SYMPOSIUM

Meaningful Participation and the Evolution of the Reformed Presidential Nominating System

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Forty years ago, violent protests at the Democratic National Convention captured the attention of the nation as rioters vented their anger over a nomination process they felt excluded their voices. The disastrous 1968 convention spawned a cascade of reforms in the presidential nomination system, many of which were intended to create greater opportunity for meaningful participation of the party's rank-and-file members. Forty years later, where do we stand? Does the nomination process meet the goals of encouraging broad participation and connecting rank-and-file preferences to nomination outcomes? We offer some tentative answers to these questions by tracing the history of the nomination process, its evolution over the last 40 years, and the implications of several key changes in the system for citizen participation.

A SHORT HISTORY

Between 1924 and 1968 state and national party elites controlled how delegates to the national convention were selected. This endeared most delegates to state leaders rather than to the individual candidates who were seeking the presidential nomination. Often, this leader was the state governor who bestowed delegate status based on past party work and loyalty. State party delegates, in turn, bargained at the national convention to select the presidential nominee. Therefore, potential presidential candidates pursued an "inside strategy" in their quest for their party's nomination by working with and through party leaders. It was not necessary for them to actively participate in primary contests or appeal to the public for support.

Indeed, nomination rules and procedures made participation by rank-and-file party members quite difficult in many states. During this period caucuses, not primaries, dominated the nomination process, which made it easier for state-level party elites to maintain control, especially in the delegate-selection process. Many states used secret caucuses, closed slate-making, and extensive proxy voting for determining delegate selection. Some states had no formal rules for delegate selection or they changed their rules after delegates had been selected. In other cases, the delegates to the national convention were selected prior to the presidential election year before the slate of presidential candidates was even known (see the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970). As a result, candidate enthusiasts found it difficult to participate in any meaningful way.

The procedural impediments to general party participation led to a clamor for change at the 1968 convention by reformers who envisioned a more open and democratic nominating system. Delegates inside and protesters outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention were angered by their perception that Hubert Humphrey was an illegitimate party nominee; he had received the party's nomination without entering a single primary. Yet party rules and procedures fully allowed for such an outcome. Reformers believed that too much power rested in the hands of the party elites and too little power rested in the hands of the rank-and-file members of the party. Therefore, many convention delegates explicitly called for direct democracy in the selection of the party nominee.

In response, the party elite resolved to appoint a commission to make recommendations to ensure that all Democrats receive a "full, meaningful, and timely" opportunity to participate in the delegate selection process (Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970). The McGovern-Fraser Commission, named for its chairs senator George McGovern and representative Donald Fraser, recommended rule changes to the nomination process that were adopted by the DNC in 1971 and applied for the first time during the 1972 presidential nominating campaign. The new rules provided for procedural fairness, proportional representation of presidential candidate supporters, and affirmative action policies to force delegates to represent their underlying demographic groups in the electorate. The purpose of these reforms was to legitimize the party's selection of the presidential party nominee by increasing participation and by opening the party to underrepresented constituencies.

The rule changes transferred the responsibility of selecting a party nominee from the party professionals to the party rank and file, allowing for greater participation in the selection process. They also ensured that the outcomes of primaries and caucuses would influence the collective outcome of the party convention. Prior to the McGovern-Fraser reforms party primary campaigns were primarily beauty contests in which candidates could demonstrate to party leaders their broad appeal and ability to win votes. The results of the primaries did not determine a state delegation's support for the candidate at the convention. Post McGovern-Fraser, however, primary and caucus outcomes were directly linked to the number of delegates each candidate received, especially within the Democratic Party where proportional allocation of delegates is mandated. The thrust of these changes placed the

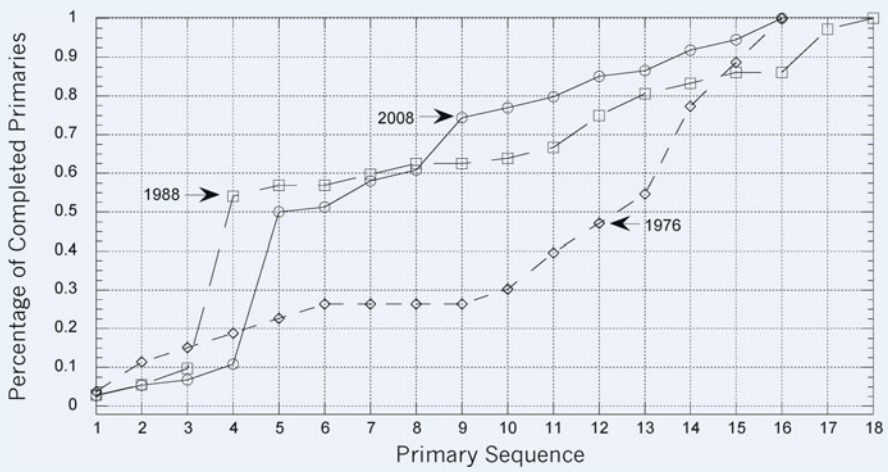
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decision-making power for the party's nomination in the hands of primary and caucus participants and away from party leaders.

Figure 1

Percentage of Primaries Complete By Primary Sequence



DOES THE CURRENT SYSTEM MEET THE STANDARD OF *MEANINGFUL* PARTICIPATION?

The purpose of the reforms was to create opportunities for *meaningful* participation for party members. Indeed, the mandate for reform mentions the word *meaningful* in relation to participation 22 times and repeatedly emphasizes its importance as the basis for its recommendations for change. Within the report, meaningful participation implies two major standards to judge the reforms. First, it implies a standard of broad access to participation in the selection process of the party nominee. Second, it implies that nomination participants' preferences and choices should have value in selecting the nominee. Senator Fred Harris, the chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) that appointed the McGovern-Fraser commission, said that, "We have no greater task than assuring that ours will be an open party, encouraging the widest possible participation in all of our affairs. The Democratic Party must serve, not be served, it must facilitate choice, not deny it; it must invite diversity, not discourage it" (Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970, 4).

The current process is now in its tenth iteration but it has been subjected to continual tinkering throughout the years as candidates and political elites look for ways to manipulate the process to their advantage. Thus, an examination of whether the outcomes of the reforms have effectively served the goal of meaningful participation is in order.

PRIMARIES OR CAUCUSES?

One change that came as a surprise to many was the quick switch from caucuses to presidential preference primaries as the preferred device for delegate selection. State leaders saw the primary as the easiest way to assure that state delegates were selected in a way that was consistent with the new rules. Interestingly, it also served to keep candidate enthusiasts out of other party business that typically takes places within the precinct caucuses as well as the county and state party conventions. From 1912 through 1968, the average number of primaries per presidential year was 15.6, but has averaged 33.4 ($p < 0.001$, two-tailed test) since the rule changes.

This shift to primaries can be judged positively based on our standard of meaningful participation. Primaries promote open and meaningful political participation because the costs of participating are similar to any other state election. Needless to say, the costs are much lower than for caucuses, where participants discuss issues and candidate preferences over an extended period of time. As a result, a larger numbers of voters go to the polls than go to the caucuses, thereby enhancing broad participation in the process (Cook and Kaplan 1988).

Primaries also come closer than caucuses to meeting the second standard—the translation of rank-and-file preferences into binding outcomes. Caucuses have multiple layers of voting that begin at the precinct level and progressively aggregate up to the congressional district and state conventions. Thus, the events of the precinct caucus votes do not necessarily carry over to the later county, district, and state conventions. Votes cast by delegates at these later events are not bound by the outcomes of the precinct caucuses and delegate totals in these circumstances do change. Therefore, we argue they provide less meaningful participation than primary contests.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FRONTLOADING FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The second significant feature of the nomination process that affects meaningful participation is the timing of the state-level events. States select the dates of their nomination contests independently, though party rules provide some guidelines, and states have incentives to schedule them early. The collective result has been an increasingly frontloaded nomination calendar with many states vying to hold primaries early in the season. Frontloading began in earnest in 1988 and has continued to increase. Frontloading, in fact, was seen as so important in 2008 that two states moved their nominating events to dates where they were openly defying national party rules. Figure 1 compares the proportion of Democrat and Republican primaries that were completed, by sequence, in 1976, 1988, and 2008. In 1976, the primary season was largely drawn out with less than 50% of primaries conducted half way through the time period, and this same pattern holds for all competitive early primaries prior to 1988. In 1988, however, frontloading is quite evident, with more than 50% of primaries conducted by week seven. The 2008

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Table 1

Number and Percentage of Primaries Remaining after Nominee is Determined, 1972–2004

	DEMOCRATS			REPUBLICANS		
ELECTION YEAR	# of primaries remaining	% of primaries remaining	Total # of primaries	# of primaries remaining	% of primaries remaining	Total # of primaries
1972	0	0	21	***19***	***100***	***19***
1976	3	11	27	***0***	***0***	***26***
1980	***27***[a]	***77***	***35***	12	34	35
1984	0	0	30	***25***	***100***	***25***
1988	13	36	36	16	44	36
1992	18	46	39	22	58	38
1996	***36***	***100***	***36***	15	34	43
2000	25	64	39	25	60	42
2004	12	33	36	***25***	***100***	***26***
2008	0	0	37	19[b]	51	39

[a]Bold numbers are sitting presidents running for reelection.

[b]Romney suspended his campaign on February 7, 2008, leaving little mathematical chance that Huckabee could catch McCain. Huckabee did not concede the race until after the primaries held on March 4 when McCain surpassed 50% of the delegate count. At that point there were 11 primaries left in the process.

pattern shows an even greater rise in the number of primaries completed quickly.

Frontloading is a tremendous change to the electoral context in the sequential system of delegate selection. The compression of the primary system influences candidate behavior and ultimately voter behavior. Frontloading has led to an increase in the importance of events in the invisible primary (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003; Haynes and Murray 1998; Mayer and Hagen 2000) and the advantage given to the frontrunner (Mayer and Busch 2004), and it has increased the problem of information to the voter (Norrander 1992).

Perhaps the most important way that frontloading influences participation is by determining the eventual nominee earlier in the process, leaving many voters to participate in a fictional contest of preferences when the outcome of the race is already known. As a result, frontloading enhances the importance of the earliest contests and reduces the importance of later contests. This happens because delegates accumulate more quickly for the eventual winner and because the race winnows more quickly. The forces of momentum send clear signals of viability to voters and campaign donors (Mayer and Hagen 2000; Mayer and Busch 2004; Atkeson 2009), so many candidates expend the bulk of their resources quickly in the hopes that a big win will propel their candidacy to the next set of nominating events. Candidates withdraw more quickly when their campaigns run out of steam because they are not anointed with "big mo."

Prior to frontloading candidates stayed in the race much longer, creating a larger field for voters to consider and providing greater incentives for voters across the electorate to tune in and participate in the selection of their party's nominee. In 1972 for example, nine Democratic candidates ran for the party nomination and by the end of the nomination season two-thirds of them remained. In comparison, in 1988 only two Democratic candidates out of seven remained during the entire delegate selection period; and for Republicans only the eventual nominee was left over two months before the delegate-selection process ended. By 2000 both parties effectively ended their campaigns almost three months before the last primary was held; and, in the Republican Party, at least half the field withdrew before the first delegate selection event was conducted.

Table 1 presents the number of primary elections remaining after the nominee is essentially determined, either because the media called a winner, because one candidate amassed enough delegates to cross the 50% delegate threshold, or because all but one candidate dropped out. Examining competitive, non-incumbent contests (incumbent races shown in bold), there is a clear increase in the number of primaries remaining after the advent in frontloading with the exception of the 2008 Democratic race, a point we will return to later. In 1972 and 1976 nearly all primaries took place before the race was called. By 1988, however, over one-third of the primaries in both parties remained when the respective-party candidates were anointed as winners. Four years later, over half the races remained and by 2000 three in five—a huge majority—remained. Even though John McCain did not cross the 50% threshold until March 4, he was essentially the nominee after Tsunami Tuesday when Mitt Romney, who had the second-highest delegate count, withdrew. Mike Huckabee remained in the race, but momentum would have had to significantly change for him to catch up to McCain, who had more resources and nearly three times as many delegates, particularly given the more common winner-take-all delegate allocation rule that many Republican state parties use.

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The increasing trend to declare the winner quickly affects the type of campaign to which voters in different states are exposed. In the earliest states, voters see a full slate of candidates, intense campaigning, and a disproportionate share of media attention (Bartels 1988). This is because early contests are important to momentum and for the most part candidates place all their campaign chips in the earliest contests. The concentration on advertising in these states reflects candidates' needs to perform better than expected in the first few primaries to stimulate momentum for future races. Not surprisingly, the media responds to the intense campaigning early in the process with almost constant coverage in early races, but a drop off in coverage quickly occurs as the campaign events become less important to the nomination outcome (Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Bartels 1988).

Two other aspects of frontloading are worth considering because they also affect the context of the campaigns to which voters are exposed. The first is that frontloading increases primary compression, leading to a larger number of contests on any given day. For example, in 2008 the Democrats opened up their window of participation on February 5, resulting in Tsunami Tuesday with the largest number of contests ever held on one day. Compression is problematic for candidate strategy because candidates must divide their campaign dollars among numerous states at the same time. Because candidates court different constituencies (Gurian and Haynes 1993), each candidate makes different strategic decisions resulting in very different primary contests across states. These differences include different levels of competition, mobilization, and information for nomination participants. These strategic choices result in different levels of turnout and judgments across electorates. We argue that these factors undermine meaningful participation.

The second is that frontloading often leads to separation of the presidential nomination contest from other nomination contests in the state (Norrander 1992). In the era before frontloading was prevalent (pre-1988), most states combined their state and federal ballots. After frontloading, however, a majority of states held their presidential primaries on a different date than their state primaries (Atkeson and Maestas 2008). Placing both elections on the same day enhances voter interest as more races are on the ballot and more candidates across races actively compete. The separation of these contests reduces turnout and functionally reduces the meaningful participation of primary voters in presidential and state politics.

Does the frontloaded system that has evolved since the reforms meet the goals of meaningful participation as sought by reformers? We think not. The current incentive structure privileges voters in some states and penalizes those in others, thereby failing to meet the goal of encouraging broad participation. In the earliest states, voters are exposed to an intense multi-candidate contest, where their decisions are seen as the harbinger of the campaign. Because the race is new and every candidate has a chance to win the nomination (at least in theory), votes in these states "count" more. The outcomes from early state contests provide important cues to future voters about the viability and electability of candidates, and can breathe life and the all-important momentum into the underdog campaign. As each subsequent election takes place, however, the dynamics of the campaign change: the field is winnowed, candidates cease campaigning, the "cues" from any one state become less important to future states, and media attention wanes (Norrander 2000; Haynes and Murray 1998).

Once the winner of the nomination has been declared voters in remaining states lack meaningful choices at the polls. Without the prodding that an active campaign provides and because whatever marginal effect voters' choices would make to an election outcome is lost when the candidate is known, voters have fewer incentives to participate. It is not surprising to find that state primary turnout declines in states that fall late in the sequence of contests. Estimates from an empirical model suggests that between 3.5 to 7% (or between 71,000 and 17,8000 voters) per state are turned off by their position in the process and their lack of meaningful participation (Atkeson and Maestas 2008).

DOES 2008 SUGGEST FRONTLOADING DOESN'T MATTER?

There is no doubt that the 2008 Democratic contest was one of the most dramatic and drawn-out nominations contests in recent times and the level of participation was greater than in previous elections. Does this mean that frontloading is not an impediment to broad participation? Probably it is not. First, frontloading certainly influenced the Republican race in the way we describe above, by winnowing the field to a single viable candidate quite quickly after Tsunami Tuesday. The winner-take-all delegate counts piled up rapidly for McCain and, although Huckabee stayed in the race until March 4, the race was effectively over after Romney suspended his campaign on February 7. Nineteen primaries still remained.

Although the Democrat race winnowed to two candidates quickly, the two candidates remained in a competitive contest to the end of the process. But, the oddities of this race likely make it unique. For example, the status of Michigan and Florida delegates were unclear until a party deal was brokered at the end of the process. As early states in the process, they should have provided momentum to the winning candidate going into Tsunami Tuesday, but the degree to which a win in those states mattered was unclear. Subsequent primary voters were left with confusing signals about momentum. That meant that voters went into Tsunami Tuesday with no clear frontrunner from the earlier contests and the short distance between contests left little time for voters to deliberate their choices. Instead the vote-share differences across races were relatively small and there were two state wins for senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton and the rest of the field, except John Edwards who was hanging on by a thread, had conceded. This, combined with rules that proportionally allocated delegates, and candidates' strategic targeting of resources on Tsunami Tuesday, lead to an extremely close split in delegate counts and state wins in what became a two-person contest. The renewed competitiveness of the election and the full campaign coffers of Obama and Clinton created a highly unusual circumstance never seen before and led to an uptick in turnout and a renewed enthusiasm and interest in the campaign. Given that this is one very unusual contest out of 20 since the

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reforms, it appears to be the odd case out and is not reflective of normal nomination politics.

That being said, it may highlight an important problem in frontloading never considered before because compression had never been as intense as it was on Tsunami Tuesday 2008. Specifically, it suggests that if there is not enough time for momentum to signal to voters the frontrunner, a compressed schedule might actually exacerbate competition and party divisiveness because of candidate strategies, creating a drawn out, but not necessarily meaningful battle. Thus, in this scenario, voters do not have clear signals from previous voters, nor do they have the full campaign to respond to because of candidate incentives to target their campaigning efforts and because of the speed of the process.

Thus, even in the 2008 contest we argue that frontloading was consequential to the outcome. Extreme compression in the race led candidates to employ selective mobilization efforts. Obama concentrated his efforts on the states holding caucuses while ceding some key primary states to Clinton, and Clinton focused on primary elections rather than caucuses. One problem with frontloading is that compression forces candidates to strategically select where to compete and this has consequences for the participation of state electorates. States where one candidate strategically cedes the race and skips campaigning generates less effective participation. Rank-and-file party members are not drawn into the race in the same way they would be in a state where both candidates choose to compete. This means that outcomes are less reflective of the underlying rank-and-file preferences than if the nomination contests had been spread out over time, encouraging two competitive candidates to focus on the same state. The result was an aggregate outcome that increased overall participation throughout the process, but with uneven mobilization of underlying electorates in individual states. Thus, although frontloading did not stymie broad participation in this case, it likely created biases in participation in individual state electorates due to selective state targeting by candidates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

If meaningful participation was the primary concern for the changes made to the process, there is both good and bad news for the reformers. Relative to the campaigns prior to 1972, there is no doubt that the rule changes have prompted greater participation. So, from one perspective the reformers should rejoice. Their reforms drastically changed the process from a top-down elite-driven model to one that is driven by the decisions of voting party members and candidates.

However, if we consider meaningful participation in relation to how the process has evolved since the reforms, another story emerges. As the process has changed over time, it has become increasingly frontloaded, which has consequences on candidate and voter behavior that reduces meaningful participation. Voters in the earliest states experience a very different campaign with active candidates and media coverage leading to the necessary information to make an informed choice. In addition, voters in these states are in the unique position that a vote for even a losing candidate may send important information about their viability to later voters. Thus, these voters have relatively high voting incentives and low voting costs, leading to more meaningful participation and an increased likelihood of turnout than later voters. Up to the effective end of the campaign, each subsequent primary has lower turnout as the prospects of the frontrunner increase and the incentives to turn out in support of a likely loser decrease. Also, once the nominee is known, participation rates sharply decline since candidates no longer have the incentives to stimulate participation and voters no longer have incentives to participate.

This result is problematic in the face of a reformed process that was intended to enhance internal party democracy and to promote meaningful and fair participation across all states, particularly for groups that were typically underrepresented in the process. Mobilization efforts in competitive elections have an especially strong effect on young voters, less-educated voters, and low-income voters (Donovan and Tolbert 2007; Hill and Leighley 1996). Therefore, it is likely that a frontloaded, sequential nomination process in which mobilization efforts cease before all states have selected a nominee creates a disproportionate burden on some classes of voters.

Recent discussions by political elites, party leaders, and political pundits also question the sanity and effectiveness of the nomination process as it has evolved, particularly as it relates to frontloading and its consequences. Political pundit David Broder (1996) argues that the rapid succession of numerous state primaries may result in the inability of voters to make a quality and deliberative decision given the choices offered. Simply, there is not enough time between state contests for voters to make a well-informed choice. Party leaders have expressed similar concerns.

Finally, the consequences to voter mobilization and rank-and-file party recruitment may also be negative. Nomination campaigns are an environment in which the party has the opportunity to expand its base of support. Those involved in the nomination campaign, even for a losing candidate, often work for the party or party nominee in the general-election campaign (Stone, Atkeson, and Rapoport 1992). Party divisiveness, caused by a candidate-centered nominating campaign, is lessened by the general election, which helps to unite people around the party nominee (Atkeson 1993) and has very little effect on general-election outcomes (Atkeson 1998). Thus, the advantages of party building during presidential nomination campaigns outweigh the potential costs of an intra-party fight that is a natural part of a candidate-centered process and offers a unique opportunity for new entrants to come into the party. With a shorter campaign, party expansion and recruitment may be less likely since voters do not have the time or inclination to become involved in a candidate's campaign before the race is essentially over. All this suggests that the current system does not offer meaningful participation to all or even most voters. Some voters' participation is more meaningful than others and their judgments are more important in selecting the party nominee.

One possible change would be to eliminate frontloading to make the process more deliberative and more democratic. This would allow for the proper spacing of primaries between events so that voters have time to learn about the candidates and

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candidates have time to get their messages to the voters to stimulate interest and participation in the process. Such a process would likely promote broader participation in the form of increased turnout. Yet, as a policy prescription, this may be unrealistic since it requires individual states to adhere to a calendar that is good for the collective party but not necessarily good for the individual state. As we've seen in 2008, this can prove impossible, even with a threat of tough sanctions.

Alternatively, the parties could consider a more radical change with a national primary that emphasizes the aggregation of votes across states as opposed to within states. A national primary would focus broad voter attention on the race as candidates compete nationally instead of locally and reduce the effects of selective mobilization that come with a compressed schedule combined with state-based results. In a national primary, all interested voters would tune in to candidate debates to assist them in making their choices rather than just those in states with impending primaries. Likewise, candidates would have incentives to activate candidate enthusiasts regardless of their geographic location, potentially creating a greater connection between underlying national partisan preferences and nomination outcomes. Meaningful participation would easily be achieved because each vote is counted equally. In addition, the process could be designed to have a run off between the top two or the parties could choose a more complex ballot that allowed voters to indicate multiple ordered preferences. In this way, the preferences of more individuals would be considered in determining the party nominee.

Equally importantly, some of the negative consequences of a sequential process would be eliminated. Momentum would not be consequential—early and unrepresentative states would not get preferential treatment. Also, the process would have additional positive benefits including an expansion of the party base as new voters are brought into the party as they are attracted to specific candidate campaigns. It also has the advantage of testing a candidate's appeal in a large electorate where voters can make informed judgments based upon the entire campaign content. And, finally, a national primary would provide a quick and decisive decision that many party leaders prefer. Of course, there would be downsides and unintended consequences, but it is an option worth considering.

In conclusion, in thinking about the future of presidential nomination reform it is important to consider what senator Edmond Muskie (Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970, 3) said about the new and radical reforms being considered at that time, "An effective political party must be responsive to the needs of its constituents and responsible in the exercise of its power. To be such a party it must be constantly alert to the need for reforming its structures and its procedures to insure maximum opportunity for meaningful participation in the democratic process." Perhaps it is time to revisit the reform process in a more serious and systematic way. ■

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