

Springer Series in Electoral Politics

Series Editors: Daniel Stockemer · Daphne Halikiopoulou

Samuel J. Best
Jeffrey W. Ladewig

Toppling Trump

How Party Elites Steered Joe Biden
to the Democratic Nomination and
Victory in the 2020 Presidential Election



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*To Ruby and Oksan,
Thanks for your patience, support, and
understanding.*

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About This Book

This book tells the story of the 2020 presidential election campaign, exploring how Joe Biden secured the Democratic nomination and defeated Donald Trump in the general election. It argues that Democratic Party elites paved the way for Biden's victory, enabling him to overcome numerous campaign missteps to defeat one of the largest, wealthiest, most competitive fields in history. It details how Democratic elites discouraged potential rivals from entering the race, manipulated rules to truncate the field, and steered voters toward Biden's candidacy both directly and indirectly. It shows how they helped the Biden campaign overcome early defeats in the first several contests and turn his campaign around. And it highlights the critical role they played in mobilizing partisans to help Biden win the general election campaign and thwarting efforts to undermine his victory. Put simply, the book demonstrates that Biden simply would not have won the presidency without the help of elites from his party.

About Chapter 2

Chapter 2 discusses how partisanship framed political perceptions at the start of the 2020 election cycle. It details how Americans became so intensely polarized in the previous decades that they judged nearly every aspect of the political landscape through a partisan lens, from performance evaluations of the president to assessments of socio-political conditions. With such little open-mindedness, the presidential race centered more on mobilizing in-group members than persuading out-group identifiers. The distribution of partisans across the states gave both sides a reasonable chance to win the White House, galvanizing partisan elites to identify and facilitate the selection of the strongest possible nominee.

About Chapter 3

Chapter 3 kicks off our examination of the 2020 Democratic nomination process. We dissect the exploratory phase of the campaign when potential candidates tested the waters to assess their chances. We systematically identify the most prominent prospective candidates and detail how feedback from party elites shaped their decisions to enter the race, sidelining many prominent figures who could have posed serious challenges to Biden's candidacy. We conclude by detailing the full field of participants in the 2020 race, situating them in the ideological factions within which they built out their campaigns.

About Chapter 4

Chapter 4 explores how party elites shaped candidate prospects during the pre-primary period. We describe how the DNC and state parties designed the nominating contests to make it exceedingly difficult for party outsiders to upend the delegate selection process. We show how party elites signaled their preferences for Biden to rank-and-file partisans by disproportionately arming him with critical resources such as endorsements, campaign funds, and media coverage. We explain how the DNC set up qualifying criteria for the intraparty debates to favor the frontrunners, forcing many candidates from the race. By the time the contests were set to begin, only 11 major candidates remained, demonstrating the potency of these efforts.

About Chapter 5

Chapter 5 chronicles the first three nomination contests, spotlighting limitations to elite influence on the nomination process, which enabled Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg to surge to the front, nearly derailing the Biden campaign. In Iowa, we explain how caucus formats and limited participation make it easier for well-organized campaigns to override the preferences of party officials. In New Hampshire, we discuss how the draw of hometown candidates can lead many voters to ignore cues from party elites. In Nevada, we explore how dissatisfied constituent groups within the party—in this case, Latinx—can upend contests, enabling targeted campaigns to overwhelm elite signals.

About Chapter 6

Chapter 6 explores how a second push by party elites empowered Biden to turn the tide of the nomination race and grab the delegate lead from his far better financed opponents. We detail how prominent South Carolina congressman Jim Clyburn's endorsement of Biden rallied African Americans behind his campaign, despite substantial efforts by his opponents to corral their support. We describe how support from three former candidates—Buttigieg, Beto O'Rourke, and Amy Klobuchar—stymied self-financed billionaire Michael Bloomberg's late entry into the race and led to a dominant performance by Biden on Super Tuesday, chasing all the major contenders but Sanders from the race.

About Chapter 7

Chapter 7 discusses how the emergence of Covid-19 upended the remaining Democratic nomination contests, facilitating a quick coalescence of votes nationwide around Joe Biden. We lay out how state party leaders postponed numerous contests, depriving the Sanders campaign of any momentum that may have remained from his early victories. We show how voters had little stomach for extending the race when they resumed, rallying around Biden, despite differences on key issues. We conclude by showing how Biden unified the Democrats after Sanders withdrew from the race, inviting his rival's supporters to participate in drafting the platform and selecting a vice president more predisposed toward their positions.

About Chapter 8

Chapter 8 pivots to the Republican nomination process. We explain how the Republican Party imposed various rules to subvert challenges to Trump's renomination, such as eliminating debates, limiting ballot access, and canceling contests altogether. We then examine how Trump kept the Republican coalition together after the emergence of Covid-19 and the killing of George Floyd threatened to disrupt his campaign and divide his supporters.

About Chapter 9

Chapter 9 focuses on the general election campaign, discussing how political polarization induced party efforts to activate their bases, rather than convince out-party voters to switch teams. We describe how state legislators manipulated electoral

rules to shape the composition of the electorate to advantage the controlling party, showing that even a modest change in the turnout numbers for either party could tip the balance toward one candidate or another. We look at the ways that party elites registered and mobilized rank-and-file partisans, overcoming the challenges imposed by the nationwide pandemic. And we discuss how the candidates raised the stakes of the election during their campaign, especially during the presidential debates, to inspire their supporters to participate.

About Chapter 10

Chapter 10 analyzes the results of the presidential election, showing how these partisan strategies paid off. We empirically demonstrate that the state legislative initiatives undertaken by the controlling party typically shaped the partisan distribution of the electorate. The party with the most registered voters won every state except Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Those exceptions, though, all fell on Republican home turf, where Trump wound up losing to Biden in all of them, despite holding a partisan advantage that other Republicans on the ticket exploited. In each case, we show that Trump's Covid policies turned off just enough Republicans to give Biden the electoral votes necessary to win the presidency.

About Chapter 11

Chapter 11 concludes the book by looking at the aftermath of the general election when Trump challenged the legitimacy of the results, especially in the four states he lost where Republican voters outnumbered Democrats. We examine the role Democrat elites played in upholding the election in each state and fighting the dozens of court cases Republicans pursued across the country. We then revisit January 6, detailing the actions undertaken by Democratic congressional leaders to certify the results and hold Trump accountable for his efforts to overturn them.

Contents

1	The Invisible Hand	1
2	A Nation Divided Against Itself	15
3	Democrats Explore Their Options (with Clifford Vickrey)	37
4	Elites Have Their Say (with Clifford Vickrey)	59
5	The Limitations of Party Influence	99
6	The Establishment Strikes Back	145
7	Covid Infects the Campaign	187
8	Republicans Stand by Trump	217
9	A Battle of the Bases	249
10	The Parties Go Toe-to-Toe	287
11	The Conflict Rages On	315
	Index	337

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List of Figures

Fig. 4.1 Pledged delegates to the 2020 Democratic national nominating convention for the U.S. states and territories 65

Fig. 9.1 The relationship between the cost of voting and turnout in the 2016 presidential election 251

Fig. 9.2 State control and change in the cost of voting between the 2018 and 2020 elections. 253

Fig. 9.3 *Real Clear Politics* polling average for Biden and Trump during the 2020 presidential campaign 274

Fig. 10.1 The relationship between the cost of voting index and turnout rate in the 2020 election 289

Fig. 10.2 Popular-vote-based allocation of electoral votes in the 2020 presidential election 299

Fig. 10.3 The relationship between state partisanship and the presidential vote in the 2020 election 302

Fig. 10.4 Republican turnout advantage by the cost of voting in the 2020 battleground states 303

Fig. 10.5 Trump’s popular vote margin by the Republican turnout advantage in the 2020 battleground states 304

Fig. 10.6 Trump fatigue among college-educated votes in the 2020 battleground states 306

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Campaign-motivated activities by Democratic presidential prospects in the 2020 election cycle	42
Table 3.2	Outside funds raised by candidate affiliated PACs during the 2018 midterm election cycle	44
Table 3.3	2018 Democratic nomination polls	45
Table 3.4	Share of early state activists considering prospective Democratic presidential candidates in 2017–18	46
Table 3.5	Democratic candidates running in the 2020 presidential election.	49
Table 3.6	Diversity of open Democratic fields from 1972 through 2020	53
Table 3.7	Ideology of the major 2020 Democratic candidates by their familiarity to registered Democrats	54
Table 3.8	Poll standing of the frontrunner and eventual nominee 9 months prior to the first contest	56
Table 4.1	2020 Presidential endorsements by high-ranking Democratic elites at the time of candidate campaign launches.	70
Table 4.2	Week 1 launch donors to candidates competing in the 2020 Democratic primary campaign	71
Table 4.3	Media mentions of Democratic candidates during the 3 days after their campaign launches.	72
Table 4.4	Poll standing at the launch and 2 weeks later for candidates in 2020 Democratic presidential race	73
Table 4.5	Campaign activities of the major candidates from January 1, 2019 through June 30, 2019	75
Table 4.6	Familiarity and poll standing in late June 2019.	78
Table 4.7	Qualifying criteria for pre-primary Democratic presidential primary debates	81
Table 4.8	Candidates meeting the DNC polling or financial thresholds for any of the pre-primary debates	86
Table 4.9	Day of national polling average and speaking times by participants in the Democratic pre-primary debate	89

Table 4.10 Candidate standing on the eve of the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination contests 92

Table 5.1 The success of Democratic endorsement leaders in caucus formats. 102

Table 5.2 Statewide results of the 2020 Iowa Democratic caucus 113

Table 5.3 Impact of candidate mobilization efforts. 113

Table 5.4 Statewide results of the 2020 New Hampshire Democratic primary 121

Table 5.5 Statewide results of the 2020 Nevada Democratic caucus 130

Table 6.1 Outside spending supporting or opposing Democratic candidates through Super Tuesday 153

Table 6.2 South Carolina TV and radio ad spending by Democratic candidates from January 1 to February 20, 2020 156

Table 6.3 Statewide results of the 2020 South Carolina Democratic primary 159

Table 6.4 Michael Bloomberg’s poll standing in Super Tuesday states before the ninth Democratic debate. 164

Table 6.5 Candidate media mentions *before/after* the Nevada caucus and South Carolina primary 169

Table 6.6 Statewide results of Super Tuesday Democratic presidential nomination contests. 170

Table 7.1 Statewide results of the March 10 democratic presidential nomination contests. 191

Table 7.2 States that postponed 2020 democratic primaries 194

Table 7.3 Statewide results of the March 17 democratic presidential nomination contests. 196

Table 7.4 Democratic voters’ perceptions of who had the best chance to beat Trump 197

Table 7.5 Statewide results of the 2020 Wisconsin democratic primary. 201

Table 7.6 Statewide results of the democratic presidential nomination contests held from April 11 to August 11, 2020 203

Table 7.7 Performance of democratic nominees in presidential primaries 205

Table 8.1 Trump campaign rallies during the 2020 Republican nomination process 222

Table 8.2 Statewide results of the 2020 Republican nomination contests with rank-and-file presidential preference voting 225

Table 10.1 Timing of network calls and candidate concessions
in presidential elections 292

Table 10.2 Seats won in federal and state elections in the decisive states 305

Table 10.3 Presidential and House vote in the decisive battleground states . . . 306

Table 10.4 Presidential support among White voters in decisive
battleground states 307

Table 10.5 Coronavirus opinions of White voters in the decisive
battleground states 308

Chapter 1

The Invisible Hand



Contents

1.1 What Gives.....	3
1.2 The Roots of Party Power.....	4
1.3 The Times They Are A-Changin’.....	5
1.4 Ongoing Party Muscle.....	8
1.5 Plan for the Book.....	11
Notes.....	14

Joe Biden had no business winning the 2020 presidential election. He confronted a host of seemingly insurmountable obstacles that would have derailed most any candidate. Yet he scaled every one of them to not only secure the Democratic nomination but defeat President Donald Trump in both the popular and Electoral College vote, returning the Democrats to the White House after one of the most demoralizing periods in the party’s history.

Biden faced the largest field of contenders for the Democratic nomination in the modern era. Fifty other Democratic candidates registered their campaigns with the Federal Election Commission. More than two dozen of them had held public office, from well-known members of Congress to prominent governors to popular mayors. Even two self-funded billionaires pursued the party mantle, trying to leverage their money into electoral success. Each brought different policy approaches and contrasting styles to the campaign, providing an array of appealing possibilities to voters.

The campaign started dismally for Biden. He committed one verbal gaffe after another on the stump. He struggled during the early season debates as his rivals attacked him relentlessly about his past missteps. His rallies drew far smaller crowds than some of his rivals and his message created little buzz on social media. If things were not bad enough for Biden, Trump tried to manufacture a scandal to finish him off by pressuring the Ukrainian President to initiate a criminal investigation against the former vice president. Although the effort failed, the pursuant investigation and

subsequent impeachment of the president seemingly harmed Biden more than it helped, portraying him as engaging in the same sort of nepotism and cronyism with which he accused his opponent.

These missteps, attacks, and innuendos, culminated in losses in the first three Democratic nomination contests. He finished fourth in Iowa, fifth in New Hampshire, and second in Nevada, unable to attract the support of 1-in-5 Democrats in any of them. It had been decades since any candidate from either party had reversed their fortunes after such a dreadful start. Many doubted Biden would be any different. The media began writing him off. Donations to his campaign started drying up. His poll numbers began to sag.

When Biden finally turned his campaign around in South Carolina and began racking up wins, a once-in-a-century pandemic swept across the globe, sending shock waves through the political system. States postponed their nomination contests and altered their voting procedures. Debates went crowd-free and party conventions took place online. Campaigning practices transformed to accommodate the perilous circumstances. Biden was forced to significantly alter his strategy, developing new policy positions, adopting new methods for accruing resources, and embracing new techniques for activating support.

It did not go any smoother for Biden during the general election campaign. Biden had to knock off an incumbent president for the first time in 28 years, one willing to do anything to prevail. Trump blasted his policy proposals, questioned his cognitive capabilities, and ridiculed him for adopting the pandemic safeguards recommended by his own administration. He turned the debates on their ear, causing so much chaos that one of them was canceled. He even tried to derail mail-in balloting initiatives installed throughout the country to accommodate voting during the pandemic.

When the presidential race seemingly ended, Biden still had to fight to uphold his victory. Trump refused to accept the outcome, engaging in a 2-month long effort to overturn the results. He publicly attacked the integrity of the electoral process, claiming voter fraud and administrative irregularities cost him the election. He filed lawsuits around the country to invalidate rule changes made to facilitate voting during the pandemic. He pressed election officials to discard ballots or find new ones. He even urged his supporters to oppose the congressional certification of the results, inciting them to storm the Capital Building. It was not until Chief Justice John Roberts swore in Biden on Inauguration Day that the nation knew for certain the election was over.

Winning the presidency had never been easy, but Joe Biden overcame as challenging a path as any candidate in the nation's history. It had more twists and turns than an amusement park roller coaster. Every campaign appears unique in the moment, but Biden's journey was truly unparalleled, a wild ride to be remembered for generations to come.

1.1 What Gives

The ability of Biden to overcome these challenges and ultimately prevail begs the question of how he pulled it off. On the surface, his success appears to defy explanation. He did not seem to enjoy any of the hallmarks of a winning campaign.

Biden was not the most compelling candidate. He was a two-time also-ran, losing both his 1988 and 2008 attempts to secure the Democratic presidential nomination. He was older than any previous candidate who had won the White House, clocking in at 78 years of age when he assumed the presidency. He was not a gifted public speaker, often falling prey to tongue twisters, embellishments, and slip-ups. And he had been in public office for nearly half a century, taking numerous policy positions that in retrospect looked pernicious and out-of-touch.

Biden did not project a provocative image on the campaign trail. He had no captivating backstory or list of remarkable political accomplishments. He did not offer unique solutions to key policy questions plaguing the country. He did not devise a clever advertising strategy or employ a novel campaign tactic that seduced and activated voters.

Biden did not even construct a robust campaign organization. He raised fewer funds than his key competitors. He struggled to attract volunteers to canvas neighborhoods or serve as precinct captains. He failed to open as many campaign offices as his opponents, leaving some states without any at all.

The prevailing media narrative chalked up Biden's triumph to good fortune. Articles littered the popular press with headlines such as "Joe Biden Is the Luckiest, Least Scrutinized Frontrunner"¹ and "How Misfortune—and Stunning Luck—Brought Joe Biden to the Presidency."² Journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes went so far as to title their bestselling book recapping the 2020 presidential election cycle, *Lucky: How Joe Biden Barely Won the Presidency*,³ documenting in extensive detail how Biden "caught every imaginable break" on his road to the White House. It seemed to many political observers that only serendipity could explain how Biden got himself out of trouble on the campaign trail time and again.

In this book, we make the case that Biden's success hinged on the concerted efforts of Democratic Party elites, not his personality, policies, or fortuitous circumstances. At every step of the way, the party establishment suppressed threats, prodded voters, and provided cover for Biden, easing his path to victory. They eliminated many of his rivals by discouraging them from seeking the nomination, establishing rules that sidelined their campaigns, or leaning on them to exit the race. They steered many rank-and-file voters toward his candidacy, awarding him a disproportionate share of endorsements, money, and media coverage. They activated their networks to register and mobilize Democrats during the fall campaign. And they ensured his triumph would stand by confronting every effort to overturn the results. Put simply, Biden would not have won the Democratic nomination or bested Trump in the general election without the contributions of party elites, vindicating their potency in presidential politics, which many political observers believed had greatly diminished.

1.2 The Roots of Party Power

Political parties have long played a central role in the outcome of presidential elections. No candidate has ever become president without being nominated by a major political party. In fact, since the emergence of the two-party system more than 220 years ago, only eight candidates have received even 10% of the popular vote without a major party nomination, just one of whom (Ross Perot) competed in the last half century. Put simply, the road to the White House travels through one of the two major political parties.

With party affiliation carrying so much weight, the governing apparatus of the parties have long tried to control who dons the party labels. Although they have been forced to widen the number of decision makers as more and more of the party faithful have demanded a say, party elites have retained a strong grip on the selection process. As a result, the presidential nominees of the major parties have almost always reflected elite preferences.

Political parties surfaced during the presidential administration of George Washington as policy differences among elected officials in the nascent government led them to forge coalitions to voice and implement their preferences more effectively. By the time of the first competitive presidential election in 1796, two political parties—the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans—had developed with sufficient scope and vision to recognize the importance of identifying presidential candidates for consideration by the Electoral College rather than simply hoping electors would collectively agree on agents who shared their policy preferences. Elected members of the U.S. Congress from each party met informally to promote presidential candidates best suited to advancing their governing visions. They then threw their support behind candidates for the Electoral College agreeable to casting ballots for their nominees. As a result, electors quickly devolved into proxies acting on behalf of their party’s congressional leaders, rather than operating independently as the framers originally intended.

Congressional selection of presidential nominees, though, proved short lived. Within a few election cycles, the Federalist Party fell on hard times, losing much of its support nationwide. When the Democrat-Republican members of Congress gathered to choose their presidential nominee, it became tantamount to them electing the president, earning the nickname “King Caucus” from its critics. Soon regional differences began to tear apart the Democrat-Republicans, making it increasingly difficult to get party leaders across the country on the same page. This came to a head in the 1824 presidential election, when they failed to coalesce around the congressional caucus’ nominee, leading to a highly contentious intraparty battle, which ultimately resulted in four candidates accruing electoral votes—none of whom acquired the necessary majority—requiring a contingent House election to resolve.

The tumult over the 1824 presidential election doomed King Caucus. Within a few election cycles, several new political parties calved off from the original ones, such as the Democratic, Whig, and Anti-Masonic Party, all of whom adopted a new system for nominating presidential candidates and coordinating national campaigns,

which widened the scope of decision makers considerably. Local party officials convened at state caucuses to choose delegates to a national convention, who, in turn, would select the party's presidential ticket. The candidates who secured a majority of the delegate votes at the national convention won the nomination.

But delegates to the national nominating conventions were rarely on the same page. They often arrived prioritizing local concerns, pushing specific policy prescriptions, and promoting candidates willing to champion their causes. The convention served as the forum for reconciling these differences, bringing competing visions together. Delegates often traded floor votes in exchange for planks on the party platform or prospective positions in the candidate's administration. The presidential ticket and issue positions that emerged did not always represent the ideal preferences of many in attendance, but the importance of defeating opponents whose initiatives could prove far more detrimental to their interests created a willingness to compromise and present a united front. Candidates themselves found little leeway to orchestrate their own campaigns, relying on local party machines to mobilize voters at the general election.

Although these nominating conventions increased the number of voices in the candidate selection process, they were far less democratic than they appeared. Many of the delegates were chosen by state and local party bosses who held considerable sway over their decisions at the convention. Rank-and-file partisans remained shut out of the decisions, offering no input at all in the candidates chosen.

Criticisms by progressives in the early twentieth century, who opposed party leaders dictating the nominees, led some states to adopt presidential primaries in which rank-and-file voters elected delegates to represent them or determined their candidate choices at the national convention. From 1904, when Florida implemented the first delegate selection contest, until 1968, as many as 20 different states held binding presidential primaries.⁴ However, in none of these election cycles were the number of delegates at stake sufficient to win the party's presidential nomination vote at the convention. Although primaries served as a proving ground for candidates to demonstrate their popular support, party leaders still maintained control over the presidential nomination process.

1.3 The Times They Are A-Changin'

The controversial Democratic nomination race in 1968 spawned substantial changes to the long-standing procedures used by the major parties to select their presidential nominees. After President Lyndon Johnson abruptly ended his reelection effort on the heels of a surprisingly narrow victory in the New Hampshire Primary, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy waged a closely contested battle for popular support in the remaining contests. Despite not participating in a single primary, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey easily won the party's nomination on the first ballot at the national convention by privately persuading enough uncommitted delegates to support his candidacy. The ensuing tensions between party leaders and rank-and-file

voters undermined Humphrey's campaign, fueling his loss to Richard Nixon in the presidential election.

The following year, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) convened the McGovern-Fraser Commission, a 28-member committee tasked with reforming the party's delegate selection rules to expand voter participation in the nominating process. The commission advocated that the party adopt new procedures for choosing delegates that greatly diminished the influence of party officials, encouraging states to utilize delegate selection methods in which rank-and-file voters played a more decisive role. In response, most Democratic state parties bound delegate decisions to the choices of voters in their respective jurisdictions. Republicans soon followed their lead, letting voters inform their choices of presidential nominees as well. The impact was immediate and dramatic. Whereas two-thirds of the states utilized elite-run party conventions to select delegates in 1968, all states opened their contests to wider participation in 1972. Primaries quickly became the most common form of delegate selection for both parties with 35 states adopting them by 1980, up from 15 in 1968.⁵

Federal campaign finance reform in the 1970s further diminished the influence of party principals. Congress imposed strict limits on campaign contributions, capping how much money candidates could collect from individuals and organizations during their presidential campaigns. From 1976 through 2000, presidential candidates could receive up to \$1000 from individuals and \$5000 from organizations during the nomination and general election campaigns respectively.⁶ Candidates could no longer rely on the generosity of a handful of major donors, as Nixon did in 1972, when he raised 28% of his funding from just 124 contributors who gave more than \$50,000 apiece.⁷ Granted, new legislation offered opportunities for candidates to secure government financing for their campaigns, but eligibility came in the form of matching funds, still necessitating the solicitation of donations from a wide swath of contributors.

These rule changes seemed to undermine the power of the party apparatus in the nomination process.⁸ Candidates no longer needed political machines to orchestrate their electoral efforts. They could now form their own campaign organizations, staffed with hand-picked personnel, capable of raising money, generating publicity, and conducting field operations. They could appeal directly to the masses, flooding the airways with advertisements, holding campaign rallies, and canvassing neighborhoods for support. It appeared candidate organizations now possessed the means to capture the nomination and win the general election with far less influence or interference from party elites.

The mainstream news media further amplified the strength of candidate organizations by framing the campaign as a horse race rather than a comparison of alternative policy approaches.⁹ Press coverage focused on who was leading or trailing on some performance metric not on the strengths and weaknesses of their respective issue positions. During the pre-primary campaign, they gave disproportionate attention to the candidates who collected the most money, ran the most ads, or attracted the most support in public opinion polls. Once the primaries and caucuses got underway, the media replaced resource barometers with election results, showering

the winners with far more coverage than their rivals, regardless of their margin of victory or the size of their delegate haul.

Voters showed a propensity to conform their views with the prevailing narrative in the press, where most of them learned directly or indirectly about the nomination campaign. This produced a bandwagon effect in which voters tended to support the candidate they perceived to be ahead rather than the one who held more compatible issue positions with their own.¹⁰ So as candidates found success, they attracted more campaign coverage, which, in turn, led to surges in contributions and support, creating momentum capable of propelling candidates to the nomination. This seemingly uncontrollable feedback cycle made it easier for factional candidates or party insurgents to succeed, especially in large fields, where narrow followings could produce electoral pluralities eventually manifesting delegate majorities.

Party elites, however, still exerted considerable influence over voter choices in the ensuing decades as they began to focus on the pre-primary campaign, which took place almost entirely outside the public eye. Only three national television networks—*ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*—broadcast news to most Americans, dedicating a mere 30 minutes of airtime to current events each evening, only sporadically mentioning election-related activities. Such sparse campaign coverage forced candidates to rely heavily on elites for the resources needed to solicit the support of rank-and-file voters. Those who excelled at raising funds, attracting campaign operatives, and cultivating media coverage during this so-called “invisible primary” performed far better in the primaries and caucuses.

The widespread adoption of cable television in the 1990s, however, dramatically increased coverage of presidential campaigns, shedding light on the nomination process earlier than ever before. Twenty-four-hour news channels began reporting the comings and goings of the candidates on a daily basis. They discussed at length the effectiveness of their stump speeches, electioneering activities, and debate performances. They reported on their campaign finances, detailing how much they raised and where they spent it. They deployed constant public opinion polls to detect any slight movement in the horse race. Rank-and-file partisans could become as informed about the field as many in the elite class.

Dissemination of the Internet in the 2000s enabled candidates to put this newfound visibility to use, sidestepping elites to take their campaigns directly to rank-and-file partisans. Campaigns could now broadcast their message to countless users or target their appeals to specific demographic groups much more quickly and inexpensively than broadcasting their messages in the mainstream media. They could arrange financial contributions with the push of a button, rather than undertaking the time-consuming efforts to collect funds at rallies or through direct mail campaigns. They could mobilize volunteers without needing to hand out brochures on the street, put up recruitment posters on building walls, or enlist people at receptions and rallies. Put simply, candidates no longer had to rely on elites to accrue resources or promote their candidacies.¹¹

These more recent technological changes appeared to only further level the playing field. Candidates with the most appealing personalities or resource-rich organizations could seemingly muscle their way past elite favorites to win a major party

nomination by riding a wave of media coverage generated by their own efforts. Support from the party apparatus no longer seemed critical, or even necessary, to secure the party mantle. The parties looked to be bystanders in their own presidential nomination processes.

1.4 Ongoing Party Muscle

Perceptions about the declining role of political parties in the presidential nomination process are often rooted in a narrow conceptualization of the nature and agency of political elites. Party elites are a far more complex and dynamic group than is often portrayed, possessing an array of methods for steering voters toward their preferred candidates, despite surrendering the final choice to them at the ballot box. Manufacturing consent under the guise of democratic choice.

Historically, many political observers depicted political parties as tight, hierarchical institutions controlled by a small group of elected officials, party officers, and professional appointees. They focused on their formal responsibilities, such as establishing the means for contesting elections, promoting policy prescriptions, and undertaking government actions for implementing party prerogatives. When party organizations relinquished control of any of these functions, like nominating candidates to elective office, affiliated political elites were often characterized as losing their ability to influence political outcomes.

In practice, though, political parties are far more elaborate than these narrow interpretations suggest. They are better understood as permeable, decentralized associations of individual activists working together to elect political leaders committed to implementing specific policy demands. They comprise not only members of the formal party apparatus but a diverse range of policy demanders—from corporate brass and interest group representatives to big donors and community organizers—providing the critical resources necessary for the party and its candidates to succeed.¹²

This disparate group of policy demanders, though, cannot achieve their goals operating as independent entrepreneurs, but must work collectively to mobilize support for them. Therefore, they frequently align into larger factions to successfully nominate and elect candidates who represent their mutual interests. Such widespread coordination often forces them to compromise their demands, exchanging some of what they want to avoid receiving nothing at all. Their long-term commitment to the arrangement hinges on the benefits they receive from their alignment over time. The more they must subvert their interests, the more disenchanted they may become, potentially leading them to coalesce with a different group of elites whom they perceive to be better positioned to advance their objectives. As a result, factions strengthen and weaken, transform and stagnate, emerge and disappear as values shift, issues evolve, and candidates change over the course of time.¹³

The dominant faction, known colloquially as “the party establishment,” dictates the policy direction of the party and installs the personnel necessary to implement

it. Its leaders manage the formal party apparatus, staffing positions, setting intra-party rules, and formulating policy platforms. They maintain control of the party's activities only so long as they satisfy their backers, ensuring the continued election of candidates pursuing their demands; otherwise, the dominant faction will find themselves out of the driver's seat and scrambling again for power.

The presidential nomination process serves as the chief mechanism for determining the leadership and direction of the party. Factions identify and coalesce around competing candidates who go toe-to-toe in a series of electoral contests, culminating in the partywide selection of a nominee. Whichever faction prevails in the intra-party battle assumes or retains the helmsmanship of the party and its bearings until the next election cycle, becoming, or continuing as, the party establishment.

The dominant faction, though, is not easy to dislodge from power. Although the electoral reforms of the 1970s enabled rank-and-file voters to select most of the national nominating convention delegates, the party establishment still retains control over the procedures determining how those choices would be made. They establish when the contests will be held, in what order, and how many delegates are at stake in each jurisdiction. They dictate how the contests will be conducted, who appears on the ballot, how votes are transformed into delegates, and how many delegate votes are needed to win. In recent election cycles, they have even begun structuring the pre-primary period, organizing, and sanctioning campaign events, most notably the intraparty debates. By establishing the rules of the game, the party apparatus shapes the number, strength, and popularity of contenders, despite rank-and-file voters making the final choice.

Successfully navigating this array of rules and winning the nomination poses tremendous challenges for candidates in the post-reform era. Millions of rank-and-file partisans across the country must be courted and mobilized, expanding support from true believers to critical skeptics across a range of diverse communities. Doing so demands considerable resources, resources that none of the prospects, regardless of their assets, possesses fully at their disposal when they enter the race. They require vast amounts of money to saturate the airways with advertisements promoting their candidacies and articulating their positions. They must accrue an army of volunteers to staff events, canvass neighborhoods, and mobilize supporters. They need ongoing publicity in the mainstream press and across the Internet to foster name recognition and foment support. Without money, manpower, and media, candidates boast little chance of thriving in the primaries and caucuses.

Party elites are still far more capable of meeting candidate demands than rank-and-file partisans, despite being far fewer in number, because of their enduring commitment to achieving their goals through party control of government. They are likely to be much more informed about the candidates, the issues, and the state of the nomination race, especially how it concerns their signature issues. Their policy needs provide the necessary motivation to supply resources to their preferred candidates. And their long-term dedication to the health of the party offers them some assurances that the candidates will honor their campaign promises.

At the same time, though, elites are cautious about committing resources to candidates. They only want to invest in those capable of providing a return. They look

for candidates who hold similar political views as their own, prioritizing problems and proposing solutions that benefit them or the groups they represent, yet are capable of winning a majority of ballots in both the party primaries and the general election. Ideological compatibility makes little difference if the candidate does not prevail. Unfortunately, making these assessments is not easy as the field of candidates evolves, policy questions transform, and environmental conditions change, sometimes in short periods of time.

In the pre-reform period, elites used the national nominating convention to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates and reconcile their differences before coalescing around a nominee. This informal negotiating persists but the reforms of the 1970s transformed the timing and mechanisms in which it occurs. Elites now communicate their preferences to other elites through the allocation of resources. By offering endorsements, donating money, making appearances, or availing their networks, they signal their preferred choices to other elites. This, in turn, sparks reactions that eventually cascade across the party. No longer do party elites conduct their bargaining in the private confines of the party convention but openly in the political marketplace, where resource consignments have replaced vote pledges to indicate support.¹⁴

Elites possess the greatest incentives to coordinate their efforts early in the nomination process before the contests get under way. During this time frame, candidates are at their neediest, driven to arm themselves as much as possible to compete in dozens of primaries and caucuses, many frontloaded to the start of the electoral calendar. Many rank-and-file partisans pay little to no attention to the campaign in the early stages of the race, despite increased media coverage, forcing them to turn to party elites to accrue assets. Elites can starve or satiate campaign organizations with their allocation decisions during the pre-primary period, winnowing the field and establishing a pecking order before most voters even begin paying attention to the race.

More importantly, the resource distribution patterns of party elites can serve as important cues to voters. Rank-and-file voters often know little about the candidates, especially in the early stages of the race, making it difficult for many of them to determine their ballot selections. To facilitate their decision making, they frequently rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts.¹⁵ The most common rule of thumb in general elections is the party affiliation of the candidates, where voters select candidates who possess the same party designation as themselves, assuming their policy preferences will align with their own. During a party nomination campaign, though, this heuristic proves useless, so rank-and-file voters often rely on endorsements, adopting the recommendations of trusted individuals or representatives of like-minded groups.¹⁶ If enough elites coalesce around a particular candidate, they can sway the outcome of the nomination race.

The proliferation of cable television and Internet sites not only enabled candidates to build popular support but gave party elites new opportunities to steer public opinion. With so many media outlets now covering every aspect of the presidential race from campaign stops and mobilizing efforts to fundraising prowess and poll standing, there has been enormous demand for informed political observers to

discuss the details, interpret the meaning, and prognosticate the impact of these activities and metrics. Media channels have increasingly turned to party elites, such as campaign operatives, interest group representatives, and former public officials to fill this need. This has enabled elites to shape the narrative, spinning reasons why some candidates look better than others, all under the veil of objective reporting.

Party elites have also found alternative methods to financially support presidential campaigns, offsetting candidates' newfound ability to raise funds quickly and easily online from rank-and-file voters. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that independent political expenditures are protected by the First Amendment and cannot be restricted by government legislation.¹⁷ The case permitted independent expenditure-only political action committees to raise unlimited amounts of money from groups and individuals for the purpose of electioneering communications, so long as they did not coordinate with the candidates or their respective campaign organizations. Partisan elites could now form so-called Super PACs to advocate for or against political candidates, enabling them to undertake massive advertising campaigns on social media and in the popular press. By 2016, Super PACs were spending over a half billion dollars to influence public opinion about the presidential candidates, far more than candidate organizations were able to allocate based on the small money contributions received from rank-and-file voters.¹⁸

Overall, party elites remain fully capable of shaping the outcomes of elections. They can use both coercive and persuasive means to steer voters toward their preferred candidates, affecting candidate success through their manipulation of the rules and allocation of resources. They have proven adept at responding to changing circumstances, finding new ways to counteract the efforts of candidate campaign organizations both in the short- and long-term. Elites are not impervious to the tactics of candidates or the whims of voters, but the influence they wield is powerful and frequently weighs heavily on the results.

1.5 Plan for the Book

This book tells the story of the 2020 presidential election campaign, exploring how Joe Biden secured the Democratic nomination and defeated Donald Trump in the general election. It argues that Democratic Party elites paved the way for Biden's victory, enabling him to overcome numerous campaign missteps to defeat one of the largest, wealthiest, most competitive fields in history. It details how elites discouraged potential rivals from entering the race, manipulated rules to truncate the field, and steered voters toward Biden's candidacy both directly and indirectly. It shows how they helped the Biden campaign overcome early defeats in the first several contests and turn his campaign around. And it highlights the critical role they played in mobilizing partisans to help Biden win the general election campaign and thwarting efforts to undermine his victory. Put simply, the book demonstrates that Biden simply would not have won the presidency without the help of elites from his party.

Chapter 2 discusses how partisanship framed political perceptions at the start of the 2020 election cycle. It details how Americans became so intensely polarized in the previous decades that they judged nearly every aspect of the political landscape through a partisan lens, from performance evaluations of the president to assessments of sociopolitical conditions. With such little open-mindedness, the presidential race centered more on mobilizing in-group members than persuading out-group identifiers. The distribution of partisans across the states gave both sides a reasonable chance to win the White House, galvanizing partisan elites to identify and facilitate the selection of the strongest possible nominee.

Chapter 3 kicks off our examination of the 2020 Democratic nomination process. We dissect the exploratory phase of the campaign when potential candidates tested the waters to assess their chances. We systematically identify the most prominent prospective candidates and detail how feedback from party elites shaped their decisions to enter the race, sidelining many prominent figures who could have posed serious challenges to Biden's candidacy. We conclude by detailing the full field of participants in the 2020 race, situating them in the ideological factions within which they built out their campaigns.

Chapter 4 explores how party elites shaped candidate prospects during the primary period. We describe how the DNC and state parties designed the nominating contests to make it exceedingly difficult for party outsiders to upend the delegate selection process. We show how party elites signaled their preferences for Biden to rank-and-file partisans by disproportionately arming him with critical resources such as endorsements, campaign funds, and media coverage. We explain how the DNC set up qualifying criteria for the intraparty debates to favor the frontrunners, forcing many candidates from the race. By the time the contests were set to begin, only 11 major candidates remained, demonstrating the potency of these efforts.

Chapter 5 chronicles the first three nomination contests, spotlighting limitations to elite influence on the nomination process, which enabled Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg to surge to the front, nearly derailing the Biden campaign. In Iowa, we explain how caucus formats and limited participation make it easier for well-organized campaigns to override the preferences of party officials. In New Hampshire, we discuss how the draw of hometown candidates can lead many voters to ignore cues from party elites. In Nevada, we explore how dissatisfied constituent groups within the party—in this case, Latinx—can upend contests, enabling targeted campaigns to overwhelm elite signals.

Chapter 6 explores how a second push by party elites empowered Biden to turn the tide of the nomination race and grab the delegate lead from his far better financed opponents. We detail how prominent South Carolina congressman Jim Clyburn's endorsement of Biden rallied African Americans behind his campaign, despite substantial efforts by his opponents to corral their support. We describe how support from three former candidates—Buttigieg, Beto O'Rourke, and Amy Klobuchar—stymied self-financed billionaire Michael Bloomberg's late entry into the race and led to a dominant performance by Biden on Super Tuesday, chasing all the major contenders but Sanders from the race.