

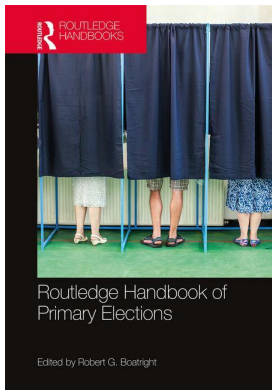
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 23 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections

Robert G. Boatright

**2016**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-20>

Marty Cohen

**Published online on: 26 Feb 2018**

**How to cite :-** Marty Cohen. 26 Feb 2018, *2016 from: Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections*  
Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-20>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

15

2016

## One Party Decided

*Marty Cohen*

The presidential election of 2016 might have made a good sequel to the harrowing film *Sophie's Choice*, since both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had higher unfavorable ratings than any candidate since the beginning of polling on the subject. For the first half of the year, Secretary Clinton was being investigated by the Justice Department and the FBI for setting up her own email server during her tenure as head of the State Department. Donald Trump combined racist and ethnocentric rhetoric with a habit of not telling the truth and absolutely no governing experience. Yet both of these candidates were able to win their party's nomination despite all of their flaws and misfortunes.

Both Clinton and Trump received a majority of convention delegates, but their paths to that ultimate victory could not have been more different. Clinton, the Democratic nominee, was from the beginning the almost unanimous choice of party elites and began the race in such a position of strength that her main competition was a septuagenarian, self-avowed Democratic Socialist who for most of his political career had not even been registered as a Democrat. Trump, the Republican nominee, on the other hand, had virtually no elite support during the invisible primary period but benefited from a field of 17 in which nobody came close to marshalling the lion's share of establishment support. In the battle for control of presidential nominations between party elites and voters, between forces of unity and factional tendency, the Democratic and Republican races of 2016 produced two wildly different outcomes. In 2016, one party clearly decided and the other party clearly did not. Why was the Republican establishment bulldozed by Trump and his movement? Why were they and their preferred candidates impotent in the face of Trump's boasts and taunts? In attempting to answer these questions, I will present an argument which seeks to explain how two nomination campaigns can turn out so differently regarding how well the party was able to control things.

In 2008, three of my colleagues and I wrote *The Party Decides*, a study of the "invisible primary," the process by which party elites agree upon a nominee before the presidential primaries have concluded. In a recent publication (Cohen et al. 2016), we revisited presidential nominations after a series of relatively wild contests that were not included in the featured analysis of the original work. The unorthodox triumph of Donald Trump, which was a broadside against the book's fundamental theoretical premises, was the precipitating cause of this second look, but in reality something had been going on since 2000 when party insiders George W. Bush and Al Gore cruised to their party's nominations. When looked at in hindsight, presidential

nominations since the McGovern-Fraser reforms have sometimes been captured by factional outsiders and other times by unifying, establishment favorites. More specifically, the early period (1972–1976) and the later period (2004–2016) were notable for the successes and near-misses of the former while the middle period (1980–2000) was characterized almost exclusively by fairly easy wins by the latter. We have attributed the loss of control in the early phase to a learning period in which the party had not yet mastered the post-reform system. Their ability to utilize the invisible primary to coordinate around a broadly acceptable choice and then marshal resources to help them win the nomination created the middle period mentioned above. What remains to be discussed here is how factions reasserted themselves and kept the party from deciding as easily as it had in the past. We argue that major trends over the past two decades – the rise of new political media, the flood of early money into presidential nominations, and the conflict among party factions – have made it easier for factional candidates and outsiders to challenge elite control of nominations (Cohen et al. 2016, 701).

The explosion of political communication in recent cycles has all but eliminated the invisibility of the “invisible primary.” This invisibility was important because it gave a relatively small group of party officials and group leaders a near monopoly over the early politics of presidential nominations, a monopoly they exercised for the benefit of party unity. Now we see cable news, blogs, and digital mainstream websites provide potential voters with a bonanza of “inside baseball” political news. Editors will give more coverage to the candidates who get the most clicks and page-views enabling ordinary citizens to become real-time players in nominee selection through their influence over who gets covered. In addition to the increase in coverage from traditional news media and the emergence of new media sources, there has been a significant increase in the number of debates between the candidates. Again, the public is treated to a public battle among the candidates that simply was not visible years earlier. The result has been the death of the invisible primary, and with it, the freedom of party elites to converse among themselves without the country-at-large having an influence (Cohen et al. 2016, 703–704). This development was right in Donald Trump’s wheelhouse as he made the most of the increased coverage to create what appeared to be a mass movement without the normal trappings of a presidential nominating campaign.

The increased availability of early money has also impacted the nominating process in such a way as to hinder the ability of party elites to control the process. While having lots of money during the invisible primary is no guarantee of success, it is necessary to build an operation capable of sustaining a candidate throughout the pre-Iowa period, not to mention through the grueling series of primaries and caucuses that allocate convention delegates. The loosening of campaign finance laws has enabled more candidates to find that small cadre of big donors to keep their candidacies afloat without the support of traditional party leaders. And even those without access to big donors can exploit internet fundraising opportunities to compete in the money primary as well. In the past, elite endorsements would often come with important resources, not least of which was money. In this way, party leaders acted as gatekeepers, keeping the field manageable and freezing out unwanted candidates. Those days seem to be gone as evidenced by the bloated 2016 Republican field – bloated in terms of the number of candidates, and in terms of the amounts of cash they raised (Cohen et al. 2016, 704–705). The large field worked in Trump’s favor as the establishment “lane” was crowded, and those candidates vying for elite support split that support throughout the invisible primary and even after the voters started going to the polls.

The state of factional harmony within parties also varies over time, and certainly within the Republican Party it appears to have deteriorated greatly in recent cycles. When a party is divided by strong factions, it follows that it will be more difficult for elites to settle on a unity

candidate early on in the process. The rise of social conservatives in the 1990s and the Tea Party after Barack Obama's election in 2008 have roiled the GOP and resulted in a civil war that has claimed many congressional incumbents and former Speaker of the House John Boehner in recent years (Cohen et al. 2016, 703). Trump's outsider status was a boon to his chances and people seemed to like and support him precisely because he had no experience and precious few ties to the Republican establishment. The Democrats have their own factional strife, as evidenced most clearly by Bernie Sanders' insurgent candidacy, but the current minority party appears to be more unified in opposition to President Trump than the majority GOP.

Donald Trump's nomination in 2016 was a shock to pundits, political scientists, and the American public. Very few individuals in any of the above categories thought it possible that he would end up victorious and go on to represent the GOP in the general election. I have laid out three systemic reasons why Trump was able to succeed when so many predicted he would fail. Before analyzing both the Democratic and Republican races in depth, I will chronicle the history of presidential nominations with an emphasis on the post McGovern-Fraser period highlighted in our book *The Party Decides*.

### A History of Presidential Nominations

Every year toward the end of October, millions of Americans shop for Halloween costumes. In the rubber mask aisle, there are the usual ghouls and goblins, Elvises and Frankensteins, witches and wizards. Every fourth year, in addition to those potential disguises, the major party nominees have their masks on the same shelves, considering Election Day is less than a week after Halloween. Al Gore and George W. Bush, the contenders for the presidency in 2000, were especially popular choices. However, you could get a Gore or Bush mask in October of 1999, a full year before the eve of the general election and months before a single vote had been cast for either party's potential nominees. Yet there they were: Bush and Gore, as if they had already clinched their party's nomination and were pitted against each other to become the 43rd president of the United States.

This was a strange phenomenon, and it was one that flew in the face of the conventional wisdom regarding presidential nominations. After all, since the reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s it was widely understood that to win nomination, candidates had to compete and succeed in a series of state-by-state primaries and caucuses that would allocate convention delegates. But sure enough, there were those masks well before Iowa and New Hampshire had commenced, let alone before the rest of the nation's primary and caucus voters had had their say.

Bush and Gore were the prohibitive favorites because they had dominated the invisible primary, leading by large margins on important measures of support such as endorsements, poll standing, money, and media coverage. Vice-President Gore was pushed in New Hampshire by Senator Bill Bradley, but Gore ended up winning every single primary and caucus that cycle. And Senator John McCain did defeat President George W. Bush in New Hampshire. But once Bush won in South Carolina, the nomination was thereafter never really in doubt. So something had changed by 2000, but what exactly?

The historical arc of presidential nominations has bent toward greater democratization. In the early decades of the Republic, congressional caucuses were convened to nominate presidential candidates. Members of Congress alone decided who would represent the parties on the general election ballot. In 1831, the Anti-Masonic Party held the first presidential nominating convention and the Democratic Party followed suit a year later. This was an opportunity to expand the universe of individuals who would decide on the party's standard-bearer. Conventions brought together political leaders and at least some rank-and-file voters so they

all could come to an agreement regarding who might best unite the party and win the White House. For almost a century and a half, this was how things worked. Presidential primaries became a part of the process starting in 1912 but they were mere “eyewash” as Harry Truman put it decades later. They were tests of a candidate’s strength in the electorate that might help the elites discern the contenders’ vote-getting ability, but no more than that. In 1968, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey could gain the Democratic nomination for president without actively competing in any of the primaries held that spring. Of course, the calamity that was the 1968 Democratic National Convention shone a bright and harsh light on the elitist nature of presidential nominations. Actual voters were given very little say in who would be on the November ballot and the time had come once again for wider participation in the process. Subsequently, the Democratic Party created the McGovern-Fraser Commission, which sought to give rank-and-file party voters more of a say in the nomination process. The end result of the commission’s recommendations was that both parties in most states adopted “binding” primaries forcing candidates to compete for convention delegates that would be allocated on the basis of the primary results.

Taking the ultimate decision-making power out of the hands of party elites and empowering ordinary voters drastically changed the dynamic of presidential nominating politics throwing the old order out of the window. George McGovern and Jimmy Carter both came out of nowhere to get the Democratic nomination in the first two open contests under the new regime.<sup>1</sup> These two Democrats capitalized on the novel dynamic and mobilized a plurality of voters turning them into a majority of delegates. This new volatility was noted by the discipline and a conventional wisdom began to take hold that was a mixture of Nelson Polsby and Larry Bartels. The former (Polsby 1983) argued that factional candidates only need appeal to and mobilize a plurality of partisans in the various state primaries and caucuses to be victorious. The latter (Bartels 1988) zeroed in on riding media-driven momentum gained from surprising early victories in either Iowa or New Hampshire to the nomination. Polsby published in 1983, Bartels in 1988 and both were understandably influenced by the wild and woolly contests of the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> But in October of 1999, one looked back and saw a much more orderly process in hindsight. And one noticed in particular that those who pulled off surprise victories early on in the season (George H. W. Bush in 1980, Gary Hart in 1984, Paul Tsongas in 1992, and Pat Buchanan in 1996) ultimately were defeated by candidates who seemed to have much broader support within the party. So, what had happened in the years since “Jimmy Who?” shocked the political world by riding 27 percent in Iowa, and 28 percent in New Hampshire to the top of the pack and all the way to the White House?

This is the question that motivated *The Party Decides* (Cohen et al. 2008). We argue in the book that parties had temporarily lost control over their nominating process, and that the results in 1972 and 1976 were two candidates on the Democratic side that would never have gotten the party elites behind them under the old convention system. In some ways, the voters made inferior choices, as McGovern was trounced by Nixon and Carter had enormous difficulty governing because he did not possess the party connections many of his Oval Office predecessors did. So it was clear as the 1980s began that parties could not control their nominations as they had done in the pre-McGovern-Fraser era. But when one starts to observe the nominations of the 1980s, then the 1990s, and 2000, a pattern emerges and the nomination cycles during that period in fact look relatively orderly. In each contest from 1980 to 2000, a clear frontrunner emerged early on in the process. In fact, if one studies the invisible primary, the year before voting begins (which we think is essential to understanding what happens *after* the voting begins), one can make the argument that party elites were trying to coordinate behind a broadly acceptable candidate much as they used to do during the convention. Through the use of public

endorsements, party leaders were attempting to have that conversation among themselves about who would be the best representative of the party and who would be the best choice to take on the opposing party in the fall. This coordination process or conversation could not happen at the convention in the smoke-filled rooms anymore. It had to happen earlier and crucially before the voters had their say because the voters had proved to be unpredictable and less than savvy in their few chances picking nominees post-McGovern-Fraser. Moreover, party leaders came to realize they could actually make it easier for their chosen candidate to be successful in the delegate chasing process. Endorsements could be quite valuable for candidates vying to be their party's nominee. Endorsements, we believe, are not only a show of public support, but a promise of private support that can take the form of money and other campaign resources that help a candidate collect votes. Endorsements also can be a cue to voters about who is acceptable and an imprimatur of respectability and gravitas depending on who is doing the endorsing. Of course, not all endorsements are created equal. Colin Powell's endorsement of Barack Obama in 2008 is on one end of the spectrum, and perhaps Britney Spears' endorsement (and then apparent retraction of said endorsement) of Hillary Clinton in 2016 would be on the other end in terms of helpfulness.<sup>3</sup>

We began to study the invisible primary in a systematic fashion. We believed endorsements were the best measure of party support and went about searching for and collecting them – who endorsed whom, when did they endorse, how much might different endorsements be worth. We found that from 1980 to 2000, the pre-Iowa leader in endorsements became the eventual nominee every time. And with one exception (the 1988 Democratic primary), there was a clear endorsement leader. There could, of course, be a spurious relationship between endorsements and electoral success, and there are other potential predictors that might be correlated with both our chosen independent variable (endorsements) and our dependent variable (delegates won). Money, poll standing, and media coverage are also potential predictors of success. When all four are included in a multiple regression, endorsements show the most robust effects. Even more noteworthy, early endorsements are a predictor itself of later poll standing, money raised, and media coverage rather than the other way around. So, it is not just party leaders bandwagoning to who the donors, voters, or reporters think is the best candidate. The money, public support and media coverage seem to follow the choice of party elites measured in the form of endorsements.

We believe that the period from 1980 to 2000 was very orderly, and we believe that we have captured that dynamic fairly well. But after 2000, things got a little trickier. The 2004 Democratic contest was not as methodical. The eventual nominee, John Kerry, had only the third-most endorsements pre-Iowa, and just as importantly only three Democratic governors had endorsed someone during the invisible primary, with two of those being favorite son endorsements for Richard Gephardt from the Governor of Missouri and for John Edwards from the Governor of North Carolina. In 2008, neither the Democratic or Republican contest appeared to conform to the pattern so dominant from 1980 to 2000. Barack Obama was a distant third in endorsements, and Senator John McCain was locked in a three-way duel for endorsement leader with former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. We did uncover a story regarding some leaders holding back their support on the Democratic side, wanting to support Obama but afraid to do so prematurely and inviting backlash from the Clintons. Nonetheless, Clinton was the establishment favorite – not to the extent that she was in 2016, but still the favorite – and she lost. McCain benefited from a fractured field to his right and won the nomination, but the party really did not decide for him pre-Iowa. So in retrospect, 2008 was also not so good for the theory. But then in 2012 Romney, the clear establishment choice, fought off a series of challengers who benefited from

intense media coverage and rose in the polls to each briefly take the lead away from the former governor of Massachusetts. At various times Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Rick Perry, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum led in the polls. But one by one, Romney parried their charges and ultimately prevailed. He may not have been the best candidate, but establishment support buttressed his campaign and he got the nomination in the end. An optimistic reading of the four contests from 2004 to 2012 would give our theory credit for one, and only partial credit for the other three.

That brings us to 2016. This would be one of those cycles, like 2008, 2000, and 1988 before it when both parties would hold open nomination contests for the presidency of the United States. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the Democratic and Republican races in light of, and with an eye toward, *The Party Decides*.

### The Democrats: Hillary's to Lose

When beginning to analyze the 2016 Democratic nomination contest one should go back almost eight years, to June 7, 2008. On that date, Hillary Rodham Clinton eloquently and poignantly recognized the 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling that resulted from her strong but ultimately unsuccessful bid for the presidency. That powerful imagery, combined with her full-throated endorsement of Barack Obama, kept herself in the good graces of party elites yearning for unity after a tough primary battle. It also assured that if she wanted to try again, they would be there for her to make a different kind of history in the future. And so it was on April 12th, 2015 when Clinton officially declared her candidacy, she immediately became the overwhelming favorite to win the Democratic nomination and be the first woman to head a major party's presidential ticket.

Why was Clinton such a prohibitive favorite right from the start of her campaign? First of all, she was the runaway leader in the polls. In a CNN poll taken the week after her announcement she garnered 69 percent, which was miles ahead of her closest challenger, Vice-President Joe Biden (11 percent), a man who had not given the slightest inkling at the time that he was interested in the top job. Bernie Sanders, who would go on to be Clinton's strongest challenger was polling third with five percent. This polling dominance reflects a second factor leading to Clinton's frontrunner status and that is the lack of high-profile competition. In addition to Sanders, a Democratic Socialist Senator from Vermont, there was only the former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, former one-term Virginia Senator Jim Webb, and former *Republican* Senator Lincoln Chafee. In terms of prestige and star power, the field running against Hillary was pretty thin.<sup>4</sup> And finally, not only did Hillary Clinton have the support of rank-and-file Democrats early on in the race, but she had already demonstrated strong support from political elites within the party. In fact, before she entered the race on April 12, she had received more weighted endorsements than anyone else would get *over the course of the entire contest*. Charles Schumer, the senior senator from New York, endorsed Clinton as early as November of 2013 and many of Schumer's fellow members of Congress followed suit in the months prior to her official campaign kick-off.

In *The Party Decides* we identify four invisible primary fundamentals that have the ability to predict how well a candidate will do in the actual primaries and caucuses that determine who gets the nomination. These fundamentals are polls, money, media coverage, and endorsements. As stated earlier, we believe endorsements are the strongest predictor both in terms of overall final delegate shares but also as the driving force behind changes in some of the other fundamentals throughout the invisible primary season. In the next section, I will analyze the 2016 Democratic race in terms of these four fundamentals.

Clinton’s commanding lead in the polls when she declared her candidacy was bound to shrink as the campaign began in earnest. With Biden remaining on the sidelines her main competitor in the polls became Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders began to tap into the anti-Clinton feeling within the party, especially among young voters. He captivated them with his call for more government services to reduce income and wealth inequality. He also got to Clinton’s left on trade and other economic issues. The only issue where he ceded the more progressive stance was on gun control due to his longtime representation of a rural, gun-friendly state. Figure 15.1 shows the polling trend, based on monthly CNN polls from April 2015 until January 2016. Clinton’s lead over Sanders at the beginning of her campaign was a whopping 64 points. In each of the next five months, that lead would shrink with the September poll showing only a 10-point lead for the seemingly unbeatable frontrunner. That difference would balloon to 28 points in December but on the eve of the Iowa caucuses it was Clinton over Sanders by only 52–38. There were several reasons why Sanders was able to close so much ground on Clinton during the invisible primary. First, Clinton’s return to the campaign trail shone new light on some old controversies, like her use of a private server while Secretary of State, the terrorist attack in Benghazi that also occurred during her tenure at the State Department, and the lucrative speeches she gave on Wall Street. Second, Sanders benefited from being the only legitimate challenger to Clinton in the race. Therefore, he sopped up virtually all of the anti-Clinton people that existed in the party. Another look at Figure 15.1 shows the anemic numbers of O’Malley, Webb, and Chafee. Finally, Sanders was able to create a strong grassroots movement that was powered mostly by young newcomers to the political process. He also appealed to the progressive wing of the party who had always been somewhat skeptical of Hillary Clinton dating back to her vote for the Iraq War in 2002 and the centrist policies she was linked to by means of being the first lady during Bill Clinton’s presidency. And crucial to Sanders’ surge in the polls was his ability to raise a great deal of money in small increments

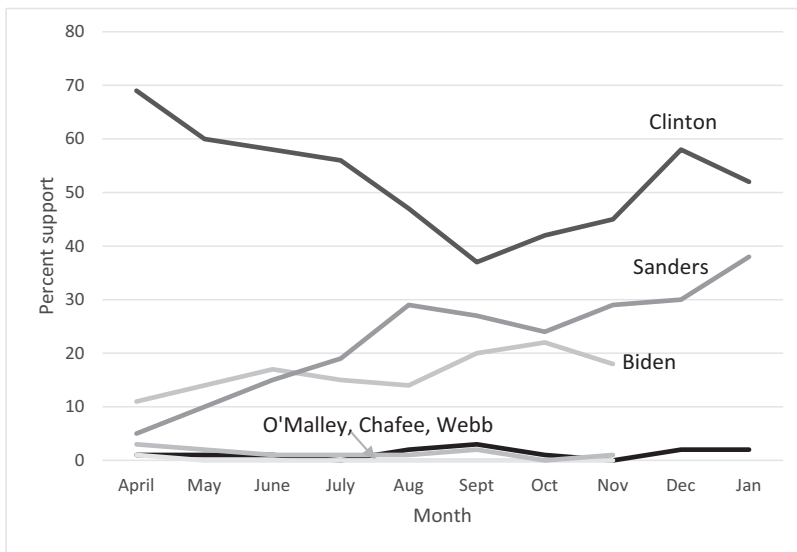


Figure 15.1 CNN Democratic Preference Polls, April 2015–January 2016

Note: Data gathered by the author from [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016\\_democratic\\_presidential\\_nomination-3824.html#polls](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_democratic_presidential_nomination-3824.html#polls).



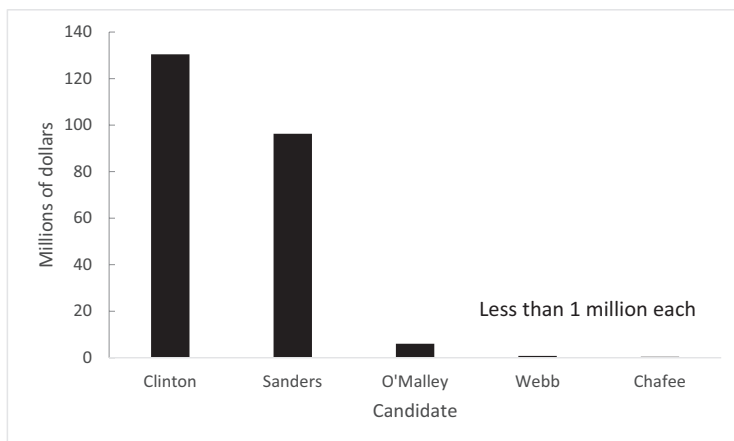


Figure 15.2 Democratic Fundraising pre-Iowa

Note: Data gathered by the author from [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

adding to the perception that he was fighting for the little guy and Clinton was in the pocket of various moneyed interests.

Clinton's fundraising prowess was certainly well documented throughout the 2016 presidential campaign. And indeed, right out of the gate she raised an incredible 47.55 million dollars during the second quarter of 2015. This haul was over three times the amount that Senator Sanders raised during that time. But in the remaining months leading up to the Iowa caucuses on February 1, Sanders achieved close to parity with Clinton as Figure 15.2 displays. As Sanders gained in the polls he was able to raise more money. This covariance is not surprising as it is easy to imagine a virtuous cycle working in Sanders' favor as the invisible primary wore on.

Not only did Sanders gain in the polls and the money chase, he also garnered more media coverage as Iowa approached. However, he never equaled Clinton on this fundamental measure. Every month of the invisible primary saw Hillary Clinton mentioned more often in front page stories in *The New York Times*. Over the entire invisible primary period, defined here as January 1, 2015 to January 31, 2016, Clinton was mentioned in 246 stories to Sanders' 76.<sup>5</sup> That is a ratio of just over three to one. However, not all publicity is good publicity in American politics and these figures do not address the split of positive and negative coverage. In fact, Figure 15.3 shows that Clinton's coverage was decidedly more negative than Sanders' during 2015. The daily beating that Clinton was taking in the press surely took its toll on her favorability ratings and made the nominating contest closer than maybe it should have been.<sup>6</sup>

The final fundamental that is worth studying in detail is elite endorsements. In fact, we believe elite endorsements are one of the keys to determining the outcome of presidential nominations. They have proven to be a strong predictor of final delegate share and early endorsements do a better job of predicting the other three fundamentals than polls, money, and media do. Endorsements are an area in which it was simply no contest between Clinton and Sanders. To reiterate, Hillary Clinton received more weighted endorsements before she declared her candidacy than anyone else got throughout the entire process, pre- and post-Iowa! Big-name endorsements came early and often for Secretary Clinton as she nabbed all 13 governors who endorsed pre-Iowa, 36 of 39 U.S. Senators, and 148 of 157 U.S. House members.

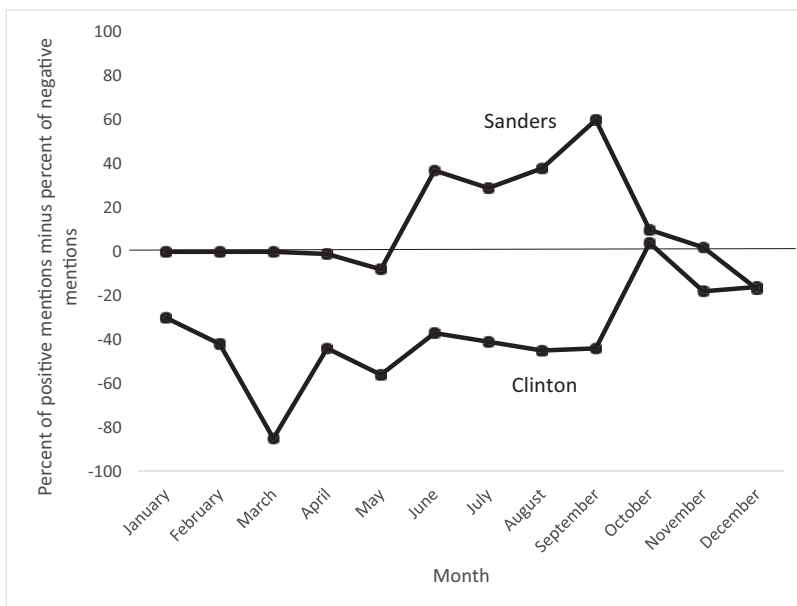


Figure 15.3 Tone of 2015 Democratic Media Coverage

Note: Data gathered by the author from <http://scholar.harvard.edu/thomaspatterson/home>.

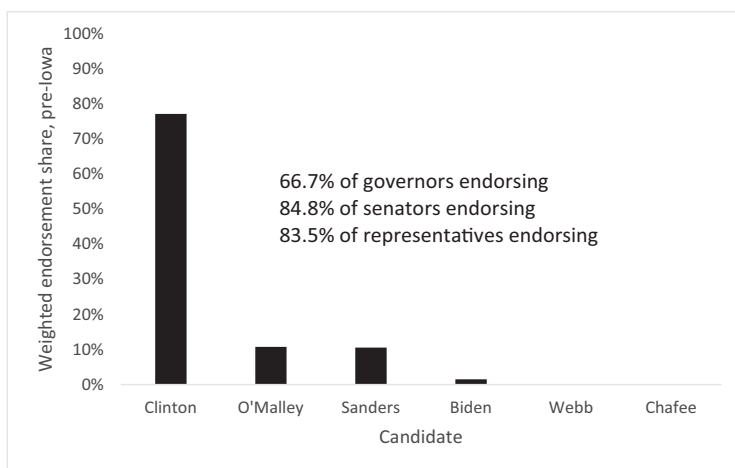


Figure 15.4 Weighted Democratic Endorsement Share pre-Iowa

Note: Data gathered by *The Party Decides* team.

Figure 15.4 shows each candidate's share of all weighted endorsements during the invisible primary. Clinton garnered 77.2 percent while O'Malley and Sanders were far behind at 10.8 percent and 10.5 percent respectively. If elite endorsements are evidence of who the party supports then it was crystal clear that the candidate of choice in the Democratic Party was Hillary Clinton. Not only did she gain a huge majority of endorsements but an unusually large proportion of

Democratic officials elected to federal office were willing to publicly signal their support for the former first lady. Table 15.1 situates 2016 within the rest of the post-McGovern-Fraser system and it is clear how much of an establishment choice Clinton was in historical terms. The only two Democratic candidates who came close to equaling Clinton were the incumbent president in 1980, Jimmy Carter, and the incumbent Vice-President in 2000, Al Gore.

Hillary Clinton's dominance in the endorsement derby was not the only support for the notion that the party decided she should be the nominee. The Democratic National Committee, led by vocal Clinton supporter Debbie Wasserman Schultz, called for only five sanctioned debates before the Iowa caucus, and scheduled three of the five on weekend nights in what was widely seen as a way to minimize viewership, and in turn, the potential of negative exposure for the front-running candidate with the most to lose. As it was later revealed thanks to the infamous Russian hack of DNC emails, debate scheduling was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what lengths party leaders were willing to go to smooth Clinton's path to the nomination. But it was something that *did not* happen that may make the strongest case for our theory regarding the ability of party elites, when united, to pave the way for their preferred candidate to become the nominee.

According to those close to him, Vice-President Biden privately stewed throughout the early stages of the nominating campaign as he got an up close and personal view of Hillary Clinton positioning herself as the rightful heir to President Obama and his two terms in office. Biden believed that he was better positioned to carry on Obama's legacy and cement it with another Democratic victory in November of 2016. He also could not understand the missteps Clinton made regarding the setting up of the private email server while she led the State Department, and her inability to handle the criticism and scrutiny that inevitably came her way from Republicans and the press. But Biden was never encouraged by Democratic elites to make the race; his boss, for instance, praised Biden in public but privately kept his cards close to his chest when it came to who he favored to be his potential successor. When Biden's son Beau passed away in May of 2015, some confidants hinted to the public that Beau's dying wish was to have his father make one more run for the White House. What happened next is not new to presidential nominating politics. Potential candidates put out feelers and test the waters before making the leap into a campaign. All accounts suggest Biden did just that and got nothing in return. He could not dislodge supporters of Hillary despite all of her weaknesses as a candidate. With Clinton still in a strong position, with most of the Democratic establishment firmly behind her, there was

Table 15.1 Pace and Character of Endorsements in Democratic Nominating Contests

Year	Nominee	% of Governors Endorsing Nominee Pre-Iowa	% of Senators Endorsing Nominee Pre-Iowa
1976	Carter	0.0%	0.0%
1980	Carter	65.6%	15.5%
1984	Mondale	29.4%	15.2%
1988	Dukakis	3.8%	3.6%
1992	Clinton	41.4%	10.7%
2000	Gore	52.9%	57.8%
2004	Kerry*	0.0%	4.2%
2008	Obama*	10.7%	0.0%
<b>2016</b>	<b>Clinton</b>	<b>72.2%</b>	<b>78.3%</b>

\* Not the pre-Iowa endorsement leader

Note: Data gathered by *The Party Decides* team.

nothing for Biden to do but remain on the sidelines. And this left only Bernie Sanders standing in the way of Clinton's coronation as the first woman to be nominated for president by a major political party in the United States.

At least it was supposed to be a coronation. While Hillary Clinton's tight grip on the nomination was ever only slightly loosened, it was far from a cakewalk. The challenge was fierce right from the beginning as the two leading candidates fought to a virtual tie in Iowa. Clinton declared victory on caucus night before the networks were willing to call it. She ended up winning by 0.2 percent of the vote, and she took heart in that narrow victory considering the embarrassment handed to her eight years ago by Iowa caucus goers when she finished third to Barack Obama and John Edwards. The next contest was in New Hampshire, and Sanders from neighboring Vermont was heavily favored to win the Granite State. He did, but Clinton bounced back later in February to win Nevada by five points and South Carolina by almost fifty. Among African-Americans in South Carolina, Clinton did even better than Obama eight years earlier, winning 90 percent of the black vote. African-Americans and Latinos were seen early on as Clinton's "firewall" against the insurgent candidacy of Bernie Sanders who was failing miserably to make inroads among these minority communities. As the nominating campaign went on it became clear that Sanders was doing better in states with lower minority populations and it followed that unless he could somehow do better among African-Americans and Latinos he simply could not overtake Clinton in the delegate chase.

March 1st was Super Tuesday, and Clinton held serve, winning eight of 12 contests. A week later, Clinton was expected to take Mississippi and Michigan rather easily and while the former state voted as predicted, Michigan stunned everyone by giving Sanders a narrow victory. The surprise upset in Michigan appeared to give Sanders some much-needed momentum and, in fact, that victory dominated news coverage in the following days. But the Senator from Vermont could not capitalize on that win in other delegate-rich Midwestern states such as Ohio, Illinois and Missouri that voted the following Tuesday. In the weeks and months that followed, the two candidates traversed the nation campaigning for votes and delegates. Sanders and Clinton traded rhetorical punches in a series of debates, and both candidates saw successes with voters. Sanders did well out west in late March and early April while Clinton did very well in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states in mid and late April. May saw each candidate claim important victories but throughout the back-and-forth Clinton never really came close to relinquishing her delegate lead, whether one counted the controversial superdelegates or not. As the nominating campaign came to an end on June 7, Sanders needed a substantial victory in California to have any chance of supplanting Clinton as the presumptive nominee. Clinton responded with a seven-point win in the delegate-rich Golden State and also won New Jersey, New Mexico, and South Dakota, leading her to declare victory that evening as she had finally won a majority of the pledged delegates.

When delving into some of the exit polls, another aspect of our theory was borne out. Clinton won self-identified Democrats by a large margin and actually lost independents who voted in Democratic primaries and caucuses (Noel 2016). And interestingly considering the media narrative, it was not only nonwhite Democrats who went for Clinton. Party identifiers of all races and ethnicities took the cue of their leaders, as *The Party Decides* would suggest, and they helped deliver her the nomination over Sanders.

### **The Republicans: The Unthinkable Happens**

While much of the Democratic establishment was "ready for Hillary" when she formally declared her candidacy for the presidency of the United States in April of 2015, virtually

nobody in the Republican establishment was ready for the wrecking ball that would ultimately obliterate them in the 2016 campaign. When Donald J. Trump entered the race on June 16th, 2015 by descending on an escalator in Trump Tower and then delivering a tirade against Mexican immigrants the country was aghast but also bemused. This real estate developer and reality television star had no political experience, no establishment support, and therefore was not taken seriously as a candidate. Despite the fact that Trump led in the polls soon after his controversial announcement, virtually nobody thought this man could become the Republican standard-bearer. However, in retrospect the Republican Party was ripe for a hostile takeover. There were rifts in the party that went back at least as far as the emergence of the Tea Party in 2009. More recently, the ouster of House Speaker John Boehner and the subsequent difficulty of finding his replacement highlighted the internal dissension within the GOP. An anti-establishment feeling was already in place among grass-roots conservatives and they flocked to Trump and his ostentatiously outsider status. He was favored precisely *because* he had no experience and no establishment support. Trump's astounding victory in the 2016 Republican primaries and caucuses completely contradicts the theory we put forth in *The Party Decides*. The party did not come close to deciding—at least not before the Iowa caucus. And when they did decide rather publicly that Trump was unacceptable, it was manifestly a case of too little, too late.

The Republican nominating season was notable and unprecedented for the sheer number of candidates making the race. Seventeen hopefuls threw their hats into the ring, necessitating a series of tiered debates in which national polling determined who would be on the main stage in prime time and who would be relegated to an earlier face-off with fewer viewers. This upended the usual dynamic present in both parties since the McGovern-Fraser reforms of focusing on the early voting states, most notably Iowa and New Hampshire. Since national polling determined debate placement, candidates were compelled to broadcast their messages over the national airwaves and spent considerably less time and effort on retail politicking in Iowa and New Hampshire than candidates in previous cycles. The large, fractured field and the emphasis on national media attention were huge benefits to the candidacy of Trump. His was not a typical campaign and it was clear very early on that this was not a typical campaign season.

When examining the four invisible primary fundamentals we identify as being significant predictors of candidate success, Donald Trump fared well in the polls and with the media. However, his fundraising lagged behind his rivals and he secured a paltry number of elite endorsements compared with the other top contenders. Table 15.2 shows that in the four months prior to Trump's entry into the race, three different candidates held the top spot, with none of them getting more than 17 percent. The large field and the lack of a true frontrunner left the door open for Donald Trump to catch fire, and only weeks after declaring his candidacy, move straight to the top of the polls. From July to January, according to CNN's polling, Trump led the Republican field every month, increasing his lead from four percentage points in the dead of summer to 22 percentage points in the middle of winter. In that last CNN poll before the Iowa caucuses, only Trump and Senator Ted Cruz managed to poll in double-digits.

Despite Trump's strong showing in the polls throughout the portion of the invisible primary in which he was active, pundits discounted his chances of winning the nomination. They cited past poll leaders at similar points in their races as evidence that Trump would not translate poll numbers into actual votes and delegates. They pointed to Rudy Giuliani in 2008 and a series of poor performers in 2012, such as Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, and Herman Cain, who nonetheless led the national polls at some juncture. We were also extremely skeptical of Trump's chances during the invisible primary for similar reasons. Early polls have often been mostly reflective of name recognition, and Trump arguably was better known than any other candidates, including Jeb Bush, the brother and son of a U.S. President.

Table 15.2 Poll Leaders in the 2016 Republican Nomination Campaign

Month	Leader	Runner-up	Third place
February 2015	Huckabee 17%	Bush 12%	Paul, Walker 11%
March 2015	Bush 16%	Walker 13%	Paul 12%
April 2015	Bush 17%	Walker 12%	Paul, Rubio 11%
May 2015	Rubio 14%	Bush 13%	Huckabee, Walker 10%
June 2015	Bush 19%	Trump 12%	Huckabee 8%
July 2015	Trump 19%	Bush 15%	Walker 10%
August 2015	Trump 24%	Bush 13%	Carson 8%
September 2015	Trump 24%	Fiorina 15%	Carson 14%
October 2015	Trump 27%	Carson 22%	Bush, Rubio 8%
November 2015	Trump 36%	Cruz 16%	Carson 14%
December 2015	Trump 39%	Cruz 18%	Carson, Rubio 10%
January 2016	Trump 41%	Cruz 19%	Rubio 8%

Note: Data gathered by the author from [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016\\_republican\\_presidential\\_nomination-3823.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_republican_presidential_nomination-3823.html).

One area where Trump was outperformed by Bush, and by several other candidates, was fundraising. The top five candidates in pre-Iowa fundraising were, in order: Ben Carson, Cruz, Marco Rubio, Bush, and Trump.<sup>7</sup> But Trump put a positive spin on this list, saying that he was largely financing his own campaign and therefore “could not be bought” by big-dollar donors. In addition, Trump was lapping the field in terms of free media, due to the wall-to-wall coverage of his every tweet, speech, and rally. From the day he announced his candidacy to the end of 2015, Trump garnered 34 percent of the news coverage of GOP hopefuls. Bush was second with 18 percent and Rubio and Carson tied for third with 14 percent. And it was largely positive coverage that Trump was getting despite his constant carping at the media during and after he received the Republican presidential nomination. Of the eight news organizations monitored by Media Tenor, the percentage of positive or neutral coverage ranged from a high of 74 percent from *USA Today* to a “low” of 63 percent of what *The New York Times* relayed to its readers. Therefore, none of these major newspapers and television networks gave Trump more than 37 percent negative coverage during the invisible primary period.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all of that free, positive news coverage and despite the robust poll numbers, Donald Trump was not able to secure much support from Republican elites in the form of publicly reported endorsements. Using the weighted system from *The Party Decides*, Trump gained only 3.6 percent of the endorsements pre-Iowa. The spread of endorsements can be seen in Figure 15.5. Trump’s total was only good for ninth out of 17 candidates. This was the main reason

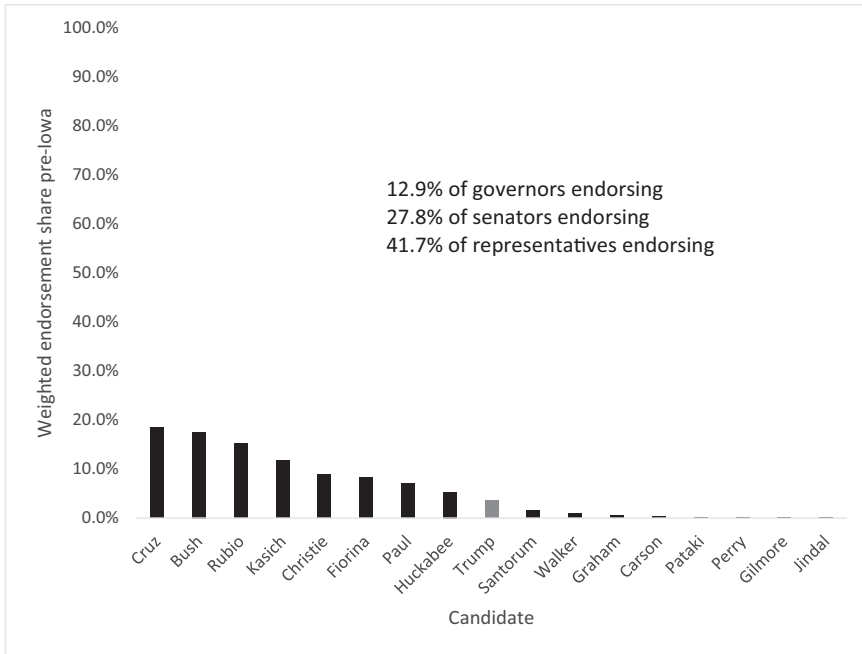


Figure 15.5 Weighted Republican Endorsement Share pre-Iowa

Note: Data gathered by *The Party Decides* team.

many in the discipline and the media gave Trump such little chance of winning the nomination. As we argue in *The Party Decides*, early endorsements have been very predictive of success in collecting the delegates necessary to secure the nomination. Trump’s ultimate victory despite lacking any major endorsements was a significant blow to our theory and its predictive ability.

However, it was not as if the party chose someone and Trump beat him or her. For many reasons that I will discuss in the next section, the Republican Party did not decide in 2016. Less than 15 percent of governors endorsed, less than 30 percent of senators endorsed, and less than 45 percent of representatives endorsed pre-Iowa during the most recent cycle. Those numbers are significantly lower than in past Republican contests. Figure 15.6 shows the trend in gubernatorial endorsements in the post McGovern-Fraser era. Gubernatorial endorsements were at their lowest in 2016, and Donald Trump became the first Republican nominee not to grab a single one pre-Iowa.

Even after the field narrowed post-Iowa to a four-horse race, Trump did not fare well among Republican elites. Rubio garnered 37 percent of the post-Iowa endorsements to lead the way. Cruz had 27 percent and Trump and Kasich were further behind with 17 percent each. So, the party certainly did not bandwagon to Trump even as he began clearly demonstrating the ability to translate his gaudy poll numbers into votes and thereby delegates. But what the party clearly could not do is stop Trump at this point in the process. High-profile endorsements meant to deny Trump the nomination were seemingly useless. Governor Nikki Haley endorsed Marco Rubio days before a South Carolina primary that Trump won easily. And months later, Governor Mike Pence endorsed Ted Cruz before the Indiana primary with similarly futile results. The tardiness of these endorsements was suboptimal as they did not give the endorsing governors enough time to transfer their campaign infrastructure to their preferred candidates.

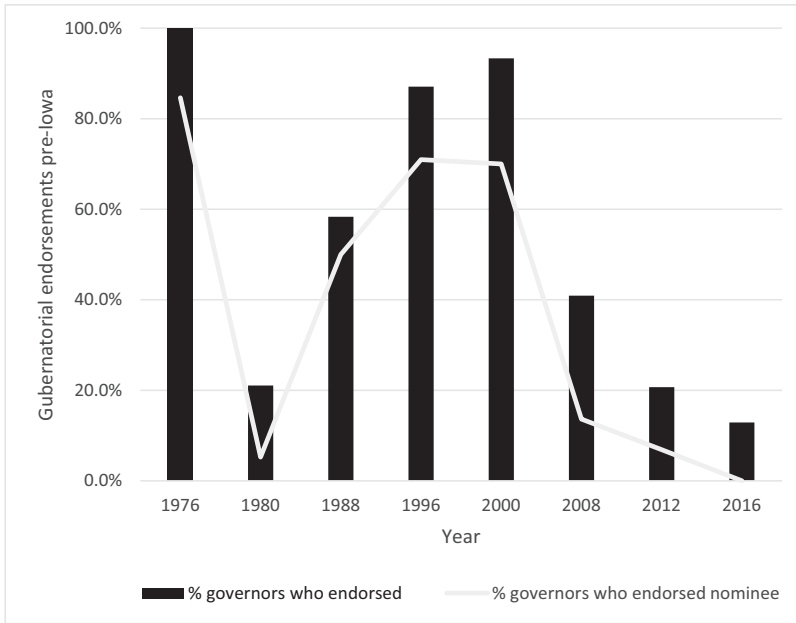


Figure 15.6 Republican Gubernatorial Endorsements pre-Iowa

Note: Data gathered by *The Party Decides* team.

Early endorsements allow for this and therefore seem to be more useful in winning primaries and caucuses. Eleventh-hour endorsements do not seem to be as potent.

Whereas the Democrats had a clear frontrunner and a relatively small field of candidates as the 2016 invisible primary got under way, the Republican nomination chase had the look of a free-for-all from the beginning. While Jeb Bush led the potential field in terms of name recognition and fundraising ability, and appeared to be the favorite before anybody had officially announced, the Bush surname was clearly not as intimidating as it used to be and in fact many argued it would be an albatross around the candidate’s neck thanks to his older brother’s rocky eight years in the White House. Bush fatigue was a real thing among the general public and even among committed Republicans.

The first candidate to officially announce was Ted Cruz on March 23, 2015. Then came fellow U.S. Senators Rand Paul and Marco Rubio in April, and a glut of candidates followed in May and June. Bush’s official announcement took place on June 15, but as would become commonplace during the campaign, the former governor of Florida was one-upped a day later when Donald Trump began his quest with a fiery opening speech in which he insulted an entire ethnic group from the podium at Trump Tower in New York. When former Virginia governor Jim Gilmore announced on July 30, he became the seventeenth and final candidate to be the 2016 Republican nominee for president.

As mentioned briefly earlier, because of the sheer size of the field the dynamic was dramatically different than in past GOP nominating campaigns. In order to get in the prime time debates candidates had to finish in the top tier in *national* polling. So there was considerably less retail campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire and more of an emphasis on increasing the national profile of the candidates. This played right into the hands of Donald Trump, who did not have much of a ground game but had terrific name recognition and the ability to command intense



press coverage throughout the invisible primary. Trump led the polls so he always faced off in the “main event” debate and his performances were noteworthy. His schoolyard taunts were surprisingly effective and they took their toll on his main opponents. Jeb Bush was “low energy.” Marco Rubio was “Little Marco.” Ted Cruz became “Lyn’ Ted.” And even when he took on Carly Fiorina’s appearance or offered a crude reason why Megyn Kelly was asking him tough questions it did not seem to hurt his popularity among those already predisposed to supporting him. Maybe more importantly, his opponents were very reluctant to directly criticize Trump in return. The reasoning seemed valid at the time but in retrospect it backfired – “big league,” as Trump would say. Most of the pundits believed Trump was far from 100 percent serious about running for president. One theory was that he was just trying to negotiate a better deal from NBC for his show *Celebrity Apprentice*. Another theory was that he was hoping to build his general brand and increase the net worth of his company. A third theory was that he never wanted to be president and he was taking a giant ego trip across the nation. Finally, even if none of those theories was valid the fact was that he had no experience and very little in the way of a traditional campaign and his quest was bound to fizzle or flame out. His opponents, therefore, did not want to be on the record as criticizing Trump, in turn alienating or even insulting his supporters. Each of them wanted to be eligible to receive that considerable support when Trump dropped out. Certainly there was no coordinated effort to bring down Trump and individually there was not much in the way of negative campaigning coming his way. The other contenders were busy attacking each other hoping to be the reasonable, establishment alternative to Trump if it came down to that. So, Bush and Rubio spent millions attacking each other. Cruz played nice with Trump while hammering Rubio. And the rest of the hopefuls were trying to get what little coverage was left when the networks and cable news shows took a break from lavishing attention on Mr. Trump.

As the winnowing intensified in the weeks leading up to the Iowa caucuses, most experts still felt as though Trump’s strong showing in the polls would not translate to victories in the primaries and caucuses. And indeed Trump could only manage a second place finish in Iowa gaining 24 percent of the vote. Ted Cruz was victorious with 28 percent and Rubio closely trailed Trump with 23 percent. Trump’s whole persona was predicated on success and victory, and he clearly lost the first time the voters had their say. Maybe Trump would indeed prove to be a paper tiger and the party would dodge a bullet despite their inability to coordinate around anyone pre-Iowa. But eight days later, Trump responded with a resounding win in New Hampshire and it became clear many party elites simply did not get it. Republican leaders were still endorsing long shots like Chris Christie in the days leading up to New Hampshire. Christie was polling in the single digits and was not the threat to Trump that Rubio, Cruz, or even Kasich might have been. This lack of foresight was really astonishing and the party’s inability or unwillingness to at least try to stop Trump through some coordination around a viable alternative allowed Trump to build a delegate lead through the first month of contests. A plurality of Palmetto State voters ignored their popular governor’s endorsement of Marco Rubio and gave Trump a major victory. Trump took South Carolina and all 50 delegates which was particularly notable, considering the role the state has played in recent Republican presidential nominating history. Prior to 2012, it had consistently been seen as a firewall for the establishment candidate. It saved George H. W. Bush in 1988 against Bob Dole and it turned around and saved Dole eight years later against Pat Buchanan. In 2000, George W. Bush scored a big win over insurgent John McCain, and eight years after that it chose the new establishment favorite McCain over Romney and Mike Huckabee.

After Trump’s win in the Nevada caucuses, he was the clear leader in delegates and the prohibitive favorite to win his party’s nomination. The viable alternatives had dwindled to three:

Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich. Yet with the exception of a half-baked plan to have Rubio supporters in Ohio vote for Kasich over Trump and Kasich supporters in Florida vote for Rubio over Trump on March 15, the three challengers were still doing a heck of a job splitting the anti-Trump vote. The vote-swap may have helped Kasich, as he won his home state, but it did not help Rubio, as he was crushed in his home state leading to his withdrawal from the race.

As the calendar moved into April, it was a three-man race and Trump was heading into some potentially friendly states in his home region. Going into the so-called “Acela Primary,” named for the Amtrak line that runs through the northeast corridor, Donald Trump had built a big delegate lead without winning a majority of voters in any state. On April 26, he managed the feat five times. In New York, Maryland, Connecticut, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, the Republican frontrunner dominated Cruz and Kasich, winning 57 percent of the cumulative vote and 111 out of 124 delegates. Trump was on the verge of an astounding victory and talk of a brokered convention was becoming more and more of a pipe dream for the Never Trumpers. Indiana came next and Governor Mike Pence’s endorsement of Ted Cruz was not enough to thwart Trump, who won the Hoosier State easily despite being outspent four-to-one. Cruz dropped out that night and Kasich followed him out the door the following day. On May 4, 2016, Donald Trump became the Republican Party’s presumptive nominee for president.

It was a stunning achievement for someone with absolutely no political experience. It was also a tremendous disaster for the Republican Party as they failed miserably to coordinate behind a candidate who was broadly acceptable to the major policy demanders in the party. Donald Trump was a loose cannon who held some seriously problematic issue positions for major swaths of the party’s base. Trump also had extremely high unfavorable ratings and went into the general election as a clear underdog to Secretary Clinton. It is important to note that the fact Trump was able to win the presidential election does not undermine this point. The general election results revealed the incredible weakness of the Democratic nominee. Clearly, a more broadly acceptable Republican without Trump’s personal and political baggage could have, and likely would have, won a bigger victory in the general election. The problems that the Republican Party is currently facing despite holding the White House and both chambers of Congress are directly attributable to the man in the Oval Office. Trump’s missteps and the intense opposition he is receiving from the courts, the media, and the American public are, at the time of this writing, threatening to render the electoral triumph achieved by the GOP meaningless in terms of policy.

### **What Next?**

Political parties are notoriously adaptive and have historically fought through both intentional reforms designed to weaken them and circumstantial developments that have threatened their power. Presidential nominations are one of the most important functions that a party undertakes. They are too important to allow reforms and circumstances to get in the way of elite control for too long. I would expect the parties to adjust to the most recent changes in the political landscape and regain control of their nominations. In 2016, the Democratic Party, despite vitriolic criticism of its tactics, did decide early in favor of a candidate and helped her beat back a serious challenge from outside the establishment. Secretary Clinton thoroughly dominated the endorsement derby and led wire-to-wire, despite some important primary victories achieved by Senator Sanders. There will certainly be calls to open up the process in the aftermath of his insurgent campaign. However, unless Sanders’ supporters dive deeply into the arcane world of internal Democratic Party politics, I would not expect many changes in how the process works. With Donald Trump in the White House, progressives of all stripes seem to have much more pressing concerns than how nominations work. As for the Republicans, they

clearly did not decide in 2016 and are currently paying the price for their inability to nominate a highly qualified, unifying candidate to take on an extremely vulnerable opponent. They allowed Trump to skate through the invisible primary without facing too much scrutiny or attacks on his personal or public life. The result was a strong outsider campaign that came out swinging in Iowa and New Hampshire and took an early delegate lead despite only being able to secure pluralities during the first few months of primaries and caucuses. Trump effectively clinched the nomination with a dominant performance in the Acela Primary, reducing the rest of the field to rubble. In their defense, the Republicans may be forgiven for not having it in the front of their mind what can happen to a party when they allow the voters to decide. It had been 40 years since Jimmy Carter stormed to the nomination and the presidency without building the close relationships within his party necessary to govern effectively. And it had been 44 years since the Democratic Party had changed the rules and forfeited control over the process almost entirely to the electorate. The result of that nomination campaign was George McGovern who was trounced by President Nixon, a man who would not survive his second term due to the scandal of Watergate. For the Republicans going into their next contested nomination campaign, whether that is in 2020 or 2024, the old saying “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me,” might be quite pertinent. As to whether you will ever again be able to purchase presidential Halloween masks a year in advance, that remains to be seen. But I would not bet against the two parties expending a great deal of energy and innovation to revert to the golden era of orderly, unifying nominations.

### Notes

- 1 By open, I mean there is no incumbent president in the mix.
- 2 Senator Gary Hart almost replicated McGovern and Carter’s feat in 1984 against the establishment favorite, former Vice-President Walter Mondale.
- 3 This is why every endorsement we collected was weighted on a scale from 0 to 1 with higher numbers representing a more valued endorsement. For example, celebrities are given the lowest weight of .1 while governors are given one of the highest weights of .8.
- 4 Joe Biden would dip his toe much deeper into the water after the tragic death of his son Beau. But he ultimately decided against making the race and I discuss that in the context of our theory later in this section.
- 5 This newspaper data was gathered by *The Party Decides* team.
- 6 Her negative coverage continued into the general election campaign and can also be contrasted with her Republican opponent’s generally positive coverage.
- 7 This ordering does not include Super PAC spending and independent expenditures. Not only would those figures change the rankings but they would also likely increase the gap between Trump and his closest competitors for the nomination.
- 8 These outlets were *USA Today*, Fox News Channel, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, CBS, NBC, *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. All media data in this paragraph gathered by the author from <http://scholar.harvard.edu/thomaspatterson/home>.

### References

- Bartels, Larry. 1988. *Presidential Primaries and the Politics of Public Choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2008. *The Party Decides*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2016. “Party versus Faction in the Reformed Presidential Nominating System.” *PS* 49 (3): 701–708.
- Noel, Hans. 2016. “Sanders needs open primaries because he’s not winning Democrats.” April 25th, <http://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/4/25/11501542/sanders-open-primaries-not-winning-democrats>
- Polsby, Nelson. 1983. *Consequences of Party Reform*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press.