SYMPOSIUM

Reforming the Presidential Nomination Process

Editors' Introduction

Caroline Tolbert, *University of Iowa*
Peverill Squire, *University of Missouri*

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD: THE BROKEN PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION PROCESS

The 2008 presidential nomination was marked by the most aggressive frontloading in recent history; the process was a mess from the outset. Frontloading is the trend in recent presidential nominations in which states schedule their primaries and caucuses near the beginning of the delegate-selection season to have a greater impact on the process. In 1976, 10% of the delegates had been chosen by March 2. In 2008, 70% of the delegates had been chosen by that same date. As part of their ongoing efforts to address frontloading and other problems, both the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) revised the schedules and rules for 2008 presidential primary elections and caucuses.

Nevertheless, ugly battles over the calendar of nomination events pitted some state parties, notably those in Florida and Michigan, against other state parties, primarily those in Iowa and New Hampshire. This conflict led to the dates and sequence of nomination events not being set until late 2007. Moreover, because Florida and Michigan moved their primaries to earlier dates than they were supposed to under party rules, the entire primary calendar was pushed to very early in 2008, with the Iowa Caucuses being held just three days into the new year. For their temerity, Florida and Michigan were threatened with severe punishment by their national parties: the loss of half their delegates to the GOP convention and all of their delegates to the Democratic convention. Although the parties largely relented after their nomination contests were settled, concern over what to do about the Florida and Michigan problems dogged the candidates, campaigns, and parties for months.

Because the nomination process was so heavily frontloaded and started so early in the year, nobody found it particularly satisfying, save perhaps for the partisans of the winning candidates and those observers who delight in high voter-turnout rates. Indeed, just prior to the national conventions, each party announced that it would undertake significant reviews of its nomination system (Balz 2008; Shear 2008). Consequently, chances are good that the nomination process in 2012 will look very different from the one in 2008 (see Squire 2008).

If so, it may be a good thing for political scientists who study presidential nominations, for two reasons. First, our understanding of the process that has been in place since 1972 has eroded. The race in 2008 unfolded in a number of ways that were contrary to the precepts of our understanding. Some of these violations were small. It had long been true, for example, that there were "only three tickets out of Iowa," meaning that anything less than finishing in the top three in either party ended a candidate's chances (Squire 1989). Senator McCain, however, managed to become the nominee even though he finished fourth in Iowa, albeit missing the third position by only a 424-vote margin. Conventional wisdom also maintained that winning the Iowa caucuses does not matter; winning New Hampshire, or doing better than expected there, is the ticket to success. Yet in 2008 Obama's surprising win in Iowa generated the momentum that allowed him to secure the Democratic Party nomination.

Other violations were larger and more meaningful. Again it was long held that the dynamics of the current nomination process made it likely that the nominee would be determined relatively quickly. The winnowing function performed by the early contests would inevitably take a large field of candidates and reduce it to a smaller and smaller group, and once two or three candidates were left voters would quickly shift in favor of the eventual nominee. While the rules on the Republican side produced the expected quick verdict, those on the Democratic side did not force the contest and it seemed like it might never end, dragging on for several months.

Other unexpected outcomes in 2008 were more positive, notably the surge in political participation that far exceeded expectations, in part because the Obama campaign was remarkably successful in getting its young supporters out to the polls. The 2008 presidential nomination contests were the most competitive in modern history, with the Democratic battle lasting into June with record turnout in primaries and caucuses across the nation. Normally turnout in presidential primaries slowly decreases over time as the field of candidates is winnowed

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and a clear winner emerges (Atkeson and Maestas 2009 in this symposium). Compared to 30% turnout in 2004, turnout in the 2008 New Hampshire primary was over 50% of the voting eligible population (VEP), a 20-point increase. With the exceptions of Michigan (which was stripped of its delegates) and Louisiana, turnout in state primaries from January through May was well over a third of the VEP across the nation. Turnout rose from an average of 30% among Super Tuesday voting states (February 5) to almost 35% in later primaries, including Ohio (March 4), Pennsylvania (April 22), and finally North Carolina and Oregon (May 20). The highly competitive Democratic Party nomination was driven after Super Tuesday by the battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Some argue competition in general is a good thing (Donovan 2007; Atkeson and Maestas 2009 in this symposium) and not only increases turnout (Cox and Munger 1989) but can alter the composition of the electorate, reducing bias (Donovan and Tolbert 2007). Others suggest competition fosters party building activities (Stone, Atkeson, and Rapoport 1992).

Other changes in presidential nominations in recent elections deviate substantially from our understanding of the process based on work conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Today serious candidates begin fundraising years before the first nominating event drawing on elite patrons, as discussed by John Aldrich in this symposium. As candidates, such as Obama in 2008, increasingly opt out of public financing, combined with a frontloaded calendar, early money matters even more than in the past. The mass media plays a powerful role in informing the public about the candidates compared to three decades ago, potentially distorting the process (see Donovan 2009 in this symposium). Since 2000 new online media and online fundraising has become increasingly important (see Haynes and Pitts 2009 in this symposium). The Internet did not exist when much of the literature on presidential nominations was written. It is clearly time to revisit our understanding of presidential nomination politics.

The second reason a revamped process may be good for political scientists is that it gives those interested in the nomination process an opportunity to take lessons learned from the current system and to help design an improved process. This is a chance that may come along only once a generation. Consequently, important contributions can be made to the debate over what a better system might be and how it might operate.

PUBLIC OPINION ON REFORM OF THE PROCESS

Clearly, the American public seems to have the appetite to revamp the nomination system. A 2008 national survey conducted in 40 states that voted on Super Tuesday or in primaries and caucuses afterwards (respondents from early nominating events, including Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina were omitted) of nearly 1,300 respondents uncovered serious reservations with the current nomination process.[1] Adapting a Pew Research Center survey question, respondents were asked, "How much influence do you think voters of Iowa and New Hampshire have?" in selecting presidential candidates. Given three options, 31% of Americans said "too much," while 53% said "just about right" and 16% said "too little." Thus one in three Americans voting on Super Tuesday or later thought Iowa and New Hampshire have too much say in the selecting presidential candidates. When asked, "How much influence does the average voter have?" a high 54% said "too little" with another 40% noting "just about right." More than half of Americans feel their voice in selecting presidential candidates is muted and would like more of a say (see Aldrich 2009 in this symposium for a discussion of citizen voters). Party leaders, in contrast, are seen to have a net positive influence on the process, with 48% of Americans saying their influence is "just about right" and 42% saying "too much." But the real target of frustration appears to be the media. When asked "how much influence do news organizations have?" 77% of Americans said "too much," which is considerably higher than any of the other responses and higher than responses to this same question about media influence in general elections when asked by Pew in 2000. The logic suggests the response to the "media has too much influence" may be related to the concept the "media attention to Iowa and New Hampshire is too much" (see Donovan 2009 in this symposium). Americans may be unhappy with the media for giving these small states disproportionate influence in selecting presidential candidates (see Winebrenner 1998).

The 2008 survey also found widespread support for reforming the presidential nomination process. As discussed in the article by Caroline Tolbert, David Redlawsk, and Daniel Bowen (2009) nearly three-quarters of Americans (excluding individuals from states voting before Super Tuesday) favor significant reform of the current system for nominating candidates, including rotating state-primary order or a national primary. Other polls have long found similar high levels of support for a national primary (Altschuler 2008).

While the Iowa caucuses have long drawn extensive media coverage there is evidence that Iowa was even more important in 2008 than in the past. Drawing on the 2004 election, Hull (2007) contends new communications media, such as the Internet, have caused Iowa to have a "wired and wild" influence on election contests in other states. In 2008 for the first time since the caucuses became first in the process, both major parties had no heir apparent and thus wide-open contests. Additionally, there were only five days between the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary. The result was an even more intense focus on Iowa, with as many as 16 candidates at least making some effort to contest the caucuses. Figure 1 provides the results of a simple search in Google News using the keywords "Iowa caucuses" or "Iowa caucus." The graph shows the number of stories related to the Iowa caucuses from 1970–2008. An Internet search of the "Iowa caucuses" on January 2, 2008, returned 42,240 articles in Google News (this number may be inflated, as online media has generally proliferated). The national news media hype in the weeks leading up to the January 3, 2008, Iowa caucuses was intense.

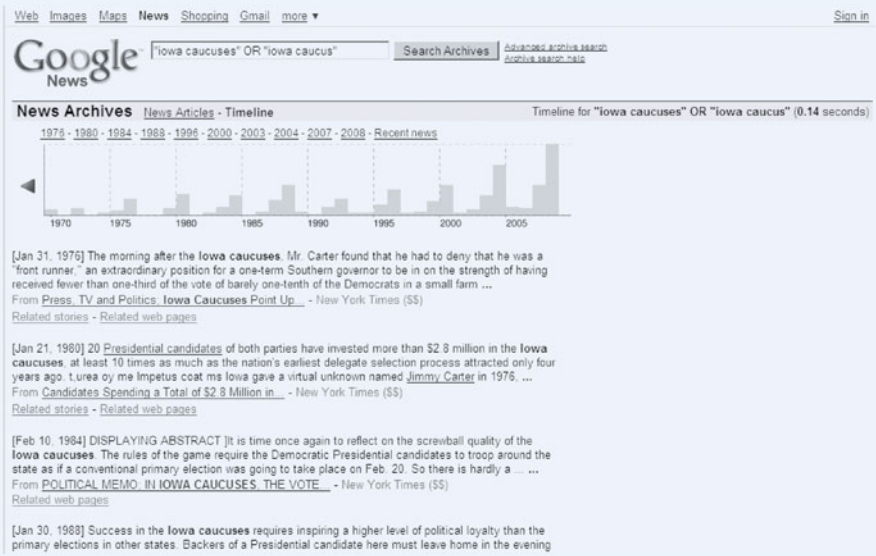
GOALS OF A PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATING SYSTEM

If public opinion on the nomination process signals a desire for change, how might we systematically study reform of the way we nominate presidential candidates? One thing should

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Figure 1

Media Coverage of the Iowa Caucuses in National News 1970–2008



be clear so far, and that is that the rules of the game structure presidential nomination contests (Norrander 1996). These rules govern which states vote early and late in the sequential process, and why some states use caucuses and others primary elections. These rules also govern whether individuals will have a chance to cast a second-place vote (or only a first-place vote), and whether votes will be allocated proportionally (Democratic Party) or using a winner-take-all system (Republican Party) where the candidate winning the most votes in states wins all the delegates for that state. Finally, these rules govern the sequential nomination process itself, versus a simultaneous election (Battaglini, Morton, and Palfrey 2007). One thing we know from a growing literature on election reform and institutions is that rules governing politics can and do change (Cain, Donovan, and Tolbert 2008).

In this symposium we focus on the presidential nominating process in terms of its ability to promote four essential and interrelated goals: candidate quality, voter information, voter participation, and equality.

A presidential nomination process should elect *quality candidates*, not simply those who are the most well known or the best financed. Such quality candidates should be representative of their party and able to win in the general election. Early nominating events should level the playing field at the beginning in terms of money and access to voters and media. Since 1980, 13 of the 14 presidential nominees—in both parties—were those who raised the most money a year before the first nominating event (Donovan and Bowler 2004). This is sometimes referred to as the wealth primary (see Aldrich 2009), as candidates seeking a party's nomination spend years before an election building networks of major donors (Mayer 2000). In contrast, campaigning in small-state environments, such as Iowa or New Hampshire, fosters grassroots or retail politics; candidates learn how to respond to voters and what issues drive voters (Hull 2007).

Second, a sequential election system in particular allows voters in early nominating events to create *information* for voters in later states. Sequential voting rules aggregate information better than simultaneous voting and are more efficient in some information environments, but sequential voting is inequitable because early voters bear greater participation costs (Battaglini, Morton, and Palfrey 2007). Outcomes from early nominating events and media coverage should generate information that citizens in later states can exploit. The process for selecting presidential candidate should maximize information about candidate quality.

Third, the nomination system should encourage increased *participation* so that the electorate is representative of the VEP. Ideally primaries and caucuses should be highly competitive throughout the nomination season. Increased turnout is a goal that might be accomplished by the use of primaries instead of caucuses and open primaries that allow nonpartisans and independents to participate, instead of closed or semi-closed primaries. Participation may also increase by spreading out the states voting on Super Tuesday so fewer delegates are awarded on one day and candidates cannot secure the nomination before many states have had a chance to vote. Knight and Schiff (2008), using simulations based on daily tracking polls from 2004 nomination contests, find that a national primary would have been more competitive and enjoy higher turnout, as would rotating state primaries. Of course greater participation does not automatically lead to a more representative electorate. Therefore policymakers must ensure that the rules governing registration and voting do not lead to systematic bias in terms of socioeconomic status or race and ethnicity (Schattschneider 1960).

Finally, the nomination system should strive for *equality* among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories that participate in terms of allowing all Americans to cast a meaningful vote. The current system may give too much power to Iowa and New Hampshire to narrow the field of candidates, while citizens from large states in a typical election year, such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas, may have virtually no say in the selection of presidential candidates or no meaningful representation because the contests are over before they reach them. The current system also encourages

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state frontloading. Proposals to rotate which states go early in the process, regional primaries, or a national primary address concerns about equality of participation among voters from different states.

SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

If the nomination process is to be changed in light of the above goals, it may be useful to explore our understanding of the current system and how it works as well as to examine alternatives to it. The papers included in this forum were originally presented at a conference hosted by the University of Iowa's department of political science.[2] They are intended to contribute to discussion of what we know about how the process currently works, and how and if it should be reformed.

In the first article, John Aldrich argues that the current nomination process has evolved to the point where the role of the public has been greatly diminished in favor of the ever-increasing power of the "nomination elite" (officeholders, activists, resource providers, campaign specialists, media personnel, and the like). He suggests that if the desire is to return to a system where the voters play a larger direct role in determining the outcome, several reforms, notably a change to condense the nomination process's larger timeframe, and efforts to make resource gathering less time consuming and more fruitful for most candidates by updating existing campaign finance regulations.

The question of state representativeness looms large for any nomination system short of a national primary. Michael Lewis-Beck and Peverill Squire explore the notion of representativeness. They challenge the widely held belief that Iowa is unrepresentative of the rest of the nation by examining a wide range of social, economic, and demographic measures. They conclude that although Iowa does not look much like the U.S. demographically, economically it may be the most representative state in the union.

The power of the media has a large role in the current nomination process and Todd Donovan explores how media coverage of the early contests in Iowa and New Hampshire shapes what people think about the candidates and their campaigns in states that vote later in the process. Indeed, he finds a significant impact of media coverage of candidates' chances of winning their party's nomination over time, beyond vote margins, even if the media may have erred in their initial analyses. These results suggest media interpretation of early events—whether precise or not—may have substantial consequences for final outcomes.

The context in which presidential nominations are contested continues to evolve in ways that may influence the way we conceptualize possible reforms. In their innovative article, Audrey Haynes and Brian Pitts show the extent of online media campaigns in the 2008 presidential nomination process and mine a great number of new online data collection tools. These tools may lead us to a different understanding of how voters acquire and use information about the candidates and their campaigns. New online media may mitigate some effects of traditional mass media on who wins the nomination.

The nomination process has evolved in important ways over the last 40 years. Atkinson and Maestas trace the impact of these changes on voter participation. They examine whether the Democratic Party's explicit desire to reform the nomination process to increase participation has been successful, focusing on the impact of frontloading and primaries on voter turnout. They report mixed results on the question of whether the current process enhances or inhibits meaningful participation, and speculate about the impact of potential reforms.

Because of flaws in the major reform proposals currently on the table, some have proposed incremental reform by changing the primary and caucus calendar to combat state frontloading (Mayer and Busch 2003). In this symposium, William Mayer argues the time period in which all states must hold their primaries and caucuses should be moved a month and half later than in 2008. At present, the Democratic and Republican parties' national rules both forbid states from holding a primary or caucus before the first Tuesday in February, while the Democrats exempt Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina from this provision.[3] Mayer suggests that the rules of both political parties should be changed so that no primaries or caucuses are allowed to take place until the third Tuesday in March (see Aldrich 2009 as well). With nominations determined regularly by early March under the current system, presidential candidates must begin campaigning for the general election half a year earlier than in the past, requiring the candidates to raise a great deal of additional campaign money, particularly for television ads.

Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen evaluate major reform proposals of the presidential nomination process using 2008 national opinion data. These include support for rotating which states hold the first primaries and caucuses, retaining or ending Iowa and New Hampshire's "first in the nation" status, and a national primary. These survey data show a majority of Americans favor major reform of the nomination process. Support for these various reforms is linked to a respondent's status as an electoral loser, residency in a large- or small-population state, and whether the respondent resides in a state that votes early or late in the process (i.e., whether the state regularly plays an active role in selecting presidential candidates). These rare data on Americans' views on possible reforms shed light on who wants and does not want to change how presidential candidates are nominated.

COSTS AND BENEFITS

The answers to which alternatives might work best rest on assessing the costs and benefits of alternative institutional arrangements in light of the above goals of an ideal process for nominating presidential candidates. For example, there are arguments for why Iowa is a good place to begin the presidential nomination process because of grassroots politics (Hull 2007; Lewis-Beck and Squire 2009 in this symposium). At the same time, the Iowa caucuses create horizontal inequity among the 50 states because of their prioritized role. There are arguments for why we should rotate state primaries, starting with small states and allowing voters nationwide

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to be exposed to competitive nominations and cast a meaningful vote. Simultaneous elections, such as a national primary, have the advantage of eliminating inequity among the states and frontloading, and likely would result in more competitive elections with higher turnout. Yet an advantage of sequential elections is that early nominating events create positive externalities in terms of generating information used by voters in later states, fostering learning. Neither a national primary nor rotating state primaries addresses the growing influence—sometimes accurate and sometimes not—of the media in determining early winners and losers in nomination contest (see Donovan 2009 in this symposium). However, new online media (Haynes and Pitts 2009) may provide a partial solution naturally. Preserving retail or grassroots politics by beginning the process in small states may provide some leverage against the mass media and the wealth primary by leveling the playing field among candidates with and without extensive resources. Incremental reform, proposed by Mayer and Aldrich (2009), may be the most feasible for bringing short-term rationality to the process. The answers to these tradeoffs in the end may rely on some combination of continuity and reform.

Finally, presidential nominations are further complicated by American federalism in which national political parties, state parties, and state legislatures vie for control of the process. Regardless of Supreme Court rulings giving political parties some power to set their rules governing state nominating events, it is a power shared by state governments, which can set the dates for when party primaries and caucuses are held. The national parties have little leverage to force states to act in the fashion they want. While the national parties seek a rational schedule for nominating events with adequate spacing between state elections for candidates to gain momentum and raise needed funds, individual states promote their self-interest seeking a greater role in the process (seeking attention from candidate and the media and generating an economic boost from campaign dollars) by pushing their primaries and caucuses earlier in the election season. The result is a situation in which neither states nor political parties have control over the process, and both often seek different (if not opposite) goals. Reform of the process will likely require compromise with the national political parties, and even congressional action. ■

NOTES

1. The national random-digit-dialed telephone survey was conducted pre and post February 5 (Super Tuesday); it included responses from registered voters in 40 states (respondents from states that had already voted where omitted, as were Alaska and Hawaii) and yielded a sample of 1,285 registered voters. The Hawkeye Poll was conducted by the University of Iowa with a response rate of 19%.

2. "Reforming the Presidential Nomination Process Conference," Iowa City, IA, January 2–4, 2008. Hosted by the University of Iowa's department of political science and Professors Peverill Squire and Caroline Tolbert. The conference was made possible by the department's Benjamin F. Shambaugh Memorial Fund. It is online at http://myweb.uiowa.edu/bhlai/caucus/.

3. See "Delegate Selection Rules for 2008 Democratic National Convention," Rule No. 11(a); and "The Rules of the Republican Party," Rule No. 15(b), cited Mayer 2009.

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SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS

John Aldrich *is the Pfizer-Pratt University Professor of Political Science at Duke University, having previously taught at Michigan State and Minnesota Universities. He has served as co-editor of the* American Journal of Political Science *and as president of the Southern Political Science Association and Midwest Political Science Association. He works on elections, political parties, and legislative politics.*

Lonna Rae Atkeson *is a professor and Regents' Lecturer in the political science department at the University of New Mexico. She studies public opinion and political behavior, emphasizing the role contextual factors play in shaping attitudes and behaviors of political actors. Her research has received repeated funding from the National Science Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts.*

Daniel C. Bowen *is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Iowa. He is writing a dissertation on representation and state legislative constituency size. He can be reached at danielbowen@uiowa.edu.*

Todd Donovan *is professor of political science at Western Washington University, where he studies elections and representation.*

Audrey A. Haynes *is an associate professor in political science at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on media and presidential nomination campaigns. She is currently working on a book that examines the impact on new media on campaigns.*

Rob Hunsaker *recently completed his senior honors thesis at Western Washington University.*

Michael S. Lewis-Beck *is F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa. His interests are forecasting, comparative elections, political economy, and quantitative methodology. Lewis-Beck has authored or co-authored over 145 articles and books, including* The American Voter Revisited, Forecasting Elections, Economics and Elections: the Major Western Democracies, The French Voter: Before and After the 2002 Elections, *and* Applied Regression: An Introduction.

Dr. Cherie Maestas *is an associate professor of political science at Florida State University. She studies public opinion, campaigns, and elections with a special focus on the role of elite political ambition and sub-national institutions in creating incentives for representation. Her work has been funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the National Science Foundation.*

William G. Mayer *is an associate professor of political science at Northeastern University. Every four years since 1996, he has edited a book of original essays on the presidential nomination process, the most recent of which is* The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2008 *(Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).*

Brian Pitts *is a graduate student at the University of Georgia. His research interests include political communications, new media, and collective action.*

David P. Redlawsk *is associate professor of political science and director of the University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll. He can be reached at david-redlawsk@uiowa.edu.*

Peverill Squire *is Hicks and Martha Griffiths Chair in American Political Institutions at the University of Missouri. He is the author or co-author of* 101 Chambers: Congress, State Legislatures, and the Future of Legislative Studies, Legislatures: Comparative Perspectives on Representative Assemblies, Who Runs for the Legislature?, Dynamics of Democracy, *and* The Iowa Caucuses and the Presidential Nominating Process.

Caroline Tolbert *is associate professor of political science at the University of Iowa. Her most recent books are* Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation *(2007, MIT Press, with K. Mossberger and R. McNeal) and* Democracy in the States: Experiments in Election Reform *(2008, Brookings Institution Press, with B. Cain and T. Donovan). She is currently writing a book on U.S. presidential nominations and Iowa's unique role in the process. Tolbert is co-director of the University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll.*

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