

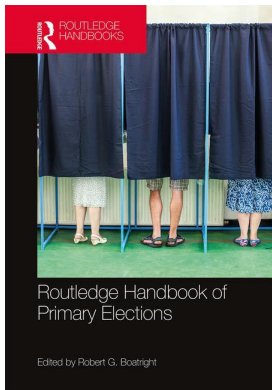
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CITIZEN CHOICE IN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

Wayne Steger

The ability to put candidates on the ballot makes political parties the arbiters of representative democracy (Schattschneider 1960, 140–41). As arbiters, the parties have the capacity to choose candidates that serve partisan interests, potentially at the expense of the broader public (Bawn et al. 2012). That makes nominations a critical concern for the parties and for the citizenry. Historically, presidential nominations were the domain of party leaders negotiating in proverbial smoke-filled rooms, with little input by party members around the country. The McGovern-Fraser Committee reforms sought to give greater legitimacy to the party's presidential nominee by making the process more open and participatory (Ceaser 1979; Crotty 1977; Ranney 1975). Voters in reformed caucuses and primaries gained a voice in the selection of the nominee (Polsby 1983; Shafer 1983). The introduction of greater participation in binding primaries and caucuses, however, may or may not have achieved the purpose of handing the control over the nomination to citizens who identify with the major political parties. The campaign occurring before the voting begins can influence the outcome of voting. In particular, *The Party Decides* thesis holds that party insiders may still hold considerable influence over the selection of presidential nominees if they work together before the caucuses and primaries begin (Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2008; Steger 2000).

Party insiders can collude to advantage their preferred candidate by coalescing behind one candidate and signaling to party groups, activists, donors and the media which candidate is preferred (Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2008). While numerous candidates may appear on the ballot, some of them may not be viable in the sense of having a realistic chance of winning. Party leaders have been able to coalesce to a substantial degree in about three-fifths of the open presidential nominations since the 1970s (Steger 2015, 2016). Party insiders' influence, however, is conditional on the extent of their participation in trying to influence the race, the timing of their involvement, and the degree of convergence among party insiders (Steger 2013, 2016). When party insiders fail to coalesce behind a frontrunner during the invisible primary – the phase of the campaign occurring before the onset of the caucuses and primaries – then more candidates remain viable options for voters (Steger 2015, ch. 7). Voters are relatively empowered in this scenario because they gain choice among more candidates.

Voters' options also may be influenced by the decisions of candidates. Every presidential nomination cycle invites a great deal of speculation about who will seek the presidential nomination. Indeed, this speculation game usually begins at one party convention and continues

until the nomination campaign is in full swing three to four years later. Party voters will have more, and more meaningful options when multiple quality candidates enter the race. Their choices will be limited if some of these candidates act strategically and decide not to run. A large number of politicians want to be president, but most ultimately decide that the conditions are not optimal for an attempt in a given year (Burden 2002; Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde 1976; Steger 2006). Thus some nomination races have a large number of candidates, like the 2016 Republican nomination, while other races feature only one or two major candidates, like the 2016 Democratic nomination race. The entry into the race by a heavyweight candidate – one who polls over 50 percent in national surveys three and four years before the nomination – tends to deter many of the potential candidates so that the race is between a single, strong frontrunner and other candidates who may or may not be viable (Adkins, Dowdle, Petrow, and Steger 2015; Brown 2011). Races without an early, strong frontrunner tend to attract more entrants and the competition for the nomination is more intense (Butler 2004; Steger 2015, ch. 9). Candidate decisions to withdraw from the race also affect voter choice in the primaries, particularly those occurring later in the sequential primary season. Traditional candidates with governing experience tend to withdraw from the race earlier than non-traditional, issue-advocacy candidates who may remain in the race as a symbolic option (Norrande 2006).

The critical thing for evaluating party voters' control over the nomination is how meaningful their options are when they cast ballots in the primaries. Decisions by prospective candidates and/or party insiders can create an imbalanced race with one strong candidate and a number of lesser candidates who do not have a reasonable chance of winning. In this scenario, voters can choose, but their vote is more or less an up or down plebiscitary option to accept or reject the frontrunner. This came close to happening in 1984 when the pre-primary favorite, former Vice President Walter Mondale, came close to losing to an unexpectedly strong rival, Senator Gary Hart. The 2016 Democratic nomination also followed this pattern when early favorite Hillary Clinton faced an unexpectedly strong challenge by Senator Bernie Sanders. However, even in these cases – when many primary voters rejected the party favorite – the frontrunner ultimately prevailed. In other races with a strong, early frontrunner, the frontrunner went on to prevail, as happened in 1980 (Ronald Reagan), 1988 (George H. W. Bush), and 2000 (Al Gore on the Democratic side and George W. Bush on the Republican side).

Nomination campaigns have been more competitive in races where there was no particularly strong frontrunner in early national polls and/or party insiders failed to engage in the process and unify strongly behind a frontrunner. This scenario played out in 1972 (George McGovern), 1976 (Jimmy Carter), 1988 (Michael Dukakis), 1992 (Bill Clinton), 2004 (John Kerry), and 2016 (Donald Trump). In races like these, the outcome of the race was in doubt and primary voters decided which of the candidates on the ballot would win the nomination. In between these two types of nominations are a number of races in which there was a moderately strong frontrunner (judging by early polls and party insider endorsements). In these races, the frontrunner has an advantage but there remained some doubt about whether the frontrunner would prevail, as in 1996 (Bob Dole), 2008 (Hillary Clinton), 2012 (Mitt Romney). When multiple candidates on the ballot have a reasonable chance of winning, then voters are relatively more empowered because their choices rather than those of prospective candidates or party insiders will determine which of the relatively competitive candidates will get the delegates needed to win the presidential nomination at the convention.

Beyond subjective judgements about how a race is going to play out, there is a systematic way to measure the competitiveness of a nomination race and to measure the extent to which primary voters have meaningful choices. Specifically, this chapter will use a measure of competition and a measure of “competitively equivalent” candidates to assess in a systematic way,

how much choice voters really have in the primaries. The empowerment of voters – a central component of all theories of democracy – requires that voters have some choice of candidates beyond a plebiscitary vote of confidence in the candidate mediated by actors and processes before the elections (Held 1987, 154–166). If some or most of the candidates cannot realistically win the nomination, then these candidates exist as symbolic options for voters who do not prefer the frontrunner. Symbolic statements have meaning, but the option remains symbolic rather than a choice that decides the leadership of the political party.

The number of viable candidates on the ballot has been measured with the normalized Herfindal-Hirschman Index (HHI). Economists and financial analysts have long used this index as a metric for assessing the number of competitively equivalent firms in a market.¹ Political scientists have used the measure to analyze multi-party and multi-candidate elections (Hickman 1992; Steger, Hickman, and Yohn 2002; Taagepera and Laakso 1989). I explain the calculation of the measure below. For now, it is sufficient to note that this measure has been adapted to measure the number of competitively equivalent – or viable – options that voters can select among, which makes it useful for assessing the extent to which the invisible primary narrows the choices of primary voters before they get the chance to cast ballots (Steger 2015, ch. 7).

The measure also can be used to evaluate differences in voter choice across presidential primaries. Voters in early states typically have more, and different, options available than do voters in states holding a caucus or primary later in the primary season (Norrander 2000). The results of the early elections affect the choices available to voters in subsequent caucuses and primaries. Candidates who do better than expected in the earliest elections gain momentum going into subsequent caucuses and primaries (Aldrich 1980; Bartels 1988). These candidates typically receive more and more favorable media coverage, increased fundraising, and greater ability to compete in the ensuing caucuses and primaries – thus staying in the race as viable options for voters. Voters in later states, however, typically have fewer choices because the sequential process winnows candidates (Norrander 2006). Winothing reduces voter choice in primaries occurring later because they typically select among fewer candidates (Atkeson and Maestas 2009; Mayer and Busch 2004). Analyzing patterns of competition and attrition thus enables us to draw inferences about the choices exercised by voters across states.

The next section discusses the importance of voter empowerment in democracy, particularly in an era of polarized political parties. After that, the chapter will analyze patterns of competition within and across presidential nomination cycles. Focusing on competition within each nomination campaign will enable us to gauge differences in voter choice across states. The chapter will finish with a more detailed analysis of the differences between the 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential primaries.

Electoral Competition and the Implications of Political Polarization

Electoral competition plays a central role in representative democracy, helping to ensure responsiveness and accountability to citizens (McDonald and Samples 2006, ch. 1). Voters are empowered to hold government officials accountable, to the extent that they have meaningful choices between candidates (Schumpeter 1942, 81–83). Competition among political organizations and leaders provides voters with the opportunity to make meaningful choices (Schattschneider 1960). Electoral competition is critical, if only because elected officials act to avoid risks of defeat (Fiorina 1977; Mayhew 1974). In this view, successful representation by elected officials should result in less competitive elections, so low levels of competition do not necessarily imply a less responsive government. This argument, however, assumes that voters with only one option on the ballot are satisfied with the choice that they have. A candidate who

runs unopposed does so because other candidates decide not to run. In this case, the decisions of candidates rather than voters determine who is elected. The empowerment of voters – a central component of all theories of democracy, requires that voters have some choice of candidates beyond a plebiscitary vote of confidence in the candidate mediated by actors and processes before the elections (Held 1987). The power to choose reduces as competition declines and the number of candidates with a realistic chance of winning, approaches one. At that point, any other option on the ballot is symbolic.

If party insiders and group leaders collude to support one candidate over other candidates before the election occurs, then party insiders can give their preferred candidate tremendous advantages in attracting the votes of citizens (Butler 2004; Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2008). In practice, this means tilting the playing field before the voters cast ballots, so that voters effectively select among a limited set of candidates who are acceptable to party insiders. Partisan voters tend to follow the cues of party elites when party elites unify behind a candidate early in a presidential nomination campaign (Steger 2015, ch. 6–9). The less competitive a nominating election is, the more likely that factors other than voters' choices determine the outcome.²

Beyond accountability, responsiveness, and empowerment of citizens, electoral competition produces a number of other benefits to democratic process and society. Close elections provide a strong incentive for the candidates and parties to organize and mobilize the electorate (McDonald and Samples 2006, ch. 1). Empirical studies generally support the relationship between competition and voter turnout (Patterson and Caldeira 1984; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Electoral competition also increases the information available to voters as political parties promote their candidate and because the news media give greater coverage to campaigns that are competitive (McDonald and Samples 2006, 7). Electoral competition also facilitates the watchdog function of the media. There is no assurance that commercial media will engage in investigative journalism, which is costly to perform and has only some probability of success. Electoral competition facilitates discovery of “abuses of power” and communication of that information to voters, because competing parties watch each other for reasons of self-interest, each trying to expose the wrongdoings of the other for their own benefit.³ This matters, because the costs of monitoring government must be absorbed by someone other than voters, who are busy with their own lives and lack the time or access to do so. Even people who do pay attention to politics must rely on the media and political parties to monitor and expose problems with candidates or parties.

Note that electoral competition might also cause problems for democratic nations. Competitive nominating elections help ensure responsiveness of party nominees to core constituencies of party activists and identifiers, whose votes are needed to win intra- and inter-party elections (Issacharoff and Pildes 1998). This may be good or bad for the country as a whole. A problem arises when the preferences of party activists come at the expense of the interests of the broader public, as noted earlier. Another problem is that responsiveness to ideologically oriented constituents constrains elected officials' ability to operate as trustees of the public good (McDonald and Samples 2006, 8–11). Elected officials need discretion to negotiate and bargain after elections, which competitive elections might constrain (Pitkin 1972). The problems of activist constraint have been exacerbated in the past decade by increasingly frenzied ideological commentators on Fox and MSNBC cable news, talk radio, and a multitude of digital media. Conservative digital media (e.g., Breitbart.com, The Blaze, The Daily Caller, Chicks on the Right, RedState, and Infowars) and liberal digital media (e.g., Addictinginfo, Bipartisan Report, Crooks and Liars, Daily Kos, Forward Progressives, MoveOn, and Talking Points Memo) provide a constant stream of information that enflame party activist passions. These passions constrain the ability of elected officials to compromise while in office.

These issues for representation and governance arise when the parties are polarized. In a polarized political environment, parties and candidates pursue the “politics of the base.” They respond to the passions of policy-demanding party constituencies in order to mobilize their partisan supporters to win elections (Abramowitz 2010; Barrileaux, Holbrook, and Langer 2002). Political polarization increases the pressure to produce policies that satisfy the more ideologically extreme preferences of their party base. As a result, both parties try to direct a disproportionate share of government benefits to their constituencies while imposing a disproportionate share of the costs on the other side’s constituencies. For example, Democrats are willing to raise taxes on Republican constituencies to pay for programs that disproportionately benefit Democratic constituencies, while Republicans are willing to cut spending in programs that disproportionately benefit Democratic constituencies in order to get tax cuts and other programs for their own constituents.

Political polarization thus increases the stakes involved in winning *institutional* control of Congress and the White House. Institutional control is critical because it confers the capacity to exercise control over the agenda and the content of policy, which is necessary for satisfying constituent demands (Cox and McCubbins 1993). Institutional control is a system level consideration because the legislative process contains multiple pivot points in which legislation can be defeated (Krehbiel 1998). Winning the presidency is especially important to a political party’s policy goals because the president has the greatest capacity to set the policy agenda and the president occupies the most critical pivot point in the legislative process. The president’s capacity to veto legislation greatly changes the power equation in the legislative process. If a party controls Congress but not the White House, the majority party in Congress needs to overcome presidential vetoes with two-thirds majorities in both chambers, which places a very high political hurdle to overcome to deliver benefits to party constituencies. For the minority party in Congress, winning the White House is tantamount to blocking the congressional majority. The presidency thus is the most critical position for delivering benefits to party constituencies.

While the parties are polarized, they remain national coalitions of groups and ideological factions. Presidential nominations are consequential because the presidential nominee of a party plays an outsized role in shaping public perceptions of what a party stands for and setting expectations about what it will do if it wins the election. Thus, nominations are contested by ambitious candidates who want the office *and* by groups and activists who want their causes and preferences represented by the party’s nominee. Who exerts influence in the nomination process affects who becomes the nominee and what policies will be pursued if the party wins.

Measuring Competition in Presidential Nominations in the Modern Era

Historically, party leaders selected presidential nominees in proverbial smoke-filled rooms at the national conventions, with little input by citizens (David, Goldman, and Bain 1960; Reiter 1985). Reforms of the nomination process in the 1970s enabled more candidates, particularly those outside a party’s mainstream, to compete for the presidential nomination (Asher 1984, 199–201; Polsby 1983). The proliferation of primary elections and reforms of party caucuses also enabled larger numbers of citizens to participate in the selection of the party nominee (Polsby 1983). While democratizing the nomination process, citizens voting in presidential caucuses and primaries may not have as much choice as it appears. As explained earlier, decisions by prospective candidates and by party insiders may result in a ballot with candidates who have very different chances of winning (Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2008). Citizens are empowered to select their leaders when they have several viable candidates to choose among in an election. Assessing the competitiveness of elections and the degree of voter choice among

candidates with a realistic chance of winning, provides insights into which scenario plays out in a given election year.

There also will be variation in voter choice across the primary season as candidates are winnowed from the race. Running for a presidential nomination is costly, especially once the primaries begin because of the need for organization, travel and advertising. Candidates begin the primary season with variable amounts of name recognition, public support, campaign funds, organization, and media exposure. Candidates who fail to attract much support in the early caucuses and primaries find their fundraising diminished, their campaign organizations cut back, and they lack the resources to advertise (Norrander 2006). Further, their ability to campaign through the news media – which is free (but earned) – is difficult because they get less coverage and what coverage they do get is more critical (Bartels 1988; Haynes, Gurian, Crespín, and Zorn 2004; Patterson 1980, 43–48). For example, in the 2016 Republican nomination, candidates like Chris Christie and Rick Santorum received few votes in the Iowa Caucus and New Hampshire primary and could not realistically continue their campaigns. Candidates with plenty of funds raised and held in reserve, like Jeb Bush in 2016, can continue in the race for a while but they too will face diminished capacity to campaign. At some point, the strategic calculus changes and the odds of winning grow thin as they fall further behind in the delegate count (Norrander 2006). At some point before the end of the caucuses, some candidates may stop campaigning because they realize they cannot win, as Marco Rubio did after losing his home state primary in Florida. As a result, there tend to be fewer viable candidates and less competition in later primaries than in those occurring at the beginning of the primary season.

The number of viable candidates that voters select among have been measured in various ways, but the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index has been shown to be a particularly useful measure in competitive markets with multiple contestants (Steger 2015, ch. 6). The HHI, for example, is used to measure the competitiveness of professional sports leagues, economic markets, and elections with more than two parties or candidates (Bardhan and Yang 2004; Owen, Ryan, and Weatherston 2008; Steger, Hickman, and Yohn 2002; Taagepera and Laakso 1989). The index is calculated in two stages. The first step involves summing the square of the candidates' vote shares, $H = \sum c_i^2$, where c_i = each candidate's share of the vote. The inverse of H provides a measure of the number of competitively equivalent options available to voters. This measure is to estimate the number of effective political parties and candidates in multi-party/candidate electoral systems like presidential nominations. I will use the 2016 New Hampshire primary results to illustrate the measure. On the Republican side, 11 candidates divided the vote, with the top five candidates getting 35.72 percent, 15.93 percent, 11.79 percent, 11.11 percent, and 10.66 percent. The next six candidates gained 14.79 percent of the vote.⁴ For this distribution of votes for 11 candidates, H is calculated to be 5.04 competitively equivalent candidates. This number can be interpreted as a voter having a choice among five viable candidates and some symbolic options. On the Democratic side, Sanders received 61.3 percent of the vote, Clinton received 38.4 percent and Martin O'Malley received 0.03 percent of the vote. This distribution of the vote yields an H of 1.91 percent of the vote – indicating that voters chose among approximately two viable candidates. The measure improves on just counting the number of candidates on the ballot because some candidates do not have a realistic chance of winning and thus are not as meaningful an option for voters. For the first part of the analysis in Figure 16.1, the votes across all primaries are combined for calculating H , excluding votes as noted above as well as any candidate gaining less than 0.1 percent of the aggregate primary vote. For the analyses of the 2016 nomination in Figure 16.3, H is calculated separately for each caucus and primary.

The second step in the analysis involves calculating a normalized index, $HHI = (H - 1/N) / (1 - 1/N)$, where N is the total number of candidates in the race. The normalized HHI statistic

measures the competitive balance of the election using the distribution of the vote while controlling for the number of candidates in the race. This feature allows us to compare the competitiveness of elections with different numbers of candidates. For ease of presentation, I inverted the normalized HHI, so that high scores indicate more competition (no candidate dominates) while low scores indicate less competition. The resulting measure is bounded at one in the case of a perfectly competitive and a score of zero indicates no competition. The New Hampshire race described above has an inverted HHI of .8817, indicating a highly competitive race. The Anti-Trust division of U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) uses the normalized HHI to determine whether a merger of corporations would excessively restrict market competition. Given the inversion of the normalized HHI statistic, the DOJ criterion establishes .75 as the threshold above which races would be considered competitive and scores below that mark indicate little competition.⁵

These measures work well for comparing the choices available to voters across campaigns with different numbers of candidates appearing on the ballot as well as comparing the competitiveness of nominations across caucuses and primaries. A low number of competitively equivalent or viable candidates and a low normalized HHI score indicate that there is little competition and voters have less meaningful choice about which candidate to nominate.

Competition across and within Presidential Nomination Campaigns

We begin with the number of candidates competing in presidential nominations from 1972 through 2016 (see Figure 16.1). Figure 16.1 shows the average number of viable or competitively equivalent candidates that represent the choices available to voters across the primaries taken together. Although there are few cases on which to base inferences, the patterns suggest the two political parties may be trending in different directions over time. Democratic primary voters chose among a larger number of competitive candidates in the 1970s, but fewer in recent decades. Republicans had fewer competitive candidates until the last three nominations. In part, the differences reflect the in- versus out-of-power party. Nominations with incumbent presidents have little competition (usually) and Republicans had an incumbent president seeking renomination in five elections between 1972 and 2004, while the Democrats had an incumbent president in three elections. Incumbency, however, does not account for all of the differences. The different trends also correspond to changing factionalism in the Democratic and Republican Parties that has been occurring as the parties realign at the elite and mass levels.

Voters in Democratic primaries had choices over a greater number of viable candidates in the 1970s, in part because the Democratic Party was more factionalized in the 1970s and 1980s than it has been since the 1990s. Between the 1930s and 1990s, the Democratic Party was a large national coalition of relatively conservative southern Democrats and more liberal non-southern Democrats. Multiple candidates sought presidential nominations by competing to be the preferred candidate of the various factions in the party (Brams 1978). The Democratic Party coalition slowly became more homogeneous and liberal as conservative southern white elites and party identifiers gravitated from the Democrats to the Republican Party through intergenerational replacement or simply by switching party allegiances (Paulson 2007). Southern white Democratic politicians and party identifiers began leaving the party in 1964 and that pattern continued through the 1990s. By the late 1990s, most Democrats in the southern states were African-American or living in large urban areas. There remain divisions among Democrats, but the differences along ideological and cultural dimensions are less than they used to be. The differences between progressives like Elizabeth Warren and centrists like Hillary Clinton are not as great as the differences of the 1960s and 1970s when Democrats had leaders like George

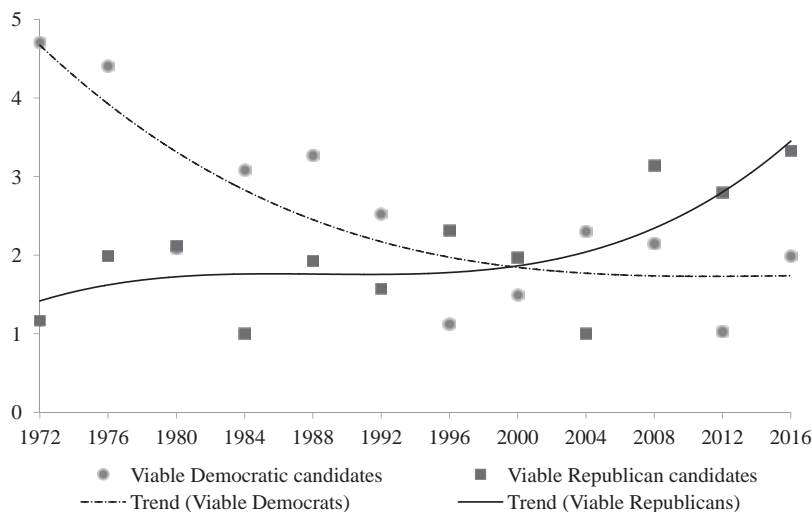


Figure 16.1 Number of Viable or Competitively Equivalent Candidates in Presidential Primaries, 1972–2016

Source: The number of competitively equivalent candidates in a nomination campaign is defined by $H = 1 / \sum c_i^2$, where C = candidate share of the aggregate primary vote.

McGovern on the left and George C. Wallace on the right. Since the 1990s, Democratic nominations typically have involved candidates vying to become the leading candidate of left-of-center “mainstream” Democrats and progressive Democrats.

The Republican Party has long had divisions between moderates and conservatives, but these divisions were not nearly as great as those of the Democratic Party. Between 1964 and the 1990s, however, conservative southern white Evangelicals increasingly joined the Republican Party, particularly during and after the Reagan years. Moderate Republicans in northeastern states and the West Coast have been slowly gravitating to the Democratic Party, but that movement is not as complete as the movement of southern whites to the Republican Party. The regional and ideological divisions within the Republican Party have increased. Across presidential nominations, the proportion of very conservative voters has been increasing, while the size of the moderate faction has been declining – though it has not disappeared (Olson and Scala 2015). The resulting Republican coalition is larger but more internally divided than that of the 1960s. Such divisions correspond to a larger number of viable candidates contesting Republican presidential primaries.

In addition to ideological factionalism, the Republican Party has experienced a substantial divide between an establishment, business-oriented party faction and a more ideological, anti-establishment coalition. After the 2008 bailout of big banks and the election of Barack Obama, Tea Party Republicans organized to challenge “establishment” Republicans who held moderate positions or who compromised with Barack Obama (Skocpol and Williamson 2013). Although the Tea Party movement had faded as an organized political force by 2016, the underlying sentiments remained in the form of strong anti-establishment attitudes. Exit polls from the 2016 Republican caucuses and primaries show that supporters and detractors of Donald Trump fell mainly along the lines of wanting an “outsider” candidate versus a candidate with more experience (more on this below). A consequence of these multiple, crosscutting cleavages in the

Republican Party has been an increase in the number of candidates competing to be the leader of different factions (Steger 2017).

Figure 16.2 shows the competitiveness of the presidential primaries, using the normalized HHI as an indicator of the competitive balance across the nominations of elections from 1972 to 2016. The figure includes the names of the eventual nominee for each party in each election. It is important to note that Figure 16.2 represents the competitiveness across all of the primaries taken together. Nominations are more competitive when there are two or more candidates competing across the entire range of primaries. Nominations are less competitive when there is a dominant candidate with little or no opposition. This usually happens when there is an overwhelming favorite in the race – as when an incumbent president is running for renomination for a second term. Nominations are also less competitive if there are viable candidates contesting the nomination, but the frontrunner quickly gains momentum and rival candidates drop out of the race, in which case mid- and late-season primaries are less competitive. This point is discussed in the analysis of the 2016 primaries below.

Regarding the first point, five of the eight presidents who sought a second term in the post-reform era (1972 to the present) were basically unchallenged when they sought renomination. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush faced no opponents. Although largely unreported, several minor candidates challenged the renominations of Richard Nixon in 1972, Bill Clinton in 1996, and Barack Obama in 2012. These candidates had only a very small impact on the primary vote and did not significantly affect the competitiveness of the primaries. Three presidents, however, faced challengers who were more significant. In general, presidents face a challenge to their renomination when there are major factional divisions in the party and the president is unpopular with the public. Defeating an incumbent president is exceptionally difficult and most potential rivals do not attempt it. The three presidents who faced challengers (Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980, and George H. W. Bush in 1992) fit this pattern. These renomination challenges are not the main concern of this chapter and interested readers can find a more detailed discussion elsewhere (Steger 2015, ch. 6). What is worth noting is that a president who is unpopular within his or her party is likely to face a challenge and the challenger will stand

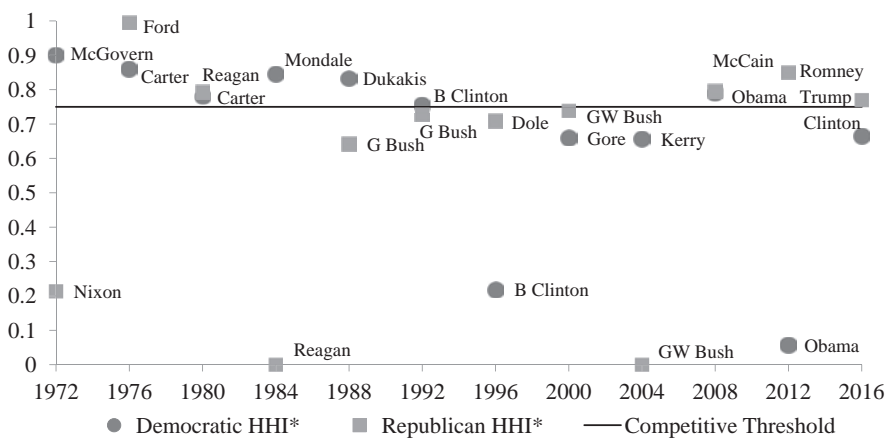


Figure 16.2 Competitiveness of Presidential Primaries, 1972–2016

Note: Normalized Herfindahl-Hirschman Index of the aggregate primary vote. Scores above the threshold indicate a competitive race across the primaries taken together.

at least as a symbolic option on the ballot for disaffected partisans. All three of the incumbent presidents who faced such a challenge were defeated in the general election.

Excluding the races involving an incumbent president, most presidential nominations have been just above or just below the threshold indicating competitive nomination races. Since 1972, ten of the 16 open races – those without an incumbent president – have been in the range indicating a competitive presidential nomination. Seven of these ten races were Democratic nominations and three were Republican nominations.

In all of these competitive races, the majority of party elites did not publicly back a candidate before the caucuses and primaries. In some of these races, there was a party favorite in the sense that a majority of party elites did endorse a preferred candidate, as Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller (2008) have found in *The Party Decides*. However, an equally critical factor is how many elites – of those who could endorse a candidate – actually do so during the invisible primary (Steger 2016). In all of the competitive nomination races, the leading candidates received endorsements from fewer than half of the party elites that could have endorsed them during the invisible primary. In each case, two or more candidates were viable competitors and the primaries were more competitive. To put some flesh on the bones provided by the figures, it is worth looking at these races in some descriptive detail.

Although data on presidential endorsements is scant for the presidential nominations of the 1970s, there is little indication that George McGovern (1972) or Jimmy Carter (1976) was the preferred candidate of Democratic Party insiders in those years. Indeed, McGovern and Carter were widely described as outsider candidates during their campaigns. Both won their nomination campaigns by gaining momentum during the caucuses and primaries (Aldrich 1980). Walter Mondale had more party insider support than any of his rivals in 1984, but many Democratic elites refrained from endorsing him or any other candidate before the primaries began. Mondale had only about a quarter of the possible endorsements that he could have had. He faced a strong challenge from Colorado Senator Gary Hart who did much better than expected in the early caucuses and primaries (Bartels 1988). Mondale narrowly won the 1984 primaries and he gained a majority of convention delegates with the help of Democratic super-delegates. Democratic insiders divided their support among multiple candidates in 1988, and the eventual nominee, Michael Dukakis was endorsed by fewer than ten percent of all the Democratic Party insiders. Democratic Party insiders mostly stayed on the sidelines in the invisible primary before the 1992 Democratic primaries, waiting for New York's Mario Cuomo to enter the race. Cuomo ultimately decided not to run, leaving the race relatively wide open. The candidate with the most endorsements was Bill Clinton, but he also was endorsed by fewer than ten percent of all Democratic Party elites. Democratic Party elites also stayed on the sidelines during the invisible primary for the 2004 Democratic nomination, jumping on John Kerry's bandwagon only after he won critical victories in the Iowa Caucus and New Hampshire primary. Hillary Clinton had more party insider support in 2008, but she did not have the support of a majority of Democratic Party elites before the primaries. Of all the open Democratic presidential nominations since 1972, the majority of Democratic Party elites publicly backed a candidate during the invisible primary only in 2000 with Vice President Al Gore and with Hillary Clinton in 2016. In both years, the primaries were not in the range considered to be competitive, though the score for the 2016 primaries is right at the margin identifying a competitive race (I discuss this race below, noting for now that it is distinctive from other nomination campaigns).

The Republican races that were competitive fit a similar pattern, in that the three candidates with competitive primaries lacked the support of a majority of Republican elites during the invisible primaries. McCain and Romney received less than a quarter of the party elite endorsements that could have been made in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Donald Trump had

no endorsements from elite Republican Party officials before the primaries began. Those that jumped on his bandwagon did so only as he demonstrated support in the caucuses and primaries. Indeed, Trump won despite opposition from party insiders. Trump will be discussed below.

The six open nominations that had less competitive primaries (see Figure 16.2) all had a stronger frontrunner who had more substantial support from party insiders during the invisible primary. Ronald Reagan was a clear frontrunner going into the 1980 Republican nomination, though it is worth noting that moderate Republican insiders opposed Reagan's nomination but divided their support between George H. W. Bush, Bob Dole, and John Anderson. Reagan's support among grass roots Republicans, however, was strong and he quickly winnowed the field in the 1980 primaries. George W. Bush was Reagan's Vice President and he received the support of about forty percent of elite Republican Party insiders before the primaries; others either refrained from backing a candidate or supported Senate Minority leader Bob Dole. Bush gained substantial momentum beginning with the New Hampshire primary and most of his opponents were winnowed quickly. Over forty percent of elite Republican insiders supported Dole's third campaign for the Republican nomination and his opponents were substantially less competitive in the 1996 Republican Primaries. Then Texas Governor George W. Bush had the most support from party insiders of any Republican to seek the nomination in the post-reform era. He faced little opposition in the primaries and quickly secured the nomination in 2000.

On the Democratic side, the two open nomination races that were not competitive (by the .25 threshold) were that of Al Gore in 2000 and Hillary Clinton in 2016. Gore and Clinton both had overwhelming support from party insiders during the invisible primary. Gore faced only one rival who had little chance of winning after Gore won strong victories in the Iowa Caucus and the New Hampshire primary. Clinton ultimately prevailed, but the media made the race look more competitive than it actually was. Although Sanders attracted energetic support from progressive Democrats, especially younger voters, Clinton won with almost 56 percent of the caucus and primary vote. There is a caveat to this observation, however, in that many of the primaries were not competitive even though the race was relatively competitive across the caucuses and primaries. Of all the nominations since 1972, the Clinton–Sanders race has a distinctive pattern across the primary season (see below).

Overall, open presidential nominations of the post-reform era have given voters meaningful choices of candidates, at least through the early caucuses and primaries. As Figure 16.1 shows, in most of these races and in three races involving an incumbent president seeking renomination, there have been competitive candidates on the ballot. Caucus and primary voters have at least symbolic options even in cases where the frontrunner is likely to win. In races in which party elites refrained from backing a candidate during the invisible primary, the primaries and caucuses are competitive. In races in which the majority of elites engaged in the process by backing a candidate, and unified around a frontrunner, the result is a less competitive race across all of the primaries taken together. This pattern suggests that party insiders may have helped tilt the playing field in favor of a preferred candidate, but this pattern holds only when party insiders actively engage in the process and unify behind a candidate before the primaries (Steger 2016).

A Closer Look at the 2016 Presidential Nomination Races: Momentum and Winnowing

The 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential nomination races exhibited substantially different dynamics. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton was the overwhelming favorite of party insiders. She netted almost 97 percent of the possible endorsements by elite elected Democratic officials. She also had an extensive fundraising network already in place among big

Democratic donors owing to her previous campaign in 2008. In very early polls during 2013 and 2014, Clinton consistently polled over fifty percent among self-identified Democrats and Democratic leaners. None of the politicians rumored to be considering a nomination campaign, like Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Elizabeth Warren, entered the race. This helped clear the path to victory for Hillary Clinton who was expected to face minimal resistance to her nomination. Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-described Democratic Socialist, challenged Clinton. Sanders began the race with little money, name recognition, and campaign organization. Sanders gained momentum in the latter half of 2015 through Twitter and word-of-mouth as progressive Democratic activists and young Democrats embraced his progressive, populist messages. Further, liberal digital media supported Sanders' left-wing populist campaign. Sanders' followers and the audiences of digital media outlets shared stories on social media, expanding the reach of his insurgent campaign. By the time the caucuses and primaries began, Sanders had become a serious rival to Clinton for the nomination.

Figure 16.3 indicates that Sanders and Clinton were both viable, competitively equivalent candidates from the Iowa Caucuses on February 2 until the last caucuses and primaries in June. Democratic voters in most states had a choice between both candidates. Note that there were several states in early March in which Democratic voters did not have two competitively equivalent candidates. Sanders ran notably weaker in some states, particularly in large southern states in which African-American voters comprised a large proportion of the Democratic voting population. Clinton, however, ran poorly in a few other states in the high plains and Pacific Northwest, where Sanders ran well. This is unusual, in that one candidate or the other won states by large margins with closely contested primaries scattered in between. Overall, however, the trendline (dotted line) indicates a relatively balanced and competitive campaign between two candidates throughout the caucuses and primaries. There were, however, enough primaries that generated lopsided results that the overall competitiveness score, shown in Figure 16.2,

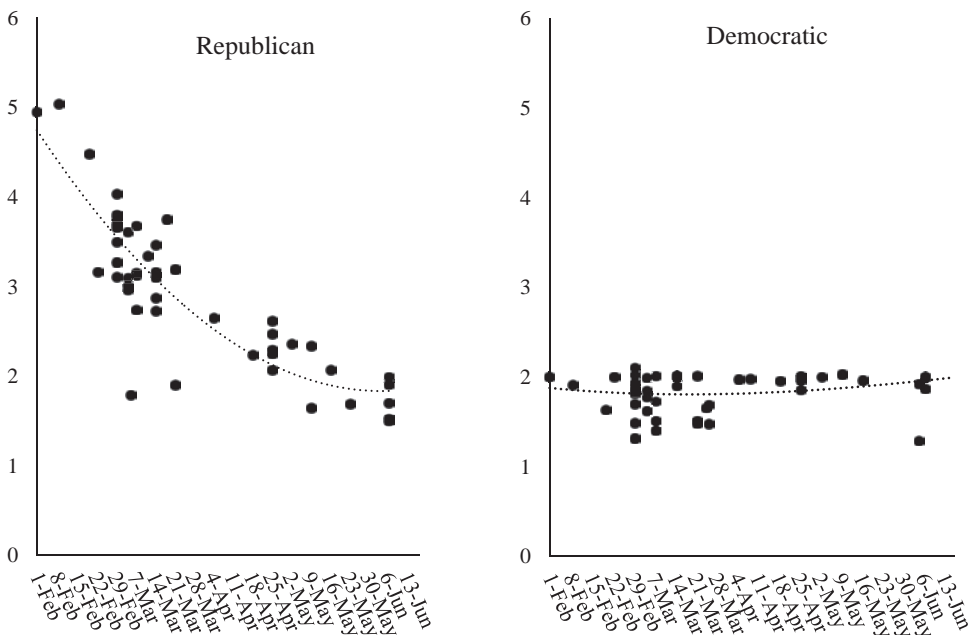


Figure 16.3 Number of Viable or Competitively Equivalent Candidates across 2016 Presidential Caucuses and Primaries

is not considered competitive across the caucuses and primaries. Despite hype surrounding Sanders' campaign, Clinton was highly likely to win the nomination after the southern states held their primaries (and in which Sanders was not competitive).

The 2016 Republican campaign shaped up differently. First, there was no clear frontrunner in national polls in 2013 and 2014 when candidates are usually calculating their chances against other potential candidates. Ultimately, there were 16 nationally recognized Republican candidates, but none drew more than 20 percent in national polls through the June of 2015. Indeed, the race was highly fluid and nine candidates led in various national polls from 2013 through the end of 2015.⁶ Republican Party elites virtually stayed out of the race during the invisible primary with only about a third making any endorsement, and those that did publicly support a candidate divided their support among several candidates. As such, none of the Republicans in the race could claim to have been a strong frontrunner or a party favorite when the primaries began. Trump led in national polls by the end of the invisible primary, but his support was far below levels at which the frontrunner was able to win the nomination in the caucuses and primaries.

Despite the large field of candidates, many did not get much traction in the race when the caucuses and primaries began. Figure 16.3 shows that the Republican race began with five competitively equivalent candidates in the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries – the most since the Democratic race of 1976. Many of the candidates, however, were winnowed from the field after they failed to place near the top in the Iowa Caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. The winnowing pattern exhibited in the Republican race in Figure 16.3 is typical of presidential nomination campaigns of the post-reform era. The race begins with a number of candidates, but those that fail to attract support in the earliest nominating elections usually drop out of the race.

One major implication in a race like this is that voters in states holding a caucus or primary on a later date have fewer options on the ballot. After Iowa and New Hampshire, the race essentially narrowed to three major candidates – Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio with Ben Carson and John Kasich continuing in the race with less support. The race continued to narrow with Trump slowly gaining momentum to become the frontrunner. Still, Republican voters continued to have choices among at least two competitively equivalent candidates throughout the caucus and primary season. This has been the pattern in the last three Republican nominations.

Figure 16.4 shows the competitive balance of the Republican and Democratic presidential caucuses and primaries. On the Republican side, the race began as a highly competitive race in Iowa and New Hampshire, but the competitiveness of the race declined as Donald Trump gained momentum and as most of his rivals were winnowed from the field of candidates. Although voters had choices by the end of the race, the competitive balance had shifted decidedly in favor of Donald Trump. Together, the two figures for the Republican race reflect a classic case of “campaign momentum” of the type that propelled Jimmy Carter to the Democratic nomination in 1976. It is clear that Republican caucus and primary voters rather than mediation by party insiders determined that Trump would win the nomination.

The competitiveness of the 2016 Democratic race, shown in the right panel of Figure 16.4, looks very different. The race began in the Iowa caucuses as a perfectly competitive race – the HHI score indicates a perfect tie. There were a few near perfectly competitive races from the beginning to the end of the primary season as Clinton and Sanders ran almost evenly in Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, Illinois, Connecticut, Kentucky, New Mexico, South Dakota, and the District of Columbia. In between, however, there were a number of states in which either Clinton (southern states) or Sanders (Pacific Northwestern states) had decided advantages. These states often had little competition between the two candidates. Both, however, won enough states to make it a two-person race throughout the entire caucus and primary season.

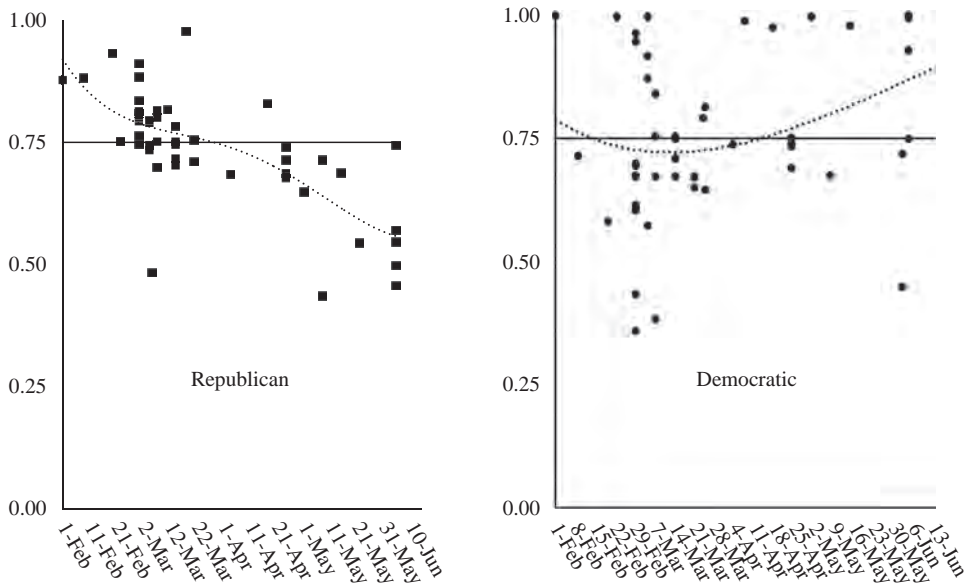


Figure 16.4 Competitiveness of 2016 Republican and Democratic Presidential Caucuses and Primaries

The difference was that Clinton won more of the big states with larger numbers of delegates to the national convention. The competitiveness of the race indicates that caucus and primary voters determined the outcome. Despite Clinton's overwhelming support by party insiders, there is little evidence that party elites were able to mediate the nomination by rallying to Clinton's banner during the invisible primary phase of the campaign. While their support undoubtedly helped Clinton, the patterns of competition and voter choice do not indicate a successful collusive effect to minimize competition and deny voters the opportunity to exercise a free choice in the caucuses and primaries.

Conclusions

The reforms of the early 1970s were intended to democratize the presidential process, enabling rank-and-file party activists and identifiers to have a voice in the selection of the party's presidential nominees. The evidence provided here indicates that the reforms have had that effect. In almost all of the open nominations, primary voters have had meaningful choices among two or more competitively equivalent candidates who had a realistic chance of winning. In addition, in three of the seven nominations with an incumbent seeking reelection, voters have had meaningful choices or at least a symbolic option with which they could express disapproval of the incumbent. There can be little question that the post-reform era is relatively democratic in this sense. Primary voters generally have meaningful choices in all but a few nomination races (particularly those with an incumbent president and a few others in which party elites overwhelmingly backed a candidate that early polls showed having a sizeable lead).

Competition in elections provides voters with meaningful choices, helping ensure responsiveness, accountability and citizen empowerment over the political system, or at least over the political class of each party. In nominating elections, such empowerment serves to make party candidates responsive and accountable to party constituencies, which comes with advantages

and disadvantages for the country. While voters have meaningful choices, there have been quite a few nominations in which the playing field has tilted in favor of an early favorite who enters the race, secures substantial party insider support, and goes on to win the nomination with the support of a majority of caucus and primary voters. When most party insiders engage in the process by publicly backing a candidate *and* unify behind a frontrunner during the invisible primary, the primaries have not been as competitive. In every case where party insiders refrained from jumping into the race behind a frontrunner, the result has been a more competitive race during the caucuses and primaries. These races in particular are highly competitive through at least the early caucuses and primaries. Voters in later states often have fewer choices than do voters in states holding primaries earlier in the calendar. In this respect, voters in these later occurring primaries have less power and influence over the nomination.

Notes

- 1 The Federal Reserve uses the index to measure market competition and market share (see Rhoads 1993, 188). The Justice Department has long used the measure to evaluate corporate mergers (Calkins 1983).
- 2 There are numerous possibilities including party insider collusion, the distribution of voter preferences, geographic or ideological sorting, and so on.
- 3 That is, unless both major parties have moved into a mutually advantageous electoral collusion, with each side accepting corruption on the part of the other in exchange for ignoring corruption on their own part.
- 4 The vote shares of candidates who received at least one-tenth of one percent of the total number of votes cast in a primary to ensure that the measure is as inclusive and as close to the total number of votes cast as possible. The measure uses the summed vote shares of candidates meeting this criterion, rather than the total number of votes cast in a primary. Votes for unidentified “others” and “scattered write-ins” are excluded since vote shares are not identifiable for individual candidates. Similarly, “uncommitted” votes are excluded since these votes do not reflect the success of individual candidates.
- 5 See <http://www.justice.gov/atr/public/guidelines/hhi.html>.
- 6 See http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_republican_presidential_nomination-3823.html.

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