candidates in the races they study. But their theory provides a much more convincing explanation of how nomination contests are decided than the personality-driven, poll-chasing formula most political journalism follows. Parties are creatures of their most highly-motivated members and Cohen and his colleagues provide a serious, reliable framework for thinking about how parties choose presidential nominees.

UPDATE 2016: Donald Trump's nomination obviously does not look like the "party decides" theory in action, having completely bypassed the supposed gatekeepers. But Hillary Clinton's nomination looks exactly like it. The authors are working on a new version. The snark they've gotten is way overblown. They're social scientists. It's always a work in progress.
