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The 2020 Democratic Primary

Key Developments, Dynamics, and Lessons for 2024

Edited by
Luke Perry

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This book is dedicated to everyone harmed in the January 6, 2021 domestic terrorist attack on U.S. Capitol.

Preface

This Palgrave Series in U.S. Elections, established in collaboration with the Utica College Center of Public Affairs and Election Research, brings together cutting-edge work in U.S. Politics focused on trends and issues surrounding local, state, and federal elections. Books in this series cover topics such as voting behavior, campaign management, policy considerations, electoral social movements, and analysis of significant races.

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Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Battle for Central New York
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Acknowledgments

CONTENTS

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LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

Introduction

Luke Perry

Abstract This chapter provides an introduction to presidential nominations, the 2020 presidential primary and the framework of this book.

The 2020 Democratic presidential primary was one of the most interesting and impactful in recent history. Democrats entered the race with hope and dread. Donald Trump was the most unpopular president to run for reelection since Gerald Ford. Trump also provided four years of daily reminders why his campaign skills should not be underestimated (Rakich 2020). "The road to the White House is long, circuitous, and bumpy," containing numerous hazards and potential dead-ends for candidates and both parties (Wayne 2016, 2). Joe Biden emerged from an unorthodox path to secure the nomination and make Trump the first

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one-term president in 28 years. Many lessons and implications from 2020 will undoubtedly influence the 2024 primaries.

Understanding presidential nominations is an inherently challenging undertaking. "Generalizations are based on small numbers- only two major party choices every four years- a mere twenty nominations in four decades of 'contemporary' politics" (Epstein 1978, 177). Ironically, these challenges have not hindered endless multimedia analysis and partisan advocacy during three-year presidential campaign cycles. The work of presidential election scholars, seeking to provide objective, evidence-based conclusions, has grown in importance during this era of hyper-partisanship and strategically deployed misinformation. This chapter provides context for understanding the 2020 Democratic primary and the framework of this book.

The Nomination Process

Beneath the public gaze on presidential campaigns, heavily focused on what candidates are saying and doing, is an "amazingly complicated set of rules" that can change in important and subtle ways every four years (Aldrich et al. 2019, 24). This complexity results from several factors, such as federalism, the influence of national party committees, and constantly shifting campaign finance laws and campaign strategies. Party activists are central actors in the process, exerting "substantial, and at times deciding, influence over the nomination of party candidates" (Carsey et. al. 2006, 147). Activists "help to shape the rules, values and culture of political parties" and influence the strength of party organizations, policy agenda, and ideological orientation.

Presidential selection was one of the most challenging issues undertaken at the Constitutional Convention. Delegates sought to ensure some independence for the presidency, opting against having the president selected by the national legislature, common in parliamentary systems. They also wanted a republican form of government, not a democracy, so that educated elites could filter and refine popular preferences. The electoral system aspired to "choose the most qualified person, but not necessarily the most popular" (Wayne 2016, 3). As result, delegates rejected hereditary lineage and direct popular vote. Indirect election following a nonbinding popular vote emerged as a compromise, building on past committee work and divisions over mode of selection. States received a number of electors equal to their members of Congress and

were responsible for deciding how to select them. A successful candidate was required to secure a majority vote in the Electoral College to become president. The Constitution did not address how to nominate candidates.

Running for president was much different in early America than today. Campaigning for one's self was uncommon and unpopular. Political parties were not developed, nor thought of positively. Delegates "assumed that electors, whose interests were not tied to the national government, would make an independent judgment, and it was hoped they would choose the person they felt was best suited for the job" (Wayne 2016, 6). This worked in two unanimous votes for George Washington, but dynamics changed quickly surrounding the selection of his Vice-President and successor. Party development prompted partisan influence over the presidential selection process. Beginning in 1796, party leaders met separately to recommend presidential candidates. Party divisions and development helped produce national nominating conventions, beginning in 1831.

Convention delegates have been responsible for selecting nominees since 1832 for Democrats and 1856 for Republicans (Aldrich et. al. 2019, 19). Early conventions were less formal and rowdier compared to today, but set important precedents, including determining operating procedures, apportioning delegates, developing policy statements, and selecting nominees. State party leaders controlled delegate selection. Bartering occurred out of public view. There was little preconvention activity, typically resulting in numerous ballots before a candidate secured the nomination. "The winner owed his selection to the heads of the powerful state organizations," though this came with high expectations of patronage and other political payoffs. At the same time, nineteenth-century conventions "provided a forum for party leaders" that negotiated disagreements, mobilized support, and unifying "disparate elements within a party," thus "converting an organization of state parties into a national coalition for the purpose of conducting a presidential campaign" (Wayne 2016, 9).

Progressive reforms of the early twentieth century sought to reduce the influence of state party bosses, resulting in the election of convention delegates through primaries. The use of primaries fluctuated over much of the twentieth century, due to cost, avoidance by candidates, limited participation, and the factionalism they could produce. In turn, primaries were not considered "an essential road to the nomination" and "running in too many of them was interpreted as a sign of weakness" because this "indicated a lack of national recognition, a failure to obtain the support

of party leaders, or both" (Wayne 2016, 10). This changed with two contentious national party conventions, 1968 and 1972, which experienced "many challenges to the rights of delegates to be present" (Polsby 1983, 695).

At the time, some states held primaries, others caucuses, but most "vested delegate selection power in the hands of state-party leaders" (Tichenor & Fuerstman 2008, 65) prompting criticisms from insurgent forces, such as Vietnam protesters, (Polsby 1983). and increased demands for "a larger voice for rank-and-file partisans" (Wayne 2016, 10). In 1968, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy challenged Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, largely due to his handling of the Vietnam War. Johnson withdrew from the race after the first primary. Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, who did not campaign publicly, "won the nomination without entering a single primary, splitting an already deeply divided party" (Aldrich et. al. 2019, 26). Kennedy's assassination after defeating McCarthy in California, and violent clashes between Chicago police and protesters during the convention, made matters worse.

Humphrey proposed the development of the Democratic Party's Commission on Delegate Selection and Party Structure, commonly referred to as the McGovern-Fraser Commission. The goal was to enable a more diverse slate of candidates and for public participation to become "more open and more effective in determining the outcome" (Aldrich et al. 2019, 19). The commission addressed "illogical and labyrinthine rules" for the Democratic Party's selection process (Tichenor & Fuerstman 2008, 65). The result was "participatory, candidate centered nominations, campaign finance reform, and later developments of front-loaded delegate selection calendars" that helped produce "a radically different" nominating system (Paulson 2009, 312). Many states switched to primaries to prevent challenges to their delegations. Both parties subsequently "used public campaigns for popular support as a way of selecting and/or instructing most convention delegates on how they should vote" (Aldrich et al. 2019, 19).

Few electoral systems "have the leaders of the major political parties cede so much control over candidate selection to the general public." Political parties occasionally run primary elections in other countries, but "this is rare, typically isolated to one or a few parties, and are often used only once or twice before being discarded" (Aldrich et al. 2019, 19). The subsequent post-reform era has changed the role of parties in the nomination process, but not obfuscated or eliminated it. As explained in