

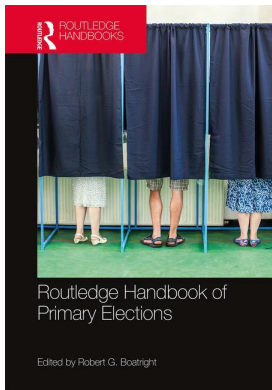
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TELEVISED DEBATES IN
PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES*David A. Hopkins***Introduction: Oops Goes a Candidate**

When Texas Governor Rick Perry announced his candidacy for president of the United States in August 2011, many political experts predicted that he would immediately establish himself as a serious contender for the 2012 Republican nomination. Perry was then the longest-serving governor in America, having been elected three times to lead the second-largest state in the nation as the culmination of a long political career in which he had never suffered defeat. He boasted the capacity to raise significant funds from an extensive donor network of wealthy Texas Republicans, as well as a more consistently conservative record in office than the party's initial frontrunner, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. Perry appeared to have the characteristics of a formidable candidate, and Romney advisors worried that he might well represent the biggest obstacle to the success of their own campaign (Institute of Politics 2013, 20). But Perry's presidential candidacy ultimately turned out to be an utter flop. He placed a distant fifth in the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus on January 3, 2012, winning just 10 percent of the vote, and withdrew from the race two weeks later after receiving less than 1 percent in the New Hampshire primary.

In retrospect, Perry's advisors blamed their candidate's failure on a number of tactical mistakes – including a late entry into the race, insufficient organization, and the absence of a compelling campaign message (Institute of Politics 2013, 66–69). But no single factor doomed Perry's 2012 presidential bid more than the self-inflicted damage suffered by the governor in the series of debates held among the Republican contenders on national television in the months prior to the onset of the primary season itself. Perry had entered the debates as a leading aspirant in the Republican field; at their conclusion, he had not only turned himself into an also-ran but had even become a national punchline.

Perry's first stumble occurred in a September 22, 2011 event aired on Fox News Channel. Asked by moderator Chris Wallace to explain his relatively moderate record on immigration – a departure from his otherwise conservative policy platform – Perry defended his support of a law that allowed students who had entered the United States illegally to qualify for the reduced tuition rates offered to state residents by the Texas public university system. “There is nobody on this stage who has spent more time working on border security than I have,” Perry told Wallace. “But if you say that we should not educate children who have come into our state for

no other reason than they've been brought there by no fault of their own, I don't think you have a heart" (American Presidency Project 2011). Perry's rivals and conservative media figures immediately attacked him for implying that opposing the provision of public benefits to illegal immigrants amounted to cruelty, and his standing in national surveys of potential Republican primary voters quickly began to erode. Perry had been leading Romney by a 28 percent to 21 percent margin on the day of the debate, as measured by the Real Clear Politics poll aggregator; by mid-October, Perry had slipped to third place, trailing both Romney and businessman Herman Cain (Real Clear Politics 2012).

In a subsequent debate held in Rochester, Michigan on November 9 and televised by the financial news channel CNBC, Perry, though desperately in need of a strong performance, instead suffered even more self-inflicted damage. While touting his plans to cut the size of the federal government, Perry could only name two of the three cabinet departments that his own campaign had proposed to eliminate, mentioning Commerce and Education before frantically searching his mind for the identity of the third. The moment was sufficiently awkward that several of Perry's rival candidates even tried, unsuccessfully, to help him jog his memory before he gave up, conceding, "the third one . . . I can't [remember]. Sorry. Oops!" (Later in the evening, Perry finally recalled that he also supported eliminating the Department of Energy, which earned him a relieved ovation from the audience in the hall.)

Perry's "Oops" moment not only became fodder for critical post-debate analyses by political commentators but also immediately earned him relentless mockery in the larger pop-culture universe. YouTube reported that a clip of the gaffe was the single most-watched internet video in the United States the following day (YouTube Trends 2011). Late-night comedians repeatedly lampooned Perry's forgetfulness, with *Saturday Night Live* portraying the governor as a dim-witted good-ol'-boy who flailed around helplessly on stage to the excruciating embarrassment of the other candidates before admitting that "I can't say stuff good, the words don't talk right." Journalists began to report that Perry's fundraising had fallen well below expectations (Dunham 2011), and his standing in public opinion polls suffered an irreversible decline. Perry's disastrous debate performances were sufficiently memorable that they continued to damage his political reputation when he mounted a second presidential bid four years later, which only lasted three months before Perry concluded that the baggage of his previous mistakes prevented him from attracting the necessary support to run a competitive 2016 campaign.

The rapid fall of Rick Perry illustrates the significant, and potentially pivotal, role that televised debates now play in presidential nomination politics. Debates among the candidates of each party prior to and during the presidential primary season have proliferated over the past two decades, as measured by the number of events held per election and the size of the national audience. Perry was one of several recent candidates whose presidential chances were strongly affected by their performance in these increasingly crucial events. Recognizing the growing power of debates to determine the identity and policy platform of the presidential nominees, both parties' national committees have acted to assert procedural control over their number, timing, and sponsorship. Like candidates, strategists, and media analysts, Democratic and Republican party leaders have concluded from experience that televised debates have become a central component of the presidential nomination process.

How Pre-Nomination Debates Differ from General Election Debates

Traditionally, both academic scholarship and popular media accounts have devoted much more attention to the series of debates held between the major-party nominees in the weeks prior to the November general election than to the earlier events of the primary season. The fall debates

have attracted consistently large viewing audiences and produced a number of memorable campaign moments ever since they were famously inaugurated in 1960 by John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. According to American political lore, Kennedy's superior debate performance – especially his personal skill in using the medium of television to cultivate a positive impression among the voting public – gave him an ultimately decisive advantage in what turned out to be a very close election. Ever since, many popular commentators have habitually treated the fall debates as a major milestone in presidential campaigns that hold the power to determine the occupant of the White House for the succeeding four years. Systematic studies of public opinion, however, indicate that these events usually exert only modest and temporary effects on the distribution of candidate support in the electorate – suggesting that media hype tends to exaggerate the importance of the general election debates in deciding the presidency (Benoit, Hansen and Verser 2003).

There are several reasons why debates held during the nomination phase of the campaign, though they do not receive the same degree of publicity or viewership as the fall events, are actually more likely to exert significant influence over voters' perceptions and predispositions. First, the presence of strong partisan ties in the electorate sharply limits the proportion of voters who remain open to persuasion by both candidates in general elections, while the debates themselves occur amid a whirlwind fall campaign that bombards attentive citizens with a barrage of other information about the policies and personalities of the two main contenders. Even a particularly strong – or weak – performance by a nominee in a general election debate is unlikely to shake the vast majority of voters from their existing loyalties, and the measurable shifts that sometimes do occur in the candidate horse race in favor of the debate “winner” usually dissipate well before the election itself.

During the nomination period, in contrast, voters' preferences are much more weakly held and are thus susceptible to significant influence by campaign events. At this preliminary stage, citizens are weighing support among candidates within their own party rather than across party lines, removing the most powerful determinant of vote choice in general elections. Voters often must choose from among a field of more – and sometimes many more – than two candidates, and they usually possess limited existing knowledge of the various contenders (especially those presidential aspirants who have not previously sought national office and are not otherwise familiar to the public). In the absence of strongly held voter predispositions or other sources of information, a debate can supply a burst of positive or negative publicity that can easily exert a significant and lasting effect on the relative standing of a particular candidate (Best and Hubbard 1999; McKinney and Warner 2013).

In addition, debate participation is a more important element of candidates' communication, publicity, and campaign-building strategies during the pre-nomination phase than in the general election. Primary debates provide candidates with low-cost access to a national audience of politically attentive party activists, donors, and elected officials as well as ordinary voters. Candidates seek to impress these influential figures and attract their active support – or, at the least, dissuade them from backing a rival – at a point when they are still forming a campaign organization and amassing a financial war chest.

Finally, the long series of debates held prior to and during the sequence of presidential primaries and caucuses may play a role in shaping the policy positions and priorities of the eventual nominee – and thus the national party itself. The contestation of internal party differences during the nomination phase can result in the formation of a broadly held agreement among party politicians about the contemporary preferences and demands of the party membership. As the various contenders within each party's field of candidates jockey for position, they test out policy proposals and themes in front of primary voters, responding to, and sometimes co-opting,

the campaign platforms of their opponents. Even candidates who ultimately fail to win the nomination themselves can leave a residue of influence on the party, and thus on the trajectory of national politics, by advancing views and ideas during the debates that are adopted by the party's eventual standard-bearer.

While debates during the presidential primary period are neither as venerable a tradition nor as well-studied a campaign phenomenon as the debates held between the general election contenders in the weeks before the November election, they have recently come to serve as critical elements of the nomination process and thus important milestones on the road to the White House. Debates among presidential nomination seekers have been held for decades – in fact, they even predate the landmark Kennedy–Nixon general election debates of 1960 – but they have achieved a newfound prominence over the past several presidential elections, due to significant changes in the American media and technology universe. As more citizens tune in to watch, candidates face an increasing pressure to hone their debating skills and avoid making mistakes that could permanently derail their presidential ambitions.

The History of Presidential Primary Debates

The first face-to-face debate between candidates for the presidential nomination of a major party took place in 1948 between New York governor Thomas E. Dewey and former Minnesota governor Harold Stassen. Dewey, the Republican presidential nominee in 1944, had started the 1948 campaign as the apparent frontrunner for the nomination, though Stassen's victories in the Wisconsin and Nebraska primaries had established him as a serious rival by the time of the debate. On the eve of the May 18 Oregon primary election, Dewey and Stassen met in Portland to face off before a national radio audience estimated at 40 million listeners (Elving 2015). The two candidates were engaged to debate a single question – “Should the Communist Party of the United States be outlawed?” – with Stassen taking the affirmative position and Dewey the negative, although they referred to other issues as well during their hour-long exchange (Benoit et al. 2002, 18–21). History has judged Dewey the winner of the debate, in part because he defeated Stassen in the following day's vote and went on to capture the Republican nomination for a second time, losing narrowly in the general election to incumbent president Harry S. Truman.

The first nationally televised pre-nomination debate occurred in 1952, at the dawn of the television age; unusually, it was a bipartisan event sponsored by the League of Women Voters and *Life* magazine. Three Democratic presidential candidates and three Republicans debated two questions determined by a survey of female voters conducted by the League (Dwight Eisenhower, the eventual Republican nominee, did not attend but was permitted to send a representative, Ford Foundation president Paul G. Hoffman, in his place). The event was televised by ABC and was also broadcast nationally on the radio (Kendall 2000, 67–68). Four years later, Democratic presidential candidates Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver participated in the first intra-party debate before a national television audience, held on May 21, 1956 in advance of the Florida primary. Press accounts (e.g. Baker 1956) emphasized the limited policy disagreement between the candidates; Stevenson's subsequent narrow victory in the Florida vote aided his ultimately successful bid for the Democratic nomination that year.

Over the next two decades, debates occurred rarely and sporadically during the nomination season. But after the process of presidential nominations was fundamentally reformed in the 1970s, requiring the vast majority of delegates to both parties' national conventions to be selected directly by voters and pledged to support specific candidates, debates evolved into a familiar component of the post-reform system. With state primaries and caucuses becoming both more plentiful in number and more crucial to the outcome, candidates began to view

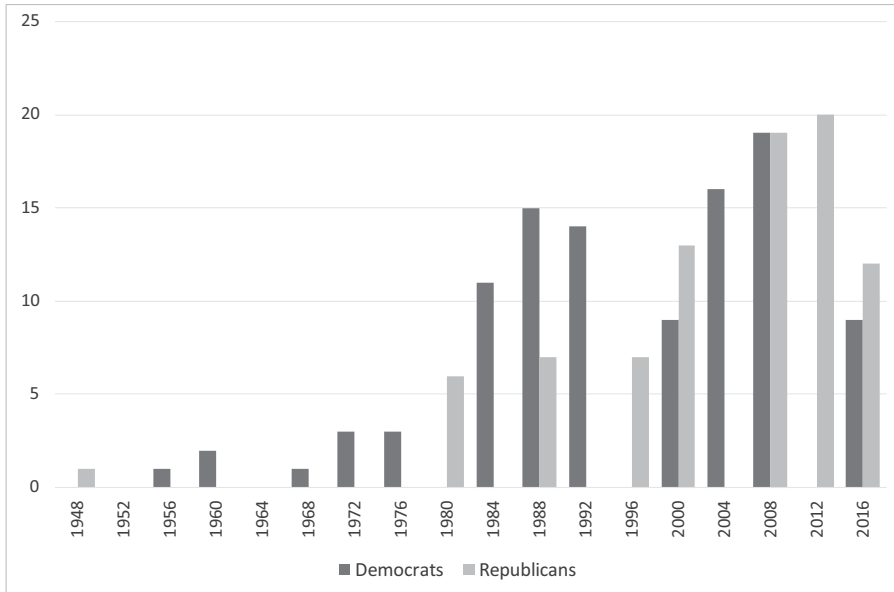


Figure 18.1 The Growth of Presidential Primary Debates, 1948–2016

Source: 1948–2012 data from Kondik and Skelley (2015); 2016 data from American Presidency Project, “Presidential Debates.”

repeated participation in debates as an important means of winning voter support – while the rise in popular interest encouraged media outlets to sponsor a growing number of events. As Figure 18.1 demonstrates, Republicans held a then-record six debates during the 1980 primaries, which was quickly surpassed by the Democrats’ 11 events in 1984 and 15 in 1988. Primary debates continued to increase thereafter, reaching a peak in 2008 and 2012 before intervention by the national party committees reduced their number in the 2016 election.

Cases in which an incumbent president is running for a second term represent an exception to this trend. Even when incumbents face an active challenger for renomination from within their party (as Richard Nixon did in 1972, Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980, and George H. W. Bush in 1992), no sitting president has yet agreed to meet an opponent in a primary debate. It is likely that incumbents have viewed such events as offering much more political risk than reward, giving challengers a unique opportunity to match – and perhaps even best – the current occupant of the White House on a national stage.

The Rising Influence of Debates

Before the 1990s, pre-nomination debates usually lacked a wide real-time viewership. Some debates were not televised outside the state in which they were held, or were carried only on the radio. One well-known 1980 debate prior to the New Hampshire primary was restricted to the two leading Republican contenders, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, though Reagan maneuvered to put Bush in an awkward position by demanding the inclusion of other candidates in attendance immediately before the event began – thundering at a moderator who attempted to cut the power to his microphone that “I paid for this microphone” (referring to the fact that the Reagan campaign had footed the bill for the debate). Though the moment is

remembered as a turning point marking Reagan's comeback in New Hampshire after losing to Bush in the Iowa caucus, there was no live television coverage of the event at all. Instead, film of Reagan's dramatic declaration was frequently replayed later on newscasts, giving him positive publicity and overshadowing the later exchanges between the candidates on substantive issues (Shirley 2009).

The major broadcast networks presumably viewed most primary debates as holding a finite appeal for a national viewing audience, and perhaps chafed at the limited opportunities that the format provides for the airing of lucrative paid advertisements. But debates held considerably more promise for the niche markets of cable television channels. Beginning in the 1980s, the non-profit C-SPAN network began providing national simulcasts of primary debates produced by local broadcast stations (such as New Hampshire's WMUR); by the 2000 election, nearly all debates in which most or all of the leading presidential candidates participated were broadcast either on a major network or on at least one of the national cable news channels such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Channel.

The proportion of the American public with access to cable television also increased substantially during this period, from 20 percent of households in 1980 to 56 percent in 1990 and 68 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002, 699). Soon thereafter, the growth of high-speed internet access facilitated the widespread online transmission of broadcast-quality video clips and streaming, providing another highly accessible technological avenue by which citizens could view debates. By the 2008 election, the video-hosting site YouTube had become one of the most-visited addresses on the Web – a status that it has retained over the succeeding decade. The emergence of 24-hour cable news and internet video has further amplified the importance of debates by allowing Americans who may not have viewed the events in real time to be exposed later to any noteworthy segments; unusual debate occurrences such as Rick Perry's "oops" moment are routinely replayed dozens of times on cable news and spread virally online to thousands of social media consumers.

Pre-nomination debates are not only increasingly plentiful in number but have generated growing voter interest over time. In the 2008 campaign, Democratic debates attracted an average of 4.7 million viewers per event, with the top-rated debate attracting 9 million viewers; the 2008 Republican debates averaged 3.1 million viewers with a peak of 7 million. In 2012, Republican debates averaged 5.1 million viewers with a peak of 8 million (there were no Democratic debates in 2012). In 2016, Democrats averaged 8 million viewers per debate with a high point of 16 million; while Republican debates drew an average audience of 15.5 million with a top mark of 24 million – reflecting the unusual popular fascination with the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump (O'Connell 2016; Rosenberg and Murphy 2016).

The rise of cable news and the internet has affected both the number and timing of pre-nomination debates. Previously, debates were often organized by state parties or local television stations and were usually held immediately prior to, or during, the primary season itself. In 1984, for example, the first Democratic debate was held on January 15, nine days before the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus, while the final event did not occur until June 3, two days before the final set of primaries in California and five other states. In recent years, however, many events have been scheduled well in advance of the primary calendar, beginning in the spring or summer of the year before the election. The first debate of the 2008 Republican nomination race occurred on May 3, 2007, the first debate of the 2012 race occurred on May 5, 2011 (with 13 of the election's 20 debates held prior to January 1, 2012), and the first debate of the 2016 contest was held on August 6, 2015.

These early events occur at a stage when many candidates are still building their campaign organizations, attracting financial donors, and introducing themselves to the party electorate

outside their home state. For this reason, a debate performance widely judged as substandard can prove damaging, or even fatal, to their presidential ambitions well before the voting even begins. Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty learned this lesson during his short-lived bid for the 2012 Republican nomination. In a June 2011 television interview, Pawlenty had attacked his rival Mitt Romney for implementing a health care reform plan in Massachusetts that resembled that of Democratic president Barack Obama, quipping that the 2010 Affordable Care Act should be dubbed “Obamacare.” But when given the opportunity to repeat the charge in Romney’s presence two days later at a debate in New Hampshire, Pawlenty dodged the question, disappointing conservative media figures who hoped that he would attack Romney on the issue. Pawlenty’s widely noted failure to impress party activists by criticizing Romney in person prevented him from gaining popular or financial support in the succeeding weeks, and he dropped out of the race by the end of the summer (Weigel 2011).

Wisconsin governor Scott Walker similarly began the 2016 presidential campaign as one of the leading candidates for the Republican nomination by media consensus. Walker had earned national attention due to a conflict with public employee unions that had led Democrats to force a recall election of the governor in 2012, which Walker had survived with help from a number of conservative interest groups. A typical poll taken in Iowa one week after his official entry into the race in July 2015 found Walker in first place, attracting support from 22 percent of likely Republican caucus attendees. But Walker turned out to be an unsteady campaigner on the national stage, and he found particular difficulty in standing out among a large field of debate participants. His surprisingly forgettable showing in the first debate of the season – *Politico* referred to Walker as “sleepy,” while ABC News characterized his performance as “lackluster” – quickly damaged the campaign’s fundraising efforts (Gass 2015; Phelps 2015). When he demonstrated little improvement in the second event one month later, Walker’s funding dried up entirely, forcing him out of the race only two months after he had jumped in. “Scott, for whatever reason, didn’t connect on TV,” lamented a major financial backer of Walker’s. “And if you can’t make it on television today in national politics, you’re dead” (Healy and Burns 2015).

The first few debates of the campaign may thus prove to be the most politically consequential, even though they occur months before the sequence of primaries and caucuses begin and up to a full year before the final state events on the nomination calendar. A study of the 2012 Republican debates conducted by Schiffer (2017) concluded that the earliest debates exerted the greatest influence on voter preferences (as measured by Facebook “likes”), which became less open to change as the sequence of events progressed. Early debates may hold a sense of novelty that attracts a unique level of interest among citizens. The estimated 24 million viewers who watched the first Republican debate of the 2016 campaign – reflecting the unparalleled national interest generated by Donald Trump’s entry into the presidential race – represented the largest audience for a non-sports cable broadcast in American history (Koblin 2016). The twelfth and final Republican debate, held the following March, attracted only 12 million viewers by comparison (O’Connell 2016).

While erstwhile leading contenders can suffer significant and even fatal damage to their campaigns by making a poor impression among debate-watchers, other candidates have viewed debate participation as a unique opportunity to attract personal publicity that they might not otherwise receive. Since the 1990s, an increasing number of unconventional candidates – such as business executives Morry Taylor (1996), Herman Cain (2012), and Carly Fiorina (2016); former ambassador Alan Keyes (1996, 2000, and 2008); religious conservative interest group leader Gary Bauer (2000); and retired heart surgeon Ben Carson (2016) – who lack the usual political experience or campaign infrastructure associated with serious aspirants to the nomination of a major party have nonetheless sought to benefit from the substantial nationwide

exposure provided by debates and other public events. Cain's effective promotion of his tax reform plan during several debates in the fall of 2011 even helped to propel him briefly to the front of the Republican field in national public opinion surveys before allegations of personal misconduct surfaced that drove him from the race.

With candidate fields often swollen by the presence of large numbers of individuals with varying claims to legitimate competitiveness, debate organizers have been forced to impose qualifying criteria to determine which contenders should be permitted to participate. Most commonly, eligibility for a particular event is based on candidates' standing in recent public opinion surveys of party voters or, if the debate is being held after the start of the primary season, on the candidates' order of finish in previous primaries and caucuses. The 2016 election in particular attracted such a large number of Republican candidates – seventeen in all, though some ultimately dropped out before the voting began – that several networks imposed a tiered format, reserving the regularly scheduled prime-time debate for the top candidates and holding a second event, dubbed the “undercard” or “kiddie table” debate by some pundits, for the rest of the field. Even so, the crowded debate stage proved unwieldy, limiting the amount of camera time that some candidates received – to their later vocal dissatisfaction.

It is clear that candidates now view debate participation as an essential component of an effective presidential campaign, even if they are running more to promote themselves or raise issues than to realistically vie for the nomination. Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig announced his candidacy for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination in September 2015, dedicating his campaign to the cause of pressuring federal officeholders to enact wide-ranging campaign finance reform. But Lessig failed to register measurable support in the opinion polls employed to determine debate eligibility, preventing him from appearing alongside his better-known opponents and prompting him to exit the race two months later. In his withdrawal announcement, Lessig lamented his exclusion, observing that “it was clear that getting into the Democratic debates was *the* essential step in this campaign” and claiming that the Democratic Party, by imposing participation requirements, “won't let me be a candidate” (Weigel 2015; Frizell 2015). For Lessig, and undoubtedly for other candidates as well, running for president was simply not worth the effort without the opportunity to gain the public attention provided by televised debates.

The Institutionalization of Primary Debates

Lessig's complaint that the Democratic Party had effectively excluded him from the presidential race by enforcing rules restricting access to the debate stage raises an important set of broader questions about how and why party organizations have recently acted to seize influence over the pre-nomination debate schedule. Before 2016, primary debates were essentially unregulated by the national parties. Debate sponsors would independently arrange dates, venues, and formats, extending invitations to whichever candidates they wished to participate. After 2012, the leaders of both parties acted on their growing frustration with the pre-nomination debate process, bringing primary debates under greater control of the national committees. These leaders viewed debates with suspicion as representing a potentially serious threat to the central interest of the party: that the nomination process produce a well-qualified nominee who could unite the party's own supporters and compete effectively against the opposition in the general election.

Party officials often express concern that the repeated thrusts and parries of debate rhetoric will result in a divided party or politically wounded nominee. In particular, they worry that candidates will use debates as a platform to play to the ideological activists of the party, promoting extreme policy positions that turn out to be liabilities in a general election (Martin 2014).

In 2012, for example, frontrunner Mitt Romney adopted a hardline stance on immigration during the Republican primaries, in part to ease concerns from conservative purists that he was too moderate to lead the party. During a January debate in Florida, Romney proposed resolving the problem of illegal immigration via what he termed “self-deportation” – a statement that was later viewed by many Republican leaders as fatally damaging their chances of attracting significant Latino support in the general election race against Barack Obama. After Obama defeated Romney in November, Republican National Committee chair Reince Priebus referred to Romney’s remark as a “horrific comment to make [that] obviously . . . hurts us” as a party (Blake 2013).

Party leaders also view the live debate setting as allowing candidates who are quick at repartee or gifted at reciting memorable sound bites to benefit at the expense of rivals with superior experience, knowledge, strategic acumen, campaign organization, or appeal outside the party base, imposing a systematic disadvantage on the contenders who possess the political assets held to be most valuable in general elections. In the Republican nomination race of 2012, for example, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich gained considerable positive publicity for his debate performances – especially his penchant for directing rhetorical fury at questions from moderators that he characterized as demonstrating anti-conservative bias or as otherwise unfair – that buoyed his candidacy for months despite a relative lack of financial resources or support from party elites. Because Gingrich was widely regarded by Republican leaders as a weak potential nominee, his success in using televised debates to attract popular support was, to them, a decidedly unwelcome development (Azari and Masket 2016).

Even if outsider or insurgent candidates do not actually best their more conventional opponents on the debate stage, the events may still work to their net advantage. Barack Obama did not consistently outdebate Hillary Clinton during their competitive and hard-fought battle for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, but Obama, only partway through his first term in the U.S. Senate at the time, still appeared to benefit from the events merely by demonstrating that he could hold his own against a better-known and more experienced opponent – which undercut Clinton’s chief line of attack against Obama as an upstart who was insufficiently prepared to assume the presidency. Similarly, Donald Trump was not often judged the most fluid or articulate debater during the 2016 Republican nomination race, but Trump managed to avoid committing damaging gaffes while aiming memorably belittling comments at his opponents – such as his mocking characterization of Jeb Bush as “low-energy” and his dismissive swipe at Marco Rubio as “Little Marco” – that proved disorienting to his targets and rendered them unable to respond effectively. For national Democratic and Republican officials who tend to be sympathetic to the veteran politicians within their party, debates increasingly represent less a valuable opportunity for internal deliberation and decision-making than a serious potential threat to be contained as much as possible.

Motivated by these concerns, both national party committees acted in the wake of the 2012 election to assert greater control over pre-nomination presidential debates. The Republican National Committee passed a resolution allowing party leaders to formally recognize, and help to organize, a limited series of debates. Any candidate who participated in a debate that was not endorsed by the national party would risk being excluded from the official events – thus compelling the candidates to follow the RNC’s organizational lead. Democrats enacted a similar provision as well.

By these measures, the parties acted to gain control over the number, timing, moderators, and broadcast outlets of the debates. Priebus and other Republican leaders had concluded from experience that there had been too many debates in recent elections, giving excessive publicity to secondary candidates and repeatedly exposing front-runners to damaging attacks. In addition,

some previous debates had been sponsored by media sources deemed hostile to the party (especially MSNBC for Republicans and Fox News Channel for Democrats) or had been moderated by figures viewed as aligned with the opposition (such as ABC's George Stephanopoulos, a former top aide to Bill Clinton, who controversially moderated a Republican debate in late 2011). Control by the national party could therefore allow leaders to prevent unfriendly questioners or networks from exerting influence over the nomination process.

So far, only the 2016 campaign exists as a test of the effects of these newfound party-initiated regulations. In a formal sense, the parties' attempts to gain influence over the debate system was an immediate and unmitigated success. The number of debates was reduced substantially on both sides: Republicans held 12 debates during the 2016 campaign and Democrats only nine – as compared to a record 20 Republican debates in 2012 and 19 debates for each party in 2008. No candidate risked exclusion from the officially designated debates by participating in any unsanctioned events, while MSNBC and Fox News Channel were denied the opportunity to host debates for Republicans and Democrats, respectively.

More generally, however, it is difficult to view the parties as having accomplished the larger goals that the institutionalization of debates was designed to achieve. If Republican national leaders anticipated that gaining official control of the debate process would tilt the field of competition toward a conventionally experienced and elite-backed nominee, their hopes were dashed by the ultimately successful candidacy of Donald Trump. Even the newfound power of the national party to exert a right of approval over debate moderators did not prevent charges of favoritism from arising once again in 2016. Trump accused conservative Megyn Kelly, then the host of a prime-time program on Fox News Channel, of peppering him with hostile questions during the first debate of the campaign in August 2015; he retaliated for this perceived unfairness by boycotting a later Fox-televised debate also co-moderated by Kelly.

On the other side of the partisan aisle, the Democratic National Committee's role in determining the number and timing of pre-nomination debates in 2015–2016 provoked substantial criticism from supporters of Bernie Sanders, who viewed DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz as using her organizational authority to structure the mechanics of the nomination process to the advantage of frontrunner Hillary Clinton. The DNC approved only nine debates – less than half of the number held during the party's previous multi-candidate nomination contest in 2008 and matching the lowest number of debates in a Democratic race without an incumbent president in 40 years – prompting unheeded calls from the Sanders campaign, several prominent DNC members, and even House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi to add more events to the calendar (Schleifer 2015). In addition, some critics accused the party of intentionally scheduling debates to limit the size of the television audience and therefore their capacity to upend Clinton's march to the nomination. One debate was held on the Saturday before Christmas in 2015, while another occurred over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend in January 2016. The debate schedule fueled some Sanders backers' perceptions that their candidate was the victim of procedural unfairness, especially when combined with other elements of the nomination process that disadvantaged Sanders, such as the existence of closed primaries and unpledged superdelegates (see DeMoro 2016). Regardless of their objective validity, these frustrations ultimately impeded the efforts of Democratic leaders to unify the party faithful around Clinton's candidacy once the primary season ended in June 2016.

Like the timing of state primaries and the formulas governing the allocation of convention delegates, candidate debates are now subject to regulation by the national party committees. As with these other components of the presidential nomination system, however, there is no guarantee that the enactment of party rules will produce the results intended by their proponents. The events of 2016 serve as a powerful lesson that the power of party leaders to influence the

outcomes of nomination contests via the exercise of procedural prerogatives remains limited and highly contingent. Yet it is unlikely that the national parties will quickly or easily relinquish the formal authority that they have recently asserted over the organization and timing of televised debates, and the future may well bring an even more extensive set of applicable restrictions imposed by officials who continue to view the conduct of these events as critical to the interests of the parties they serve.

Conclusion: Debates in a Changing Nomination System

In a sense, primary debates have become a synecdoche for the contemporary presidential nomination system of which they are an increasingly fundamental component. The reforms to the process that were introduced in the 1970s, and that have been subject to almost continuous mechanical tinkering ever since, were intended to democratize party nominations by transferring control of nominations from party “bosses” to rank-and-file citizens, thus bestowing the outcome with an indisputable representative legitimacy. Yet the benefits of these reforms have been much more mixed in practice than in theory. Some scholars contend that party leaders have managed to recapture control over nominations via other means, thus “beating reform” (Cohen et al. 2008); others have concluded that changes to the system have merely empowered alternative sets of actors – such as the news media – and favored different types of candidates (Polsby 1983). The parties themselves are in a constant state of dissatisfaction, fiddling with various attributes of the process – the existence and proportion of superdelegates, the extent of front-loading in the primary calendar, the prevalence of winner-take-all delegate allocation, the degree of temporal primacy afforded Iowa and New Hampshire – with the objective of improving its outcomes while simultaneously protecting its validity in the eyes of the public.

Public debates among candidates for office, like primary elections themselves, ostensibly comport to an ideal of democracy in action. They appear to provide citizens with the unique opportunity to judge the various contenders for themselves without elite intermediation, based on whatever criteria they wish, and to make a fair and informed choice of standard-bearer to lead the party into electoral battle with the opposition. Yet the capacity of a momentary triumph – or, more commonly, blunder – in the midst of a single exchange on live television to exert a lasting effect on the electoral fate of a candidate raises serious questions about whether the increasing influence of debates on presidential nominations is indeed a welcome development. Do debates really further the goal of providing the American people with a choice of attractive, competent, and well-suited nominees for the presidency?

Consider the plight of Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, widely considered a talented and formidable politician when he entered the race for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. Rubio’s third-place showing in the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus raised expectations that he would successfully unite Republican voters dissatisfied with the top two finishers, Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, behind his own candidacy. Rubio appeared to receive a significant boost from his Iowa performance and subsequent favorable media coverage; according to the FiveThirtyEight poll aggregator, his support in the New Hampshire primary rose from 10 percent to 16 percent in just five days, pushing him from fourth to second place in the state (FiveThirtyEight 2016).

Unfortunately for Rubio, he suffered an inopportune setback due to a damaging performance in a debate televised nationally by ABC three days before the New Hampshire primary. Under rhetorical attack from New Jersey governor Chris Christie for lacking the necessary experience to be president, Rubio oddly repeated the same response – referring to “the fiction that Barack Obama doesn’t know what he’s doing” – four separate times, appearing only

to confirm Christie's accusations that Rubio could only offer voters a "memorized 25-second speech" rather than a set of real-world accomplishments. Media analysts seized on the moment after the debate was over, endlessly replaying the Rubio "malfunction" on television and the internet while burying the candidate in a blizzard of bad publicity. As a result, his campaign lost its momentum, finishing a disappointing fifth in the New Hampshire vote and folding five weeks later after winning just one of 29 state primaries and caucuses – leaving Trump in commanding position to win the Republican nomination.

It is hardly surprising that party leaders might conclude from such examples as the Rubio gaffe that debates not only hold the potential to play a pivotal role in determining presidential nominations, but also cannot be counted upon to benefit candidates who are best-positioned to unify the party, defeat the opposition, and govern successfully once elected. But any action by the party organizations to scale back the number of debates or otherwise attempt to limit their influence risks a backlash from critics who charge that they are violating a norm of internal party democracy by unjustly "rigging the system" in favor of "insiders" and squelching the voice of the people (Azari and Masket 2016). As long as primary voters continue to use debates to help them make up their minds, party elites will face serious constraints on their ability to steer the presidential nomination process in their own preferred direction.

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PART V

Primaries Outside of the United States

Primary elections have become a major area of study outside of the United States over the past decade. As noted in the introduction, the landmark study on this subject has been Reuven Hazan and Gideon Rahat's 2010 book *Democracy Within Parties: Candidate Selection Methods and Their Political Consequences*. There, Hazan and Rahat detail many of the different methods of candidate selection in democracies and discuss the consequences of these methods for governance. Because many of the democracies that have established primaries (or things that look like them) are party-centered parliamentary systems, it is not at all clear how relevant the experience of a candidate-centered first-past-the-post system like the United States will be for these nations. Some of the appealing features of primaries – from the strategic party goals discussed in Part I of this book to the excitement generated by charismatic candidates – transcend national boundaries. But this raises many questions about how candidates who must run in primary elections will behave as legislators. These questions have been central to studies such as Giulia Sandri, Antonella Seddone, and Fulvio Venturino's 2015 book *Party Primaries in Comparative Perspective*, an edited volume that brought together research in primaries conducted over several years as part of a project of the European Consortium for Political Research. They have also (as Alan Ware noted in Chapter 1 of this volume) raised the question of what primaries actually are. It is not in fact clear that the sorts of candidate selection methods used within political parties truly count as “primaries” in the American sense if they do not include the mass electorate.

The cases in this Part do not necessarily provide a comprehensive account of all of the different primary systems worldwide, but they were chosen to provide a sampling of how primaries have been adapted to fit the circumstances of different regions and different types of political traditions. The first two chapters in this section consider the legislative consequences of primary elections. Reuven Hazan and Reut Itzkovich-Malka provide an overview of candidate selection methods today in Europe. The authors here show that candidate selection methods can influence legislative behavior across all different types of party systems. The introduction of primaries, or inclusive candidate selection methods that resemble them, tend to weaken the power of political parties over their members. It is unclear where this will lead European parties in the long run.

Indriði H. Indriðason and Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson address one interesting aspect of measuring the consequences of primaries. In weak party systems, advances have been made in measuring parties' coherence within legislators. Yet in systems where legislators are expected to support

their parties at all times, it is harder to assess the effects of elections on candidates. Using the case of Iceland, a nation that has used primaries for longer than most other parliamentary systems, Indriðason and Kristinsson provide other measurements of the effects of primaries, including legislators' speeches and bill introductions. They show that primary competition increases the level of activity among legislators.

The next two chapters in this section consider the decision to hold primaries. Kathleen Bruhn's study of Latin American primary elections shows that primaries can be used in many of these countries when political parties have strategic reasons to hand the task of candidate selection to voters, and they can be avoided when involving the public will be detrimental to party goals. Likewise, Nahomi Ichino and Noah Nathan explore the use of primaries in African democracies, with particular emphasis on Ghana. This study, which draws upon several prior works by the authors on African elections, shows the importance of primary elections in combatting corruption and vote-buying in new democracies. However, it also shows the difficulty of using them in systems where the parties often are not organized along ideological lines. Both of these chapters demonstrate the importance of democratizing candidate selection in nations where democracy is not well-established.

In Chapter 23, Scott Pruyers and Anthony Sayers consider the use of primary elections in Canada. As is the case in Latin America, Canadian primaries are held at the discretion of the parties, and the parties have tended to adopt different types of decision rules and voting rules that suit their immediate aims. Unlike the Latin American case, however, Canadian primary elections have become sufficiently institutionalized that parties rarely choose simply not to use them at all. They are now expected by most voters. The Canadian parties have also, like many European parties, expanded their use of primaries for party leadership positions over the past two decades.

Finally, in Chapter 24 Marino De Luca explores the use of primary elections in Italy since the early 1990s. Italy has now used primary elections more extensively than any nation other than the United States. De Luca shows that Italy has developed a primary election system that distinctively embodies the nation's political character. Parties and individual candidates initially adapted primaries to suit their own political needs, but enthusiasm about primaries in the media and among the general public has led to their widespread adoption at most levels of government. Although the specific rules of primaries vary across parties, their use is now routine. It is certainly possible, perhaps even likely, that the development of primaries in Italy will be followed by greater experimentation with them in other democracies in the years to come.