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Nomination Politics, Party Unity, and Presidential Elections

"In every American election there are two acts of choice, two periods of contest. The first is the selection of the candidate from within the party by the party; the other is the struggle between the parties for the place."

—James Bryce, *from The American Commonwealth*, 1891[1]

Many changes occurred in the nomination process and campaigning in the century before Lord Bryce made this observation and certainly many more in the century since. The presidential nomination process, first controlled by a caucus of the parties in Congress, later evolved into a system in which delegates chosen by the state parties effectively decided the nomination in national nominating conventions. Efforts in the late 1960s to reform the nominating process into a more open and democratic system led to a proliferation of primaries, and decentralized caucuses spread out over several months. In the 1980s, states moved their primaries and caucuses to earlier in the year, creating the compressed or front-loaded primary-dominated, post-reform system that exists today. The basic sequence—a party nomination process followed by the general election—remained through all of these changes.

It also remained the case that the political parties' presidential nomination process is important in two respects. First, in our two-party system, among the many who might serve as president, the choice of who will serve is narrowed to the two candidates nominated by the major parties. Whoever is elected president in 2008 will be either a Democrat or a Republican, as it has been in every election since 1852.

Second, the nomination process is important because the way candidates are nominated affects their prospects of victory in the general election campaign that follows. This consequence of nominations is less fully appreciated. Whether a party quickly and enthusiastically unites behind its nominee or engages in a rancorous internal struggle over who should be the party's standard-bearer substantially affects the

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nominee's chances in the general election campaign. The presidential nomination process is important in its own right for what it says about the political party, who controls the party, and what the party stands for. But it is also important as part of the larger electoral process, as the prelude to the general election campaign. Whether a candidate gets a head start or starts from behind makes a big difference to who wins the race.

The Post-Reform Nomination Process

There is no definite starting date for campaigns to win a political party's presidential nomination. Years before the nomination is formally made at a party's national nominating convention, potential candidates for the nomination explore their possibilities. They consult with advisors. They size up their likely competitors, both in their own party and the candidate from the opposing party who they might face in the general election. They talk with supporters and those who might contribute financially to their campaigns. They weigh their options: the likely costs and benefits, politically and personally, for the immediate election and down the road. Then they make their decision either to throw their hat in the ring, as Theodore Roosevelt colorfully described it, or to sit it out. Out of these individual deliberations, typically made more than a year in advance of the election, comes the field of candidates for the nomination contest.[2]

Once a candidate has decided to seek a party's nomination, the race is on, at least for that candidate. He or she must then recruit a campaign staff, clarify the campaign's message (the reason why voters in the party should choose him or her rather than someone else), raise millions of dollars to fund the campaign so that the message can get out to potential voters, develop a strategy to use the campaign's resources most effectively within the rules of the nomination process, and assemble a network of supporters and campaign workers across the nation and particularly in those states thought to be most important to winning the nomination. In order to win a party's nomination, a candidate must devise a strategy for winning a majority of delegates selected in the states through party caucuses and primary elections. In 2004, Democrats selected 4,353 delegates to their national nominating convention and Republicans selected 2,509 to theirs.[3] For most candidates, the nomination strategy means devising a way to win, or at least to exceed expectations, in the early nomination contests so that they can gain additional contributions, receive more media attention for their campaigns, attract more supporters, and drive opponents out of the race.

Even before a vote is cast in a caucus or primary, candidates try to develop positive expectations about their candidacies among the media and activists. They must cultivate an image as a viable candidate; someone that primary voters should seriously consider supporting. This is particularly important in a crowded field of contenders. This phase of the campaign has been called "the invisible primary" and the winner of the invisible primary (as seen in the pre-primary polls) is the candidate to beat for the nomination.[4]

The official process of selecting delegates begins with the Iowa caucuses in late January of the election year and a week later with the New Hampshire presidential primary. The process of delegate selection across the individual states (mostly by primary elections) extends for several months. In 2004, the official delegate selection

process ended with a set of primaries in early June, about five and a half months after the Iowa caucuses. The nomination process officially ends when the delegates nominate the party's presidential candidate at the parties' national nominating conventions, traditionally held in July and August.

In reality, the nomination process is not this long. Although a few states still select delegates late in the spring and into the early summer months, most have moved their delegate selection processes earlier in the year to gain greater influence. This compression or front-loading of the delegate selection calendar is the result of many individual state and state party decisions. States that select their delegates later in the year (in April, May, or June) found that the eventual nominee had usually accumulated enough delegate votes to win the nomination before the state even held its primary or caucus. The incentive has been clear: If people want their state to matter in determining the parties' presidential nominees, they must select the state's delegates early in the year before the nominations are effectively settled. In 2004, 24 of the 36 states holding Democratic Party presidential primaries held them by the middle of March. Three-quarters of the delegates were selected in the seven weeks following the New Hampshire primary.[5]

This front-loading of the primary and caucus schedule has been a huge boon to front-running candidates. The compressed schedule now requires candidates to run in a large number of states at once, a feat only a candidate with a large national organization and lots of money can do well. The front-loading of the primaries and caucuses prevents long-shot candidates from exploiting early victories and gaining momentum. A frontrunner has the resources to recover from a setback; a lesser-known candidate does not have the time to gain significantly greater recognition, organizational strength, and resources before the next set of primaries and caucuses are conducted. As William Mayer has observed, "Not since Jimmy Carter's campaign in 1976 has a momentum-driven candidacy been successful"; and Carter's emergence from the pack of Democratic hopefuls in 1976 was before the front-loading of primaries began.[6]

The campaign financing system also provides a considerable advantage to front-running candidates, especially if they are able to raise enough money that they can afford to forgo federal matching monies (as George W. Bush, Howard Dean, and John Kerry did in 2004) and the regulatory strings that go with those funds. Long-shot candidates who accept federal matching funds for their contributions must observe numerous restrictions on how much they can spend in different states. As a result, these candidates are forced by the campaign financing system to pursue a suboptimal campaign strategy. That is, they must comply with restrictions on how much they can spend in different states as opposed to what might be the best strategy of spending to increase their chances of winning the nomination. Combining the front-loaded nomination calendar and the campaign financing system, the current nomination system is one that looks open to many candidates (lured into the process by the apparent openness of the primary dominated system) but is in reality a system strongly inclined toward frontrunners (when there is a frontrunner) and one that settles on a nominee several months before the summer conventions. The conventions, aside from establishing the party's platform on the issues and ratifying the choice of a vice-presidential candidate for the ticket, have evolved into more of a kickoff for the general election campaign than the close of the nomination process.

All Nominations Are Not Equal

As Lord Bryce observed, the nominating process in choosing the parties' presidential candidates is an important "act of choice." This is true as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough in reflecting the relation of the nominating system and the electoral process. The nomination system should be understood as part of the electoral process, rather than a distinct process providing the candidates for the general election. For a presidential candidate, the issue is not just *whether* you win your party's nomination, but *how* you win it. A presidential candidate's prospects in the general election hinge to a great extent on the amount of internal party unity coming out of the nomination. This is as true today—when nominations are effectively decided in the first few weeks in a flurry of presidential primaries and caucuses—as it was in the old days, when nominations were actually decided at the parties' national conventions.

A candidate who emerges from the nomination process with a unified party has five substantial advantages over a candidate who lacks a unified party at the outset of the general election campaign: votes in the bank, strategy, turnout, resources, and ammunition.

First, a substantial majority of voters decide how they will vote before the general election campaign gets underway. In the typical election between 1952 and 2004, about 43 percent of voters reported that they decided how they would vote before the conventions, and another 21 percent said they decided during the conventions.[7] In 2004, more than 70 percent of voters indicated that they had decided before or during the party conventions. A candidate with a unified party providing a significant base of committed voters to work from has a shorter distance to go in assembling an electoral majority than a candidate with smaller group of committed followers at the start of the campaign.

A unified party in the nomination phase of the campaign also provides a candidate with a strategic advantage. Elections cannot be won with the party's most loyal voters alone (its base) but cannot be won without them. Candidates must shore up support from those most likely to support them but then must reach out to win the votes of those undecided and swing voters. A candidate who already has a secure base has a head start in trying to win over uncommitted and wavering voters. Without a unified party, the candidate must build some enthusiasm in his or her base of support while simultaneously reaching out to swing voters. This is no easy task, particularly when appeals to the party's loyalists are generally more ideological than those that might appeal to more centrist voters.

A party unified at the outset also suggests greater enthusiasm for the candidate, and this may lead to higher partisan turnout on Election Day. On the other hand, a candidate whose partisans indicate more tepid support at the start of the campaign may have a more difficult time mobilizing these partisans to vote. Although most partisans will vote (if sometimes grudgingly), some of those who have mixed feelings about their party's nominee at the outset may not muster the effort to vote. Previous research indicates that the turnout rates of party identifiers of the winning presidential party are higher than otherwise expected, and the turnout rates of party identifiers of the losing presidential party are lower than otherwise expected.[8]

A candidate who is not seriously challenged for the party's nomination has the advantage also of directing campaign finances toward the cause of the general election campaign. A candidate fighting for the nomination does not have this luxury. Without a secured nomination, campaign money must be directed at fending off challengers within the party. The clearest recent example of this difference was the 1996 campaign. Whereas President Clinton was essentially unopposed for the Democratic Party's nomination, Senator Bob Dole had to battle a significant group of opponents for the GOP nomination. While Clinton used $30.4 million (not to mention substantial "soft money") essentially to get a head start to the general election campaign, Dole was forced to use his campaign's resources ($34.5 million) on battling his Republican opponents for the nomination.[9]

A candidate having a unified party at the outset also has an ammunition advantage of sorts. In a hotly contested nomination battle, fellow partisans make charges against each other that can be used by the opposing party's candidate during the general election campaign. One of the clearest examples of ammunition for the opposition coming out of a divided nomination contest is from the 1980 campaign. In the general election that year, Democrats frequently reminded voters that George Bush, Reagan's running mate and former competitor for the Republican nomination, had called Reagan's economic proposals "voodoo economics." Four years later, President Reagan used ammunition supplied in the Democratic nomination battle against his opponent, former Vice President Walter Mondale. While campaigning in Ohio in 1984, Reagan attacked Mondale's record by using charges leveled against him in the nomination campaign by nomination foe Senator Gary Hart. Reagan told the crowd: "My opponent has done a very good job of slipping, sliding, and ducking away from his record. But here in Ohio during the primaries, Senator Gary Hart got his message through by reminding you, the Ohio voters, of the true record. And I quote—he said, 'Walter Mondale may pledge stable prices, but Carter-Mondale could not cure 12 percent inflation. 'Walter Mondale,' he added, 'has come to Ohio to talk about jobs, but Carter-Mondale watched helpless as 180,000 Ohio jobs disappeared in the period between 1976 and 1980.' Now I didn't say that. Those are Gary Hart's words."[10]

Nominations Affect Elections

While these are plausible advantages for a candidate coming out of a more unified nomination process, do they really make a difference? What is the evidence that divided nomination campaigns and party disunity before the general election actually harms the nominee's chances of attracting votes in the general election? A number of studies have examined divisive primaries at the state level and have generally found that they hurt a candidate's vote in the general election, though there is some disagreement as to whether party disunity existing before the primary or disunity caused by the primary make the difference.[11] Martin Wattenberg has also examined the impact of party disunity with an interesting (but somewhat ad hoc) index of "nomination fighting" and concluded that "the candidate with the most united party won every election from 1964 to 1988."[12] In this section, we will examine the impact

of party unity in presidential nominations on general election results over 136 years of electoral history using two different national measures of party satisfaction with its presidential candidate at the time of the nomination.

Unified or Divided Conventions

One measure of party unity in the nomination process is whether a majority of the party's convention delegates voted for the eventual nominee on the convention's first ballot. Although every convention since 1956 has produced a first ballot nomination, multiple ballots were common in earlier conventions. In the 22 presidential elections from 1868 to 1952, the major parties held 44 national conventions. The nomination was settled on the first ballot in 26 of these conventions, but at least a second balloting of the delegates was required in 18 conventions.[13] Of these 18 cases, we set aside elections in which a first ballot nomination was denied a candidate with a majority of delegate votes (because of the Democratic Party's two-thirds rule), elections in which multiple ballots were required in both parties' nominations, and the 1912 election in which the Republican Party was so divided that it split before the renomination of President William Howard Taft. This leaves nine presidential candidates in these 22 elections (41 percent of the elections) who were nominated by a divided convention (no first ballot majority) while their opponent was nominated on the first ballot of the opposing party's convention. Table 11.1 lists these nine, the lack of party unity about their nominations as reflected in the convention voting, and their fates in the general election. These are the candidates who might have been disadvantaged in the general election by party divisions over the nomination.

As the table indicates, the parties were more divided over some of these nominations than over others.[14] Probably the least divided of these divided conventions was the Republican convention of 1948. New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, having won the Republican nomination four years earlier, went into the 1948 convention with 40 percent of the delegates supporting him on the first ballot.[15] His closest competitor for the nomination, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, however, was a distant second with 20 percent of first ballot votes, and when Dewey picked up another 7 percent of the delegates on the second ballot, the momentum to a third ballot nomination was unstoppable.

At the other end of the spectrum were far more divided nominations. In 1868, Democratic Party delegates cast 22 ballots before turning in desperation to New York Governor Horatio Seymour who had received no delegate votes on the first ballot and only 7 percent of votes on the 22nd ballot before delegates switched their votes to make him the nominee. But perhaps the most divided nomination was the Democratic nomination of John W. Davis of New York in 1924 after 17 days and 103 ballots. The convention turned to Davis only after it became apparent that the northern urban wing of the party and the southern rural wing of the party could not abide each other's nominees.[16]

Despite differences in the extent of internal party divisions in the nomination period, candidates emerging from a divided nomination process (whether badly or horribly divided) clearly do not do well in the general election that follows.[17] Of the nine candidates who lacked a majority of delegate votes going into their party's nominating

Table 11.1 Elections with One Divided Major-Party Presidential Nominating Convention, 1868–1952

Year	Presidential Nominee	Political Party	Number of Ballots to Nomination	Nominee's Delegate Percent on 1st Ballot	Percentage of the Two-Party Popular Vote	General Election Outcome
1868	Horatio Seymour	Democratic	22	0 –	47.3	Lost
1876	Rutherford B. Hayes	Republican	7	8 (5th)	48.5	Won
1888	Benjamin Harrison	Republican	8	10 (4th)	49.6	Won
1896	William Jennings Bryan	Democratic	5	15 (2nd)	47.8	Lost
1916	Charles Evans Hughes	Republican	3	26 (1st)	48.4	Lost
1924	John W. Davis	Democratic	103	3 (15th)	34.8	Lost
1940	Wendell L. Willkie	Republican	6	11 (3rd)	45.0	Lost
1948	Thomas E. Dewey	Republican	3	40 (1st)	47.7	Lost
1952	Adlai Stevenson	Democratic	3	22 (2nd)	44.6	Lost

Note: A divided nominating convention is one in which multiple ballots were required to select the nominee, and the nominee did not have a majority of delegates on the first ballot. In two Democratic Party conventions (1876 and 1932) the nominee had a first-ballot majority, but multiple ballots were required because of the party's two-thirds rule. Both major parties had divided conventions in 1880, 1884, and 1920. Also, because of the Republican progressive bolt to Teddy Roosevelt's campaign in 1912, both parties are considered as having divided nomination contests in that year. The number beside the nominee's delegate percentage on the first convention ballot is the ranking of the eventual nominee on that first ballot.

conventions, only two were elected president: Hayes in 1876 and Harrison in 1888. In terms of the national popular vote, none of the nine presidential candidates received a popular vote plurality. Both Hayes and Harrison became presidents by virtue of their electoral vote majorities, but their opponents (Tilden and Cleveland) received more popular votes nationwide. The record could hardly be clearer: Parties divided over their nominations are in big trouble in the general election.

The Loyalty of Early Deciding Partisans

Although party divisions over its presidential nomination are less evident in national nominating conventions since 1952 (with the notable exception of the 1968 Democratic convention and possibly the 1964 Republican and 1972 Democratic conventions), the degree of party unity before the general election campaigns can be gauged more directly and accurately for recent campaigns through survey data. In every election since 1952, the American National Election Study (NES) has asked

a national sample of voting age Americans about their party identification, if and how they voted for president, and when they decided how they would vote. Using these data, we can determine the percentage of party identifiers in both parties who decided how they would vote at or before the parties' nominating conventions and decided to vote for their party's candidate. This provides the basis for a relative measure of party unity at the time of the nominations. In many respects, this is the best measure of whether a party was truly divided in its nomination or otherwise failed to select a candidate who could generate enthusiasm within the party.[18] The relative index is computed as the percentage of early deciding Democrats who reported that they voted for the Democratic presidential candidate minus the percentage of early deciding Republicans who reported that they voted for the Republican presidential candidate.[19] A positive value indicates that Democrats were more unified around their nominee than Republicans were around theirs, and a negative value indicates that the Republicans exhibited more early party unity. Normally at least 85 percent of those who decide how they will vote before or during the conventions end up voting for their party's candidate, with early loyalty rates being a bit higher among Republicans.[20] Nevertheless, despite high rates of loyalty by early deciders within both parties, varying degrees of enthusiasm for their party's nominee cause differences in how uniformly loyal these early deciding partisans are from year to year.

The extent of party unity at the time of the nomination reflects several conditions. It reflects both the absolute enthusiasm for the party's nominee and the relative enthusiasm for the nominee compared to other candidates who competed or might have sought the party's nomination as well as reactions to candidates in the opposing party. It also reflects the roughness of the nomination campaign and any lingering ill will from it. Finally, it reflects the effectiveness of the nomination end game and the convention in reunifying the party behind its standard bearer. Conventions typically provide their nominees with a convention bump in the polls, especially for the party that was less unified and trailed in the polls.[21] A candidate who appeals to the party faithful more than the alternatives in or outside the party, has won the nomination without political bloodshed, and has energized the party with a positive nominating convention should have his or her party's early deciding voters firmly behind him or her and be well positioned to make a strong race in the general election.

Figure 11.1 plots the index of relative Democratic Party early unity against the Democratic candidate's actual national popular vote. It is clear that the relative extent of unity within the party at convention time is related to how well the party's candidate does in the November election. Going into the fall campaign, the more unified a party is relative to the opposing party, the greater the expected vote for its candidate. Historically, a party's presidential candidate can expect about 4 percentage points more of the two-party vote in November for every 10 percentage points of greater party loyalty than the opposition at the end of the nomination process. Moreover, the election's outcome hinges more on the relative party unity of those who decided how they would vote at the time of the nomination than the extent of party loyalty of those who decide how they will vote after the parties' nominating conventions.[22]

Each party benefitted by a large difference in party nomination unity in one election in this era. For the Democrats that election was 1964. That year, 95 percent of

Figure 11.1 Party Unity of Early-Deciding Party Identifiers and the General Election Vote, 1952–2000
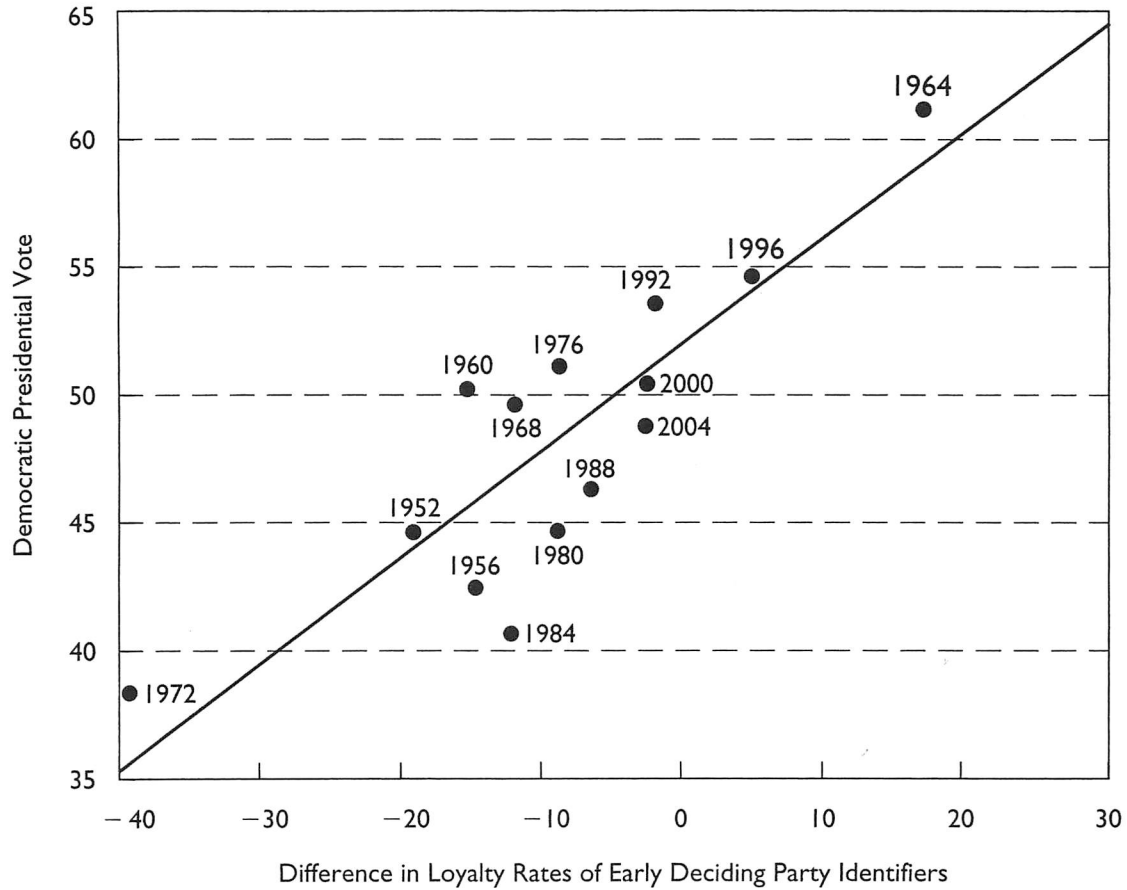
Difference in Loyalty Rates of Early-Deciding Party Identifiers

Note: The Democratic presidential candidate's vote is the percentage of the two-party national popular vote. The difference in loyalty rates of the early-deciding party identifies is computed as the percentage of early-deciding Democrats who reported voting for their party's candidate minus the percentage of early-deciding Republicans who reported voting for their party's candidate. Early deciders are those who indicated that they decided how they would vote at the time of or before the national conventions and who did not change their reported vote from their earlier stated vote intention. The data are from the National Election Studies and have been adjusted to the known national vote division. See Campbell, 2000, Appendix B and p. 98 entries for the 2000 election computed by the author. The regression of early loyalty difference and the general election vote has a constant of 52.15, a slope of .42 (P<.001), and an adjusted R-square of .73 (N=13).

Source: Original essay written for the volume.

Democratic Party identifiers who said that they decided how they would vote at the time or before the national conventions voted for their party's candidate Lyndon Johnson. Republicans that year faced a revolution from the right in the candidacy of Senator Barry Goldwater from Arizona. Goldwater's unabashed conservatism conveyed in his convention speech proclaiming "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice," and his campaign slogan that "in your heart, you know he's right" threatened the party's moderates. Only 78 percent of the Republicans who decided how they

would vote before the fall campaign began (about half of all Republicans) voted for Goldwater—compared to normal GOP loyalty rates in the middle to upper 90 percent range among early deciders. The relative disunity doomed the Goldwater candidacy.

At the other end of the early loyalty difference spectrum, Republicans enjoyed a large party unity advantage going into the 1972 campaign. Although Nixon had nominal opposition en route to his renomination, his support among early deciding Republicans was almost perfect (about 98.7 percent). The Democratic Party, in contrast, was in disarray. Much as Goldwater's candidacy had represented the conservative wing of the Republican Party, the candidacy of Senator George McGovern of South Dakota in 1972 represented the liberal wing taking control of the Democratic Party, alienating the party's moderates. Only 59 percent of early deciding Democrats voted for McGovern in 1972. Even when the extreme cases of 1964 and 1972 are set aside, the relative degree of party unity at the end of the nomination process is clearly important to the general election results.[23]

As noted previously, Republicans have generally benefitted from greater early party unity than Democrats over this period, though this appears to be changing. Of the 14 elections, Democrats were more united at the outset than Republicans in only two cases—the 1964 election and the 1996 Clinton-Dole race, both involving White House incumbents. In three other elections, the 1992 Clinton-Bush-Perot election, the 2000 Bush-Gore election, and the 2004 Bush-Kerry election, loyalty rates at the outset only mildly favored the Republicans. Overall, Democratic presidential candidates won popular vote pluralities in four elections in which they started the campaign with a party unity deficit. In 1992, with the help of the Perot candidacy and with just a slim Republican unity advantage (owing perhaps to the Buchanan nomination candidacy as well as Perot), Clinton defeated Bush (the elder). The other three Democratic vote pluralities without an early loyalty edge (1960, 1976, and 2000) were all very narrow.

The most raucous nomination battle of this period (and perhaps any other) was the 1968 Democratic nomination of Vice President Hubert Humphrey during the height of the Vietnam War protests. Protesters and the police in the convention city of Chicago battled in the streets, and bad tempers raged in the convention hall itself. While moderate liberals and more radical liberals fought for the nomination, the southern conservative wing of the party deserted to support Alabama Governor George Wallace as a third-party presidential candidate. While this divisive nomination battle undoubtedly hurt the party with its base and with potential swing voters, loyalty rates of early deciding Democrats were not as low as they had been in the 1950s when Dwight Eisenhower attracted Democratic voters away from Adlai Stevenson or as they would be four years later when George McGovern appeared too liberal to many party moderates. Nevertheless, early deciding Democrats were about 12 percentage points less committed to Humphrey than early deciding Republicans were to Nixon. The impact of the 1968 nomination battle was also evident elsewhere. The nomination conflict kept many Democrats from making an early decision. A smaller percentage of Democrats in 1968 had decided their votes at the time of the nomination than in any other election from 1952 to 2004; and of those Democrats who held off deciding, a smaller percentage ended up voting for the Democratic presidential

candidate (54 percent) than in any other year. The end result was that Humphrey was unable to pull the badly damaged Democratic majority coalition together in time for the November vote and Republican Richard Nixon narrowly won the election.

In general, the differences in the degree of pre-campaign party harmony are not as great as they once were. In each of the six elections from 1952 to 1972, there were double-digit differences between the early loyalty rates of Democrats and Republicans for their respective standard-bearers. In the eight elections since 1972, only the Republicans in their support of President Reagan in 1984 had more than a 10-point advantage over their opponent in early party unity. Whether the result of the polarization between the parties causing disagreements within the parties to be set in perspective, or parties becoming more adept at handling internal divisions, or the partisan realignment making each party more ideologically homogeneous, the unity differences between the parties in recent elections have not been as pronounced as they had been.[24]

The Usual Beneficiary of Early Party Unity

If early party unity (whether exhibited by first-ballot nominations or by higher loyalty rates among early deciding partisans) is important for later electoral success, what candidates tend to enjoy an easy nomination, and what candidates tend to have a tougher time pulling their party together? Although situations within the parties change from year to year and with the ambitions and opportunities afforded various candidates under changing nomination methods and rules, incumbent presidents usually have an easier route to the nomination and a more united party as the fall campaign gets underway.

The incumbency advantage in having a unified party in the nomination stage of the election is evident in both the divided convention and the party loyalty of early deciding partisans. None of the nine presidential candidates in Table 11.1 who lacked a delegate vote majority on the first ballot of their nominating conventions were incumbents. In fact, none of the 17 presidential candidates who were nominated at multiple-ballot conventions from 1868 to 1952 were incumbent presidents.[25] In this span of history, there were only two exceptions to incumbents having a unified party. The first exception was the Republican Party in 1912 in which former president Theodore Roosevelt split from the Republican Party, leaving incumbent President William Howard Taft with only part of the Republican Party and a humiliating third-place finish in the general election (winning only the eight electoral votes of Utah and Vermont). The other exception was the Democratic Party in 1948, in which Democrats on both the left—under former Vice President Henry Wallace—and on the right—under South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond—split from the party. President Harry Truman was left with the colossal task of pulling the party's coalition back together over the course of the campaign—a feat that he was able to accomplish. Nevertheless, Taft and Truman are the exceptions. Most incumbents have unified parties in their renomination and reelection campaigns.

Party unity behind incumbents is also generally evident in the voting loyalty of early deciding partisans in Figure 11.1. In elections since 1952, the relative early

party unity for incumbents was about nine points higher than it was for their challengers.[26] Eight of the nine incumbents in this period entered the fall campaign season with a more unified party than their challengers.[27] This early unity advantage for incumbents translates into about a three-point advantage in the November vote. This is not to say that incumbents can take for granted a united party at the nomination stage. Incumbents have not always had an easy path to nomination. President Jimmy Carter in 1980 faced a serious challenge from Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts. Republicans that year had an eight-point unity advantage among early deciding partisans, even though they had a crowded and contentious battle for their nomination. Reagan was opposed by George H. W. Bush, Howard Baker, and John Anderson, among others.

President Bush (the elder) in 1992 did not have an easy time of it either. Although Republicans who decided their votes early overwhelmingly supported his reelection (about 95 percent), many were unsure enough about their support that they held off making their decision. While typically more than 60 percent of Republicans have decided how they will vote at or before conventions, fewer than half of voting Republicans in 1992 felt comfortable enough about their candidate to reach an early decision. The only other modern election in which so few Republicans made an early decision was in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson defeated Republican Barry Goldwater in a landslide.

The Carter and Bush cases aside, incumbents since 1952 have had strong and early party backing from their party and this has helped their general election runs.[28] Eisenhower in 1956, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, Reagan in 1984, Clinton in 1996, and G. W. Bush in 2004 all had their parties firmly behind them as they embarked on their reelection runs.

Looking Back at 2004 and Ahead to 2008

Outcomes of general elections depend a great deal on the unity of the parties coming out of the nomination stage of the campaign. The candidate with the more unified party is better positioned to attract votes in the general election and incumbents normally have the more united party going into the election. This proved to be the case, albeit only slightly, in 2004. Both parties had grown polarized and were solidly unified behind their standard bearers before the campaign began, but Republicans were a bit more enthusiastic and united front in their support of President Bush than Democrats were for Senator Kerry.

On the Republican side, conditions favored party unity. President Bush was unopposed for renomination. Despite concerns about the conduct of the war in Iraq and about job creation at home, conditions tilted in favor of his re-election, and the case was felt particularly strongly within his party. Objective economic conditions were not much different from what they had been in 1996 when President Clinton was re-elected; a substantial majority of Americans favored Bush over Kerry when it came to conducting the war against terrorism.[29] Although President Bush's pre-campaign approval ratings with the general public were unimpressive (high 40s to low 50s), his

standing with Republicans was rock solid. Among Republicans, the President's approval rating averaged an stratospheric 90 percent in Gallup polls from January through May, never dipping below 88 percent. Still mindful of the Clinton years and the razor-thin victory of 2000, Republicans rallied to Bush. Three-quarters of Republican partisans decided how they were going to vote before or at the time of the conventions, and 97 percent of them voted for President Bush, almost two points higher than in 2000. Republican unity and enthusiasm was also reflected in the number of Republicans reaching early vote decisions. Three-quarters of all Republican voters in 2004 decided how they would vote before the campaign began, a 16-percentage-point increase over 2000. Finally, Republicans' enthusiasm was evidenced in their turnout. For the first time since the NES began conducting their election year surveys in 1952, strong Republicans outnumbered strong Democrats among voters (though not among all respondents), and Bush carried the nine states in which turnout increased the most over 2000.

Nomination politics for the Democrats in 2004 were more complicated, but the party was also united as it entered the fall campaign. Unlike the Republicans, Democrats in 2004 had a wide field of candidates contesting for their party's nomination. Ten candidates sought the party's presidential nomination, with former Vermont Governor Howard Dean emerging as "the candidate to beat." This changed dramatically, however, in the week before Iowa. Democrats turned away from Dean and toward Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. Kerry's more reserved and temperate demeanor convinced many Democrats that he had a better chance of defeating President Bush. Kerry finished first in both Iowa and New Hampshire. His support snowballed in the states that followed. Even with the front-loading of the nomination system, Kerry's momentum set him squarely on a course for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination.

Although the crowded field of candidates and their changing fortunes might suggest disarray among the Democrats, it was quite to the contrary. The party was uncertain about its leadership but not divided over it. The great concern among Democrats was for their candidate's electability. This spurred the overnight exodus from Dean to Kerry. Democratic Party unity was grounded in three factors. First, Democrats were unified ideologically. Both Democratic candidates and voters easily pledged their support for the party's standard bearer without reservation. Second, Democrats and Republicans were polarized, standing poles apart ideologically. With Democrats clearly the liberal party and Republicans clearly the conservative party, partisans saw a greater threat from the election of the opposition. This difference also had a personal dimension. Many Democrats had demonized President Bush from the time of his election and desperately wanted to avenge their loss in 2000. Finally, Bush was considered beatable, but not easily so. This made party unity of added importance to Democrats. Although there were some reservations about Kerry being too liberal, 70 percent of Democrats decided their vote before or at the time of the conventions (5 percent fewer than Republicans), and 92 percent of them (again, about 5 percent less than Republicans) supported their party's candidate. Democrats were slightly more united than they were in 2000 behind Al Gore but still not quite as united as the Republicans. With the number of partisans on each side now near parity, this slight early unity difference was important to President Bush's re-election.

As we look to the 2008 presidential election, there are be a number of differences from 2004. Most notably, with President Bush completing his second term, there is no incumbent in the race. Unlike 2004, the Republican field is wide open with no clear favorite, at least not several years away from the election. Circumstances are a bit different on the Democratic side. Though there are a number of candidates likely to seek the Democratic Party's nomination, many observers consider Senator Hillary Clinton to be the early frontrunner for the Democratic nod. Will Republicans divide over their nomination while Democrats unite behind the former first lady? If recent elections serve as a guide, both parties will fall squarely in line behind their candidates and the nomination of Senator Clinton may do as much to unite the Republicans as to unite the Democrats. American politics is now so polarized that upward of 70 percent of both Democrats and Republicans will decide which party they will vote for by the time of the conventions (if they have not already done so) and upward of 90 percent of them will stay with their party—whoever its nominee is. The only real question is how far "upward" both of these numbers are for each party, because in another close election that can spell the difference.

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

1. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth,* 2 Vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1891) v. 2: 170.
2. Michael G. Hagen and William G. Mayer, "The Modern Politics of Presidential Selection: How Changing the Rules Really Did Change the Game," in William G. Mayer, ed., *In Pursuit of the White House 2000: How We Choose Our Presidential Nominees* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), p. 25.
3. According to Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._presidential_nominating_ convention (accessed October 1, 2005), there were 4,353 delegates and 611 alternates attending the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston between July 26 and 29 of 2004 and 2,509 delegates and 2,344 alternates attending the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City between August 30 and September 2.
4. Arthur T. Hadley, *The Invisible Primary: The Inside Story of the Other Presidential Race: The Making of the Candidate* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976). William Mayer also notes that "in seven of the last 10 contested nomination races, the eventual nominee was leading in the polls for at least a year before the Iowa caucuses." See William G. Mayer, "Forecasting Presidential Nominations or, My Model Worked Just Fine, Thank You," *PS: Political Science and Politics,* 36 (April 2003): 155.
5. Michael L. Goldstein, *Guide to the 2004 Presidential Election* (Washington, DC: CQ Press), p. 35–6.
6. Mayer, "Forecasting Presidential Nominations or, My Model Worked Just Fine, Thank You," p. 155. See also, Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002): 114–15. John Kerry's wresting of the Democratic Party's frontrunner mantle from Howard Dean in 2004 indicates that

frontrunners are not invincible, at least before they have established their bona fides in an actual caucus or primary.

7. James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000): 8. The data are originally from the American National Election Studies from 1952 to 2004. The 2000 and 2004 time of decision for voters was calculated by the author.

8. James E. Campbell, *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections,* second edition. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997): 183.

9. Stephen J. Wayne, *The Road to the White House 2000: The Politics of Presidential Elections* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000): 54.

10. Ronald Reagan, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987): 1511.

11. See, Richard Born, "The Influence of House Primary Election Divisiveness on General Election Margins, 1962–76," *The Journal of Politics,* 43 (August 1981): 640–55; Patrick J. Kenney and Tom W. Rice, "The Relationship between Divisive Primaries and General Election Outcomes," *American Journal of Political Science,* 31 (February 1987): 31–44; and James I. Lengle, Diana Owen, and Molly W. Sonner, "Divisive Nominating Mechanisms and Democratic Party Electoral Prospects," *The Journal of Politics,* 57 (May 1995): 370–83. See also, Lonna Rae Atkeson, "Divisive Primaries and General Election Outcomes: Another Look at Presidential Campaigns," *American Journal of Political Science,* 42 (January 1998): 256–71. Atkeson examines the national effects of divisive primaries and finds no significant effect once economic and presidential evaluations are taken into account. Her study ranges from 1936 to 1996. The problem with these findings is that primary divisiveness probably said very little about nomination divisiveness when primaries were a minor component in the nomination process, as they were before 1972. For example, Lyndon Johnson in 1964 had highly unified party behind him, but ran in very few primaries and received less than 18 percent of the primary total vote (see, Moore, Preimesberger, and Tarr, *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections, fourth edition,* v. 1: 350). Several others have claimed that the same factors hurting a candidate's nomination success or primary vote also hurt the candidate's general election vote and that the divisiveness of the nomination is a reflection of party disunity rather than a cause of it. See Andrew Hacker, "Does a 'Divisive' Primary Harm a Candidate's Election Chances?" *American Political Science Review,* 59 (March 1965): 105–10; James E. Piereson and Terry B. Smith, "Primary Divisiveness and General Election Success: A Re-Examination," *The Journal of Politics,* 37 (May 1975): 555–62; and William G. Mayer, *The Divided Democrats: Ideological Unity, Party Reform, and Presidential Elections* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1996), pp. 43–71. Although these studies indicate that the expression of party disunity (by the divided primary vote) is not the major cause of party disunity in the nomination phase, the analyses do not rule out nomination divisiveness as contributing to or reinforcing disunity. The main point here, in any case, is that party disunity, however caused, at the time of the nomination is extremely damaging to the general election prospects of the nominee.

12. Martin P. Wattenberg, "The Republican Presidential Advantage in the Age of Party Disunity," In Gary W. Cox and Samuel Kernell, *The Politics of Divided Government* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 39–55. Wattenberg creates a five point index of nomination fighting from four dummy variables based on a rough coding of whether there were early primary contests, late primary contests, a convention battle, and a healing vice presidential choice. The index was coded for the 14 candidates in the seven elections from 1964 to 1988. I examined the difference in Wattenberg's index for candidates running in the same year and compared it to the early loyalty difference index. The two were surprisingly highly correlated (r 5 .85), adding a degree of confidence in both measures.

13. The data on the conventions and delegate vote counts come from Moore, Preimesberger, and Tarr, *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections,* v. 2: 441–641.

14. These divided nominations were about as likely to be in the Democratic Party (4) as Republican Party (5) and were about as likely to involve running against an incumbent (5) as running for a open seat (4).

15. Like the 1912 election, the 1948 case might also be set aside because the Democratic Party splintered before its first ballot nomination of Harry Truman. The southern conservative wing bolted and ran Strom Thurmond as a Dixiecrat candidate and the progressive wing bolted and ran former Vice President Henry Wallace as a presidential candidate. Even without the 1948 case, the record of divided conventions of one party is eight major party candidacies without a single popular vote plurality.

16. For a colorful history of the 1924 Democratic convention see Robert K. Murray, *The 103rd Ballot: Democrats and the Disaster in Madison Square Garden* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

17. For an alternative assessment of the impact of divided conventions see Paul T. David, Ralph M. Goldman, and Richard C. Bain, *The Politics of National Party Conventions* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1960), pp. 221–39.

18. The ideas of a divisive nomination and the lack of party unity at the nomination stage are conceptually distinct. That is, a party may not be unified behind its nominee because of a divisive nomination process or some other reason. It is quite possible that the nomination process failed to generate enthusiasm for a candidate because of the candidate, the candidate's positions on the issues, or the candidate's poor prospects for election. The point here is that whatever causes a lack of party unity at the time of the nomination, that disunity is very harmful to the candidate's chances in the general election.

19. The NES data have been corrected for their differences from the actual reported presidential popular vote. Leaning independents are counted as party identifiers with the party they lean toward. The adjustments and the adjusted data used to compute the loyalty rates are in Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote*, pp. 62–3, 98, appendix B. Because third-party support can draw votes from a party's candidate, loyalty rates were based on votes for all candidates. The 2000 and 2004 data were calculated by the author from the NES studies. The 2000 early loyalty rate for Democrats was 92.4 percent and the early loyalty rate for Republicans was 95.3, for a difference of 22.9 percentage points. The 2004 early loyalty rate for Democrats was 94.1 percent and the early loyalty rate for Republicans was 96.9, for a difference of 22.9 percentage points.

20. Wattenberg in "The Republican Presidential Advantage in the Age of Party Disunity" using a very different measure also finds that Republicans throughout much of this period exhibited greater unity in support of their presidential candidate than did Democrats.

21. James E. Campbell, Lynna L. Cherry, and Kenneth A. Wink, "The Convention Bump," *American Politics Quarterly* 20 (July 1992): 287–307; and Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote*, pp. 145–51. The updated analysis of the later study indicates that frontrunners (those with more unified parties) typically have received about a 4 percentage point boost in the polls after their conventions, while trailing candidates (those with less unified parties) typically get a 7 percentage point bump. The analysis finds that about a third of the net bump carries through to the November vote and two-thirds is dissipated in the weeks following the conventions.

22. A regression accounting for variance in the Democratic candidate's two-party popular vote was estimated using the relative loyalty differences among early deciding party identifiers and the relative loyalty differences among late deciding party identifiers (those deciding their votes after the conventions or changing their vote from their pre-election vote intention). The coefficients for the loyalty differentials were .34 for the early deciders and 20 for the late deciders (with standardized coefficients of .73 for the loyalty of early deciding partisans and .35 for the loyalty of late deciding partisans). Both were statistically significant at p, .02, one-tailed and the adjusted R^2 was .81 (N 5 14). Adding the difference of the percentage of Democratic and Republican identifiers voting increases the adjusted R^2 to .98. The difference in early party loyalty was again the most important variable, more important that the difference of the percentage of Democratic and Republican party identifiers in the electorate. The standardized coefficients were .74 for the early loyalty difference, .51 for the later loyalty difference, and .41 for the difference of the percentages of Democratic and Republican identifiers among all voters.

23. Excluding both the 1964 and 1972 landslides, an equation with both the early and late party loyalty differences and the difference of the percentage of Democratic and Republican party identifiers in the electorate still accounts for 98 percent of the vote variance. The standardized coefficients were .47 for the early loyalty difference, .80 for the later loyalty difference, and .52 for the difference of the party identifiers among voters.

24. I discuss the staggered realignment toward competitive balance in "Party Systems and Realignments in the United States, 1868–2004," *Social Science History*, forthcoming.

25. These include the nine candidates in Table 11.1 plus the seven of the eight candidates nominated by multiple-ballot conventions in elections in which both parties had divided conventions (1880, 1884, 1912, and 1920) and the two candidates nominated by multiple-ballot conventions even though they had a first-ballot majority (Tilden in 1876 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932).

26. The 8.9 percentage point advantage in early party unity for incumbents is the median value of the early party loyalty difference between each of the nine incumbent-candidates and their challengers between 1952 to 2004.

27. President Carter in 1980 was the exception who had a less unified Democratic Party than the his opponent Ronald Reagan.

28. Two other cases in recent times also may qualify for incumbent trouble. President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 undoubtedly would have faced a seriously divided party had he sought renomination. Also, President Gerald Ford in 1976 faced a serious challenge from Ronald Reagan. Despite this challenge however, Republicans were more united at the close of the nomination process in 1976 than were Democrats. Jimmy Carter's emergence from a crowded field of Democrats that year left many Democrats still skeptical at the time of the nomination.

29. I evaluate the evidence of the pre-campaign conditions more thoroughly in "Why Bush Won the Presidential Election of 2004: Incumbency, Ideology, Terrorism, and Turnout," *Political Science Quarterly* 120 (Summer 2005): 219–41.