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## Political Parties in Rough Weather

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# Political Parties in Rough Weather\*

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## Abstract

Though lightly regarded by many observers, political parties have been able to steer presidential nominations to insider favorites in all nine of the contested cases from 1980 to 2000. Democrats had more trouble in 2004, but still managed to avoid insurgent Howard Dean. This paper explains how today's presidential parties – understood as coalitions of elected officials, interest and advocacy groups, and ideological activists – have learned to work together in the so-called Invisible Primary to affect the outcome of the state-by-state primaries and caucuses. The paper concludes with a discussion of the influence of parties in the pre-Iowa phase of the 2008 nominations.

**KEYWORDS:** political parties, presidential nominations

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The massive power of the American presidency -- the most powerful office of the most powerful country in the world -- finds a strange complement in the apparent weakness of the political institutions that structure presidential nominations. Those institutions include an "Invisible Primary" in which candidates travel the country trying to raise money and support, a donnybrook in Iowa in which a small percentage of the state's voters kill off most of the candidates, and a rapid-fire sequence of state-level elections that come too fast for the remaining candidates or voters to maintain control.

Few recent nominating contests have seemed so out-of-control as the 2008 Republican race. At the time of this writing, a few days before the Iowa caucuses, the Republicans have five major candidates, no real front-runner, and good prospects that their eventual nominee, whoever he turns out to be, will be unacceptable to an important wing of the party. The three-way battle for the 2008 Democratic crown is also no exemplar of orderly decision-making. A front-runner emerged, but lost her lead and is now struggling. Fluidity is the watchword in both contests.

The only thing that seems certain is that we will not know the two party nominees until they emerge from the primaries. "Nominations are fought and won among mass electorates," as Polsby and Wildavsky (with Hopkins) write in their classic textbook (2007, 130). As they add,

Once upon a time, presidential nominations were won by candidates who courted the support of party leaders from the several states. ... That system is history. Now, nominations are won by accumulating pledged delegates in a state-by-state march through primary elections and delegate-selection caucuses. ... (2007, p. 97)

Against this backdrop, we have been completing a study of the role of parties in presidential nominations, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*.<sup>1</sup> Our thesis is that the conventional wisdom has underestimated the role of parties in the process of candidate selection. Candidate-centered organizations and the media are powerful forces in presidential nominations, but so are political parties. Parties scrutinize and winnow the field before voters get involved, attempt to build coalitions behind a single preferred candidate, and sway voters to ratify their choice. Every nomination is a struggle, but in the past quarter century, parties have usually been able to determine the particular candidate who wins and -- perhaps even more important -- have never been saddled with a standard-bearer unacceptable to key constituencies within their coalition.

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<sup>1</sup> Due out in August of 2008 with University of Chicago Press.

That careful observers may fail to find much influence of parties in the 2008 nomination process is understandable: you have to know where to look. That observers failed to notice the central role of parties in many presidential nominations since the 1970s requires some explanation. In the nominations of candidates like Ronald Reagan, Walter Mondale, Bob Dole, Al Gore, and both Presidents Bush, parties have been in plain view. Observers have failed to see them for three distinct reasons.

One is that they have been too wedded to a conception of parties in which elected officials and party officers are the key players. Yet traditional interest groups, issue advocacy groups, and ideological activists are in long-term alignment with parties and exert as much influence in nominations as office-holders and officials. Second is a failure to recognize that the traditional national party convention, which has been made obsolete by the McGovern-Fraser reforms, is not the only means by which parties may affect nominations. Party coalitions acting in concert can funnel resources to their most preferred candidate and also influence rank-and-file voters to follow their lead. The third is that, in focusing on candidates and their organizations as strategic players, scholars overlook the capacity of party leaders, groups, and activists for strategic behavior of their own. Or, rolling all three points into one, existing scholarship fails to recognize that, with several strong candidates vying for nomination, parties can, by throwing their weight behind one of them, often determine the outcome.

Parties do not always prevail, but precisely because the presidency is so powerful, it would be deeply surprising if party leaders, aligned groups, and political activists stood by and made no attempt to influence their party's choice for that office. And, indeed, they do not stand by. Parties are a systematic force in presidential nominations and a major reason that all nominees since the 1970s have been credible and at least reasonably electable representatives of their partisan traditions.

### **ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT NOMINATION SYSTEM**

From 1840 to 1968, both major political parties chose their nominees in a national convention. Delegates to those conventions were chosen by state organizations on the basis of procedures that evolved over time, but which were usually under control of local activists. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, about a fifth of states had presidential primaries, but local officials were still often able to control the delegates selected through them. Some scholars have argued that party leaders in the 1950s and 60s were losing control of nominations to "the forces of mass democracy," but we dispute that. In 1968, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination over Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy without entering a single state primary.

What party leaders were losing was legitimacy. After a long primary season in which McCarthy or Senator Robert Kennedy or both entered every state contest, it was an embarrassment that Humphrey could beat them without entering any. Humphrey sought to reclaim legitimacy by agreeing to a reform commission to revamp the system. That panel, the McGovern-Fraser commission, gave us the current nominating system. Its most important feature is that, except for a handful of top elected officials and party officers who are delegates *ex officio*,<sup>2</sup> voters in state primaries and caucuses choose all delegates to the party nominating conventions. The McGovern-Fraser commission was a creation of the Democratic Party. For a variety of reasons, however, the Republican nomination process quickly came to resemble that of the Democrats. In both parties, rank-and-file voters, not party officials, determined the selection of most delegates to the party nominating conventions.

The first nominations under the new system confirmed in practice what the new rules had decreed -- voters, not party officials, controlled the outcomes. In 1972, George McGovern, from the far left-wing of his party, won the Democratic nomination in a series of bitterly contested primaries despite an almost complete lack of support from party officials. Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, the most visible symbol of the party establishment, was refused a seat at the party convention that year. In 1976, Jimmy Carter, a former one-term Governor of Georgia and a man similarly lacking in standing with the party establishment, won the Democratic nomination. Democratic Party leaders were once again flummoxed. When W. Averell Harriman, an old Democratic war horse, was told of Carter's success in the primaries and the likelihood that he would be nominated, he exclaimed, "Jimmy Carter? How can that be? I don't even know Jimmy Carter, and as far as I know, none of my friends know him, either." (Matthews, 1989, p. 155)

Like most candidates since, Carter's strategy was to use success in the Iowa Caucuses as a springboard to success in New Hampshire and the other contests that followed. By doing "better than expected" in the first contest, he attracted media attention that made him a national sensation and left other candidates to labor as also-rans. Some of the power lost by party officials in the McGovern Fraser reforms did not go to rank-and-file voters. The power of the news media, which set the agenda for voters, was much enhanced. "The road to nomination now runs through the newsrooms," wrote one scholar (Patterson, 1994, p. 33). The power of unions, religious activists, and other advocacy groups also took a quantum leap upward. Kept at arms length by the state politicians who chose convention delegates in the old system, interest and advocacy groups were now

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<sup>2</sup> The proportion of *ex officio* delegates is greater in the Democratic Party since the creation of "superdelegates" before the 1984 campaign.

able to negotiate terms of support with candidates who needed their help to compete effectively in 50 separate state primaries and caucuses (Shafer, 1988).

At this point, most scholars and close observers questioned, with good reason, whether parties still existed, at least as regards presidential nominations. A party that cannot control its nominations is not really a party at all. We agree with this assessment but part company with most scholars on what happened next. We argue that in 1972 and especially 1976, most of the candidates manifestly failed to understand how the new system worked. In both years, for example, Hubert Humphrey sat out key primaries in the hope that party leaders would find a way to nominate him anyway. Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson, probably the strongest candidate in the 1976 race, skipped Iowa and New Hampshire, believing that the Massachusetts primary, a good contest for him, would give him the “acceleration” necessary to pull ahead. The only candidates who followed what is now regarded as the correct strategy -- to compete for every delegate in every state -- were the winners, McGovern and Carter.

Yet by 1980, this lesson had sunk in for everyone. When all candidates, rather than only one, understand the rules, it makes it a different game. No longer did the strongest candidates wait to enter the primaries at their strategic convenience.<sup>3</sup> They *all* organized in the year prior to the election, entered the first contests, and tried to build on their early success. In this system, politically marginal but strategically savvy candidates like McGovern and Carter had no special advantage. Weaker candidates could still hope that a “surprisingly” good showing in an early primary would create momentum for them, as occurred for underdog Gary Hart in the 1984 Democratic contest. But with the leading contenders now playing the correct strategy, the candidates with the most backing tended naturally to win. Thus, William Mayer observed in 2001:

Thirty years after a series of reforms that were supposed to “open up the parties” and “level the playing field,” the American presidential nominating process has become, if anything, even more hostile to outsiders than the system that preceded it. If the 1996 nomination contests went a considerable way towards establishing this proposition, the 2000 races should remove any lingering doubt (p. 12).

Evidence consistent with Mayer’s claim is presented in Figure 1. The data are the public endorsements of presidential candidates reported in major news outlets in the year prior to the Iowa caucuses. For example, endorsements for the 1972

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<sup>3</sup> Al Gore ran a southern regional strategy of waiting until Super Tuesday to enter the 1988 primaries. But Gore chose this strategy from weakness rather than strength, like Polsby and Wildavsky’s “drowning man clutching at straws,” and it failed. The same can be said for the decisions not to compete in Iowa made by John McCain in 2000 as well as Wesley Clark and Joe Lieberman in 2004.

Democratic nomination were made from the beginning of 1971 to the eve of the Iowa caucuses, which were held at the end of January 1972. We do not claim that the period of the Invisible Primary precisely coincides with this particular 13-month window; in fact, it begins much earlier. But the last year or so of the process is the most visible portion and therefore the part we study. The endorsement data in this figure are based on a search of major national and regional publications, such as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, plus any magazines that follow presidential politics. The percentages in the graphs are each candidate's share of endorsements made in the given nomination contest, as weighted by the political importance of the endorser.<sup>4</sup>

The data in Figure 1 show that, even in the chaotic 1970s, party insiders managed to form a united front in the Invisible Primary in two of the three contested nominations. But in only one of those cases, that of incumbent President Gerald Ford in 1976, did the insider favorite manage to win nomination. From 1980 to 2000 -- the period to which Mayer referred -- the record is notably stronger. In 8 out of 9 cases, party insiders were able to form a united front behind a preferred candidate, and in all eight cases their preferred candidate won nomination. In the ninth case, Michael Dukakis was a less-than-solid plurality winner of his party's Invisible Primary, but was still able to win nomination.

Most scholars, including Mayer, explained the success of insiders as a triumph of campaign rationality -- the candidate with the most money, the strongest poll support, and the best staff would naturally tend to beat candidates who lacked these advantages. The explanations were couched in terms of candidate-centered politics. It was at this point that we began our research on presidential nominations, which we initially presented in a 2001 convention paper, "Beating Reform: The Resurgence of Parties in Presidential Nominations." As we argued:

Presidential parties are back. Operating as loose but stable networks of elected officials, fundraisers, and other activists, the two major parties control the resources candidates need to compete for delegates in state primaries and caucuses. The result is that the candidates favored by party insiders have won every nomination from 1980 to 2000.

Scholars have noted the success of insider candidates in recent cycles, but our claim is larger. We maintain that presidential parties are again capable of coordinated and strategic action. Their leaders are hard to force onto bandwagons, resistant to ideologues who would divide the party, and willing to pass on their most preferred candidates for the sake of coordinating on someone more broadly acceptable. In short, presidential parties behave the way parties are classically supposed to behave.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 6-1, *The Party Decides*.

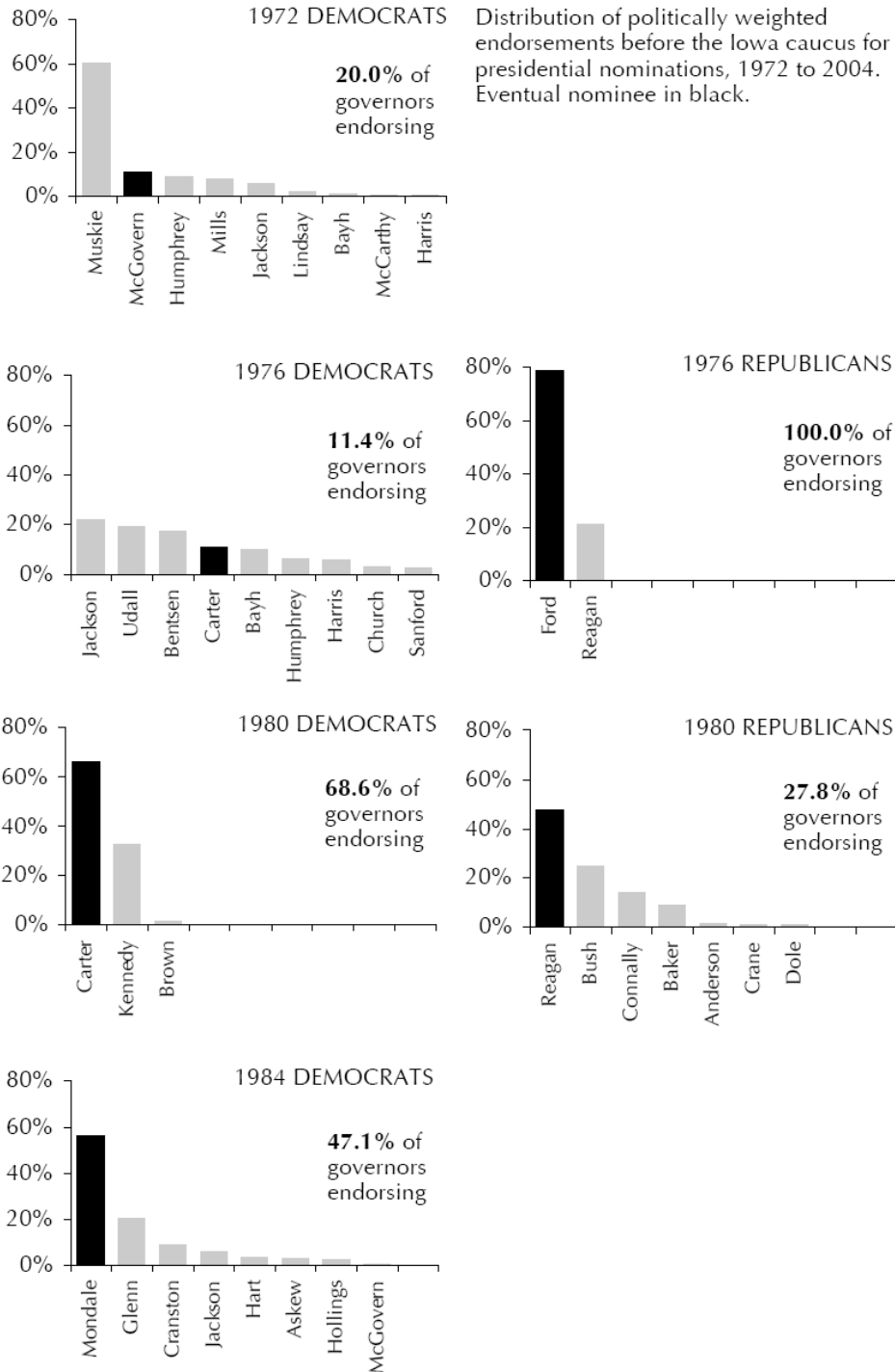
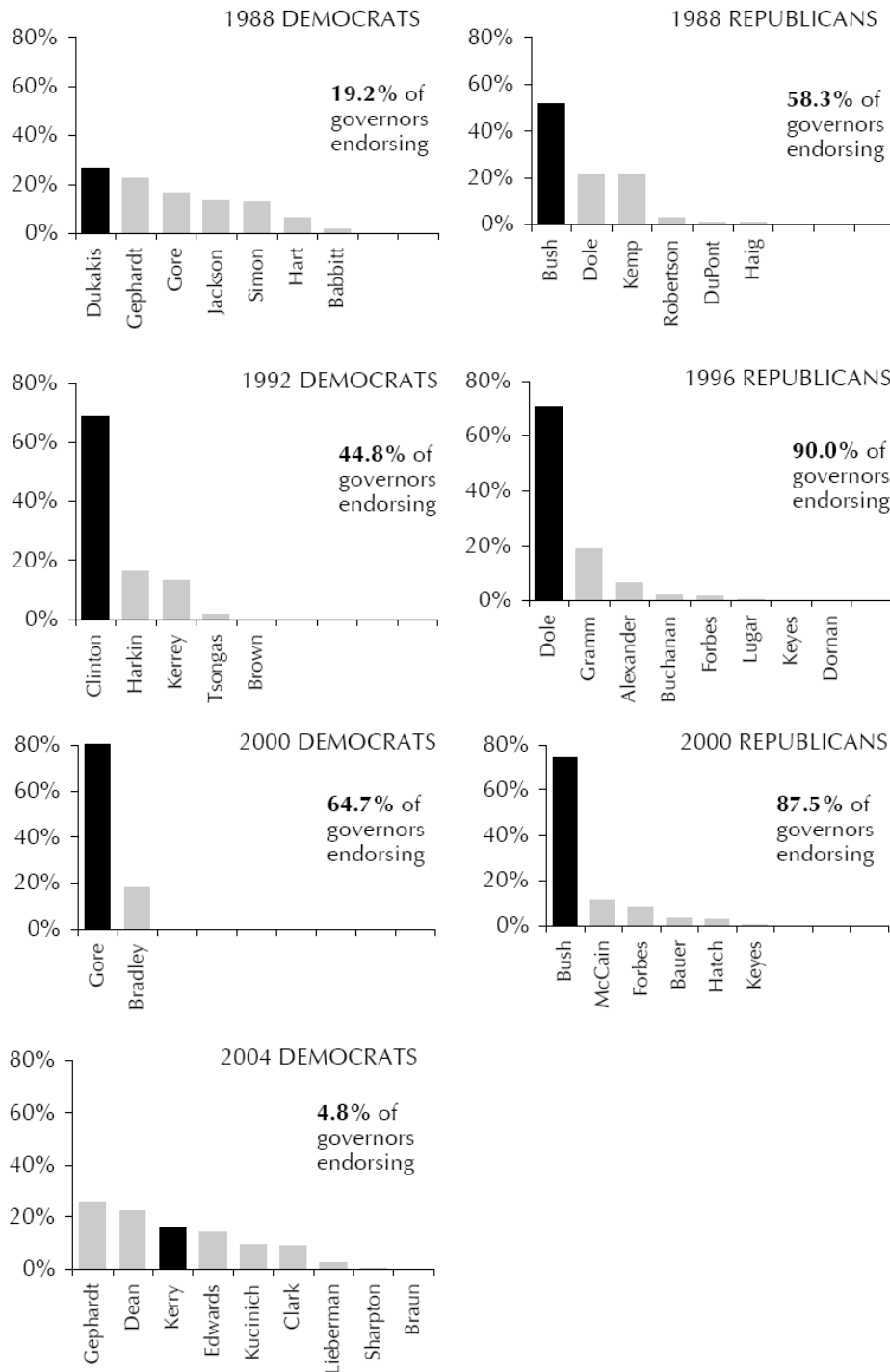
**FIGURE 1: Distribution of Endorsements by Contest**

Figure 1 continued



The record of party success in controlling presidential nominations has been notably weaker since 2000. The Invisible Primary phase of the 2004 contest was won by Howard Dean, a maverick who compared his party's leaders to "cockroaches" and used the Internet to enlist tens of thousands of neophytes in a crusade against the Iraq War. Dean's candidacy was the antithesis of party control, but it collapsed in the Iowa Caucuses, leaving the nomination to John Kerry, the candidate who began the race as the choice of party insiders. Yet Kerry's victory may have owed more to the last minute infusion of campaign cash from mortgaging his house than to support from the party establishment.

The parties are having another rough time in the current cycle. Our preliminary counts indicate that Hillary Clinton has corralled about half of the party's public endorsements. This visible support helped her to become the clear front-runner in the early months of the race, but it may not carry her to victory. As the Iowa Caucuses approached, she lost ground and is now locked in a very tight race with two candidates who have much less insider support, Barack Obama and, to a lesser degree, John Edwards.

The Republicans are even more disorganized. A party whose social and economic wings have worked harmoniously together in past nominations simply cannot agree in 2008. Each of their five candidates has a unique disability: Rudy Giuliani is unacceptable to social conservatives because he favors abortion rights, gun control, and gay rights; John McCain is unacceptable to party loyalists because of his failure to support the GOP agenda consistently in his Senate votes; Mitt Romney is unacceptable because he converted too late to issues that social conservatives care about and because some are distrustful of his Mormon faith; Mike Huckabee raised taxes while governor of Arkansas and has expressed populist and protectionist sentiments recently, which makes him anathema to economic conservatives. Fred Thompson is widely acceptable within the party and initially seemed to be the unifying figure many Republicans hoped for, but has demonstrated a disconcerting lack of energy on the campaign trail. It seems odd that a party that faces no particularly divisive issues would be unable to find a candidate capable of bridging its normal factional divisions and willing to campaign hard for nomination, but such is the case in the Republican Party this year.

We see two potential explanations for the three tough nominations that have followed nine comparatively easy ones. One is chance: The parties were never so firmly in command as they seemed in the period 1980 to 2000, nor are they as feckless as they have appeared recently, but are simply encountering different kinds of luck. For example, the inability of the Republicans in 2008 to find a consistently conservative politician with passable campaign skills seems best explained as simply bad luck. Had the emerging GOP favorite, Sen. George Allen, not self-destructed last year, the story might have been different.

The other potential explanation for the parties' recent difficulties is that the communications revolution of the past few years -- cable news, blogs, YouTube, and the related increase in visible campaign activity, especially debates -- has given candidates more opportunities to make independent impressions on voters and thereby made it harder for parties to dominate the game. On either account, parties would still be major players in presidential nominations, though not quite the dominant ones they seemed when their preferred candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore, capped a two-decade string of successes in 2000.

We shall discuss each possibility below, arguing that both explanations probably have some merit. First, however, we must say more about the two decades of apparent party dominance. The simple data display in Figure 1 is compatible with many scenarios, of which party dominance is only one. Our discussion on the importance of parties in presidential nominations will focus on two questions: What exactly is a party? And what happens in the Invisible Primary, the period in which, for earlier contests, party favorites built up leads that carried them over to the nomination? Having answered these questions, we conclude this essay with a discussion of parties in the 2008 nominations contests.

### WHOSE PARTIES?

In *Why Parties?* John Aldrich writes that "Political parties can be seen as coalitions of elites to capture and use political office... (But) a political party is ... more than a coalition. A major political party is an institutionalized coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms, and procedures". From Joseph Schumpeter to Anthony Downs to Joseph Schlesinger down to Aldrich, leading scholars have used this basic definition of parties. But who exactly are the "elites" who form and maintain parties? The answer, for most contemporary scholars, is office holders and aspiring office holders. In the context of presidential politics, they are the party officials who, in the pre-reform party system, assembled in national conventions to make presidential nominations but who, in the aftermath of reform, appear to have lost control.

We take a broader view, arguing that interest group leaders, ideological activists, and other "intense policy demanders" are not simply ancillary members of parties, but leading players -- the building blocks of the party coalitions and important players in all party business, including nominations. In this view, parties are a working coalition of office-holders and non-office-holding policy demanders. As full-time professionals, office-holders are the most visible members of the party, but they rarely act independent of the extended coalition upon whom their own and the party's prospects depend.

Helping nominate candidates with credible commitments to group values is often a better way for policy demanders to get what they want out of government

than negotiating with independent politicians who have already obtained office. This is especially so as regards the presidency. A sitting president enjoys huge power and substantial freedom of action. Groups do not want to leave it to voters to select this extremely important official. They wish, if possible, to control the choice themselves. Their method is to reach agreement on someone whom all wings of the party can trust and to focus campaign resources and voter attention on that person.

Some may doubt that the far-flung members of a political party are capable of making a coordinated decision except in the context of a national convention, but the historical record does not support that view. Most nominations in the final decades of the pre-reform system were made on the first ballot. The reason is that candidates and their agents traveled the country ahead of the convention to line up the necessary support. The turning point seems to have been around 1928, when Southern Democratic leaders agreed ahead of the convention to go along with Al Smith's nomination and thereby opened the way for him to win on the first ballot. Journalist Arthur T. Hadley (1976) later coined the phrase Invisible Primary to describe the pre-convention deliberations that, as he claimed, picked most nominees from the 1930s to the 1960s. The parties continued in the post-reform period to use the Invisible Primary to reach consensus on most nominations.

The Invisible Primary is essentially a long-running national conversation among members of each regular party coalition about who can best unite the party and win the next presidential election. The conversation occurs in newspapers, on Sunday morning TV talk shows, among activist friends over beer, in chatter at party events and, most recently, in the blogosphere. Face-to-face meetings with candidates are an especially important part of the conversation, as party leaders, groups, and activists seek assurance that they can trust the candidate to promote their most important policy demands.

Our argument about the centrality of group policy demands in party politics has roots in an older tradition of theorizing by Arthur Bentley, E. E. Schattschneider, V. O. Key, and others. But it has been several decades since mainstream political science has taken seriously a group theory of parties.

### **PARTIES IN THE GOLDEN 80S AND 90S**

George Washington may have been the last president who did not exert himself in order to win election. But in the heyday of the national nominating conventions, it was obvious that the party actually chose the nominee. In some years, it would choose a "dark horse," that is, a candidate who became prominent only after the convention had deadlocked over the major contenders. The national party convention was, to use the phrase of the late Nelson W. Polsby, a "consensus-forcing institution." But, as Polsby argued in *Consequences of Party Reform*, the

need to compromise was much reduced in the aftermath of the McGovern-Fraser reforms. Groups were now tempted to get behind their most preferred candidate -- whether he was acceptable to the rest of the party or not -- and try to get that person through the state primaries. An incentive to factionalize thus replaced the incentive to find someone acceptable to the whole coalition.

Yet Figure 1 shows that the party leaders, groups, and activists whose endorsements are reported in the news media have, in most years, resisted the temptation to back factional favorites. The main exceptions have been 1988, when most African-American leaders backed Jesse Jackson, and 2004, when anti-war activists backed Dean. One might now cite the 2008 Republicans as well, especially the support of Christian conservatives for Mike Huckabee. But, as we argue in our book-length study, the parties' most important groups -- labor and civil rights supporters in the Democratic party; social and economic conservatives in the Republican party -- have often conspicuously failed to support the candidate closest to them on the issues and have instead repeatedly supported someone more broadly acceptable. We show, moreover, that, all else equal, the candidate with the broadest initial support tends to pick up support over the course of the Invisible Primary.

The Clinton campaign in 2008 is, in this regard, typical of winning coalitions in the 1980s and 90s. Even with a major African-American candidate in the race, many important black politicians have supported the white Senator from New York. Obama, too, has a broad bi-racial coalition. Despite John Edwards' strong appeal to labor activists, Senator Clinton has won many union endorsements. Whatever one might say about the 2008 Democratic contest, it is not simply one party faction against another.

Many observers, however, might see the 2008 Democratic race as candidate-centered -- the early-starting, highly efficient Clinton machine versus the personal organization of the charismatic Illinois senator, with the Democratic Party playing no important role. They might also view the data in Figure 1 through the prism of candidate-centered politics: the strongest candidates have the most backing, but the support derives from each candidate's personal political strength rather than the choice of anything like a party.

We agree that a candidate-centered interpretation is possible for Figure 1. But a party-centered reading is, on the face of it, no less plausible. So how would one decide? In our approach, we set up a test among four variables: A candidate's share of endorsements, national poll standing, media coverage, and fund-raising. We measure each of these variables at two points in time, early and late in the Invisible Primary (but all before the Iowa caucuses). The data cover all contested nominations in the period 1980 to 2004.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> We omit the slightly contested re-nomination of George H. W. Bush in 1992.

We take poll standing, fund-raising, and media coverage to be indicators of candidate-centered strength and public endorsements by party leaders, groups, and activists to be an indicator of party preferences.<sup>6</sup> If, therefore, measures of these variables in the first time period predict endorsements in the second period, we would take it as evidence that candidate-centered strength is the cause of endorsements. But if, on the other hand, endorsements at the end of the Invisible Primary are largely independent of early candidate strength, we would take it as evidence that endorsements mainly reflect simply the preferences of party actors.

The data support the latter view. They also showed that early endorsements -- particularly when they are from outside the candidate's own state, political institution, ethnic, religious, or ideological group -- are especially powerful predictors of later developments in the Invisible Primary. Thus, it was broad party backing, as against narrow factional support, that seemed to drive the dynamics of the Invisible Primary. More generally, endorsements from outside the candidate's group seemed to be the unmoved mover of the Invisible Primary. We do not assert this conclusion strongly, since our data are fragile. The most important limitation is that the data involve marginal changes in each variable across only two time periods. Yet, as far as they go, they are much more consistent with a view of free party choice than of candidate-driven choice.

We also examined the impact of these four variables -- endorsements, polls, fund-raising, and media coverage -- on candidate success in the state primaries and caucuses. We find that broad-based endorsements early in the Invisible Primary are, all else equal, more important than other variables in predicting success in winning delegates in the state primaries and caucuses. Because changes in national poll support within the Invisible Primary are caused in significant part by early endorsements, but early polls have little effect on later endorsements, endorsements trump even polls as a predictor of success in the state-level contests.

These results suggest that, at least in the period 1980 to 2004, the endorsements of party insiders drove the presidential nominating process. There were certainly some close calls: Inside favorites Walter Mondale and Bob Dole nearly lost to insurgents in 1984 and 1996. There was also one important case -- the Democrats in 2004 -- in which the party had little influence because it failed to make up its mind prior to Iowa. But the overall pattern of results is in line with a thesis of party resurgence in presidential nominations.

Evidence that endorsements have been a major force in the Invisible Primary and the state primaries is stronger than the evidence about why they matter. One fairly obvious reason is that they are a cue to other party elites about who is acceptable in the party as a whole. Another is that they are a commitment of

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<sup>6</sup> We weight endorsements based on their partisan significance, as determined by the ratings of expert judges.

various campaign resources -- a governor's personal organization, a union or church phone bank, a fund-raising network. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, endorsements are a cue to rank-and-file voters. We believe that a buzz develops around the insider favorite, as millions of partisans get the message from party officials, activists, and interest group leaders that "George W. Bush is our guy in this contest" or (perhaps) "Hillary Clinton is our gal." If voters can, as other evidence shows, respond to expectations about who is likely to win, they should also be able to respond to national party cues. Indeed, the two messages may be, in some degree, different frames for the same information.

### LUCK, CHANGE, OR WHAT?

The nine contested nominations from 1980 to 2000 are enough cases to identify a strong pattern and span enough time to constitute a political regime. We do not, of course, know how the 2008 nominations will come out, but the parties seem to have less control over the Invisible Primaries of this cycle than in the past. As noted, insurgent Howard Dean outperformed eventual nominee John Kerry in the Democratic Invisible Primary of 2004. On both statistical and substantive grounds, then, one may be tempted to view the three apparently different contests from 2004 and 2008 as draws from a different political universe. But, pending information from one or two more contests, we shall resist the temptation and instead make the parsimonious assumption that we are dealing with one process, perhaps evolving over time and most likely affected by chance occurrences.

We have already suggested what a chance effect looks like in the context of presidential nominations: The Republicans in 2008 have no consistent conservative candidate who is willing to campaign hard for the nomination. It would be far-fetched to suggest that this represents a structural weakness in the Republican Party; nor is it a situation that is likely to repeat itself any time soon. But it has been important in 2008.

Here are two other chance effects, both favorable to the appearance of party control and both from the earlier period: President Jimmy Carter was the endorsement leader as the 1980 Iowa caucuses approached, but looking vulnerable to insurgent Senator Ted Kennedy. Then the Iran Hostage Crisis boosted the president in late November 1979, and he rode the wave to re-nomination. Party support was surely a boon to the president, but he might not have survived without the foreign policy rally.

In our second example, Gary Hart was the poll leader in the Invisible Primary for 1988; labor opposed him but had no strong candidate to throw against him. In these circumstances, Hart had difficulty winning party endorsements -- a result consistent with our theory -- but he might still have prevailed in the state primaries, thus undermining our claim that parties can block candidates they do

not want. Yet Hart was forced out of the race by a personal scandal and Michael Dukakis, with a weak plurality of party endorsements, went on to eke out a win in the primaries.<sup>7</sup>

More recent Democratic contests seem also to have been affected by chance events. In 2004, it was the Iraq War. Parties rarely cope well with the intrusion of divisive new issues, and the Democratic Party did not do so in this case. In 2008, the irritant to party control has been the late emergence of a candidate who is, at least so far, a more adept campaigner than the insider choice. That is, Barack Obama seems like more than a fresh face; he appears to be a superb candidate -- and perhaps better than Clinton, whose campaign has been dogged from its inception by polls showing that many Democrats do not like her. If he had arrived earlier in national politics, Obama rather than Clinton might have been the inside favorite.

That party control can be affected by events like these is a true testament to its limits. Although chance surely affected choices of nominee in the old system, it could not threaten party control per se, which was assured by the nature of the nomination process. Thus if, for example, Republicans were facing the current field in an old-style nominating convention, they would probably turn with minimal rancor to a "dark horse" acceptable to all of its factions. The lack of such a "consensus-forcing institution" leaves parties more vulnerable to the twists and turns that are inevitable in politics. We thus tentatively conclude that a change in the nature of chance events -- favorable to party control in the 1980s, unfavorable in recent cases -- may explain the appearance of party stumbling in the most recent contests. Parties themselves seem to be what they have been since 1980.

With equal tentativeness, we suggest a systematic factor may also be at work -- an increase in political communication over the past 10 to 15 years. The rise of the Internet -- more specifically, political blogs, YouTube, on-line contributions, and web-based advocacy groups -- has given candidates more ways to mobilize political support and given potential supporters more ways to monitor what candidates are doing. The Internet is, moreover, only one part of the story. The mass communications mainstays of the 1960s, big city newspapers and network TV news, are notably weaker today than they were. But media that cater to political junkies -- cable television news and talk shows; elite national newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*; radio, especially right-wing talk

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<sup>7</sup> Note that, in both of these accounts, the "chance effect" was a supplement to the efforts by parties to control their nominations, not a substitute. We should also add that Carter might have beaten Kennedy in 1980 without Iran Hostages, just as Ford beat Reagan in 1976. One can also imagine that the continued presence of Hart in the race might have lured Mario Cuomo in, or might have provoked the rest of the party to coalesce earlier and more strongly behind Dukakis. So we are not saying that the party would have been beaten in these cases without some good luck, only that it got some good luck and it seemed to help.

radio and National Public Radio -- are all stronger. Reflecting the newly created market for political junkies, candidate debates have become a mainstay of the Invisible Primary. For political professionals, the routine ease of airline travel for conferences and small-group meetings is another big advance in political communication. In consequence of these advances in communication, no one can say today what T. H. White said of party insiders in the 1960s:

The country is so vast, and its political worlds so many, that these local leaders, groping as they leave their home base, crave contact with one another and are grateful to any man who can give them the sense of strength through multiplication (p. 149).

The country is as vast today as it ever was, but its political leaders no longer live in separate universes. All are part of a national political community that is far better inter-connected than before. This development has been a double-edged sword for parties. On the one hand, internal communication in parties is better than ever. When a candidate does well or badly in a debate, gets a big new endorsement, or alienates a critical constituency, the whole party knows about it within hours and can adjust accordingly. Fox News on the Republican side and the liberal netroots on the Democratic side are evolving as beacons of orthodoxy for their party rank-and-file. New communication media were especially useful in conveying insider approval of the late emerging candidacies of Wesley Clark in 2004 and Fred Thompson in 2008.

On the downside, however, the pressure of the 24-hour news cycle creates more opportunities for candidates to get in trouble -- especially the front-runners whom everyone pays most attention to. In the 1980s and 90s, much of the action in campaigns consisted of candidate entourages passing one another in airports with minimal engagement. Now campaigns are in constant exchange with one another, with mainstream reporters, and with hyper-aggressive bloggers. The campaign is no longer a collection of separate organizations, but a big national debate with multiple candidates and an audience of national news junkies who seem never to sleep.

Besides increasing pressure on front-runners, the new national campaign gives insurgent candidates a public medium in which to act and a ready audience to which they can appeal. This has, in turn, changed the dynamics of the Invisible Primary. In earlier years, outsider underdog candidates had to "do better than expected" in Iowa or New Hampshire to generate massive media coverage and come to the attention of a national audience. In more recent campaigns, however, candidates including McCain, Dean, and Huckabee have gone from obscurity to the top tier before the first vote has been cast. In the current media-rich campaign, merely rising in the polls in one of the early-voting states is enough to generate buzz and national visibility.

It is not, however, clear whether the surge in political communication has in the end made much difference. Recall that Eugene McCarthy mounted an effective anti-war insurgency campaign in 1968, and that George H. W. Bush came from national obscurity to beat front-runner Ronald Reagan in Iowa and to capture national momentum briefly in 1980. So there is a chance the campaigns of McCain, Dean, Huckabee, and Obama would have prospered even in the communications environment of the 1980s. Notwithstanding this, we do think the new communication environment may be marginally less friendly to front-runners -- and the party establishments that help create them -- than what existed in the past.

Our analysis of the 2008 nomination process is, as we have explained, rooted in our understanding of nominations since 1980. Someone who knew nothing of the past 25 years, or who wished wholly to discount the experience of the recent past, would therefore reach different conclusions than we do. Yet we have said that, even for this set of contests, there is evidence of party behavior if you know where to look for it. Exhibit A is John McCain. McCain is a war hero, a media celebrity, a strong campaigner, and an accomplished legislator. He put together a strong campaign team, ran first or second in early polls, raised plenty of start-up money, delivered some of the best lines in the presidential debates, and worked as hard as anyone on the campaign trail. If there is any core meaning to the claim that presidential nominations are candidate-centered, McCain ought to be at the head of the Republican field.

McCain does, however, have one big weakness: he is distrusted and often detested by leading Republicans, many of whom feel he is more interested in courting the media than advancing the party agenda. For example, he opposed the Bush tax cuts on the grounds that they were fiscally irresponsible and sponsored a campaign finance reform that many Republicans thought damaging to their interests. In the 2000 campaign he lashed out at prominent figures in the religious right, calling them “agents of intolerance.” He is often called a maverick. As the *Economist* reported:

Mr. McCain is the most conservative of the big three Republicans—pro-life, pro-small-government and pro-projecting American power—but he is also the most loathed among the [party] hard core.<sup>8</sup>

McCain’s relationship with groups in his party became so strained that, alone among the major candidates, he skipped the annual conventions of the Conservative Political Action Conference and the Club for Growth. McCain won some early endorsements, but also more anti-endorsements than any other candidate. Lacking broad insider support, McCain gradually lost his position at

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<sup>8</sup> “In Search of the Old Magic,” May 31, 2007. Internet edition.

the head of the pack, falling behind in fund raising and poll standing.<sup>9</sup> If one analyzes presidential nominations from the standpoint of candidate-centered politics, the collapse of the candidate with so many indications of personal political strength is anomalous. But from our analysis of the effect of endorsements in the Invisible Primary, a candidate known to be on the outs with much of his party would be expected to fare poorly.

The candidate atop the Republican race for much of the Invisible Primary, Rudy Giuliani, also had relatively few endorsements. His support in GOP preference polls remained about 30 percent -- low for a front-runner in a Republican race -- until the last month or so, when his lead largely disappeared. In joining McCain in the club of fallen front runners, Giuliani did his part to maintain the perfect forecast record of our endorsements measure: No candidate who has emerged as national poll front-runner in races from 1980 to 2004 has been able to maintain that position in the absence of strong plurality support among the leaders, groups, and activists of his party.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, every candidate who has moved into the position of poll front-runner with strong endorsement support has gone on to be nominated. We take this record, on both the positive and negative side, as evidence of the importance of party leaders in structuring the Invisible Primary.

Meanwhile, Giuliani's long period as a front-runner, unacceptable to a key party group, has motivated some of the most interesting internal party activity that we have been able to observe. Much of it centered on efforts to engineer a late entry to the race by former Senator Fred Thompson. For example, we found the following report in June in a political blog:

After more than a year of fretting, it looks as if many members of the Arlington Group, an informal roundtable of the country's most influential culturally conservative groups, are fast settling around Fred Thompson as their presidential candidate of choice.

Thompson is not an evangelical, but he has, evidently, sounded solid enough in his private meetings with individual Arlington Group members, a series of which have taken place over the past few weeks.<sup>11</sup>

The Arlington Group has no formal procedure for making endorsements. But the conservative leaders hoped to coalesce around one candidate that prominent

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<sup>9</sup> It is true that McCain took some unpopular positions in the campaign, but others did so and survived.

<sup>10</sup> This group consists on Ted Kennedy in the 1980 nomination contest, Gary Hart in 1988, Jerry Brown in 1992, and Howard Dean in 2008. John McCain and most recently Rudy Giuliani may now be added to this list.

<sup>11</sup> "Is the Arlington Group Coalescing on Fred Thompson," Marc Ambinder: A Reporter Blogs on Politics, on-line, June 7, 2007.

members could endorse individually. The Arlington Group encompasses roughly 70 grass-roots organizations around the country said to reach tens of millions of people collectively. A month later in July, a report in *U. S. News and World Report* wrote:

For months, conservative evangelical activists have been fretting over a Republican presidential field whose front-runner [is]... pro-abortion rights ... Now the Christian right is eyeing former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson ... but are waiting to see how he holds up under increased scrutiny once he officially enters the race. "There's a deliberate attempt by evangelical leaders to come to consensus," says [one minister]. [Another] says "the leaders I talk to are all really interested in Thompson, but they're waiting to pull the trigger [on endorsements] until later this year."

Thompson's record in the Senate, his Internet postings, his radio commentaries, and his folksy persona were carefully dissected by an army of conservative bloggers -- and passed muster. To many Republicans, Thompson seemed the white knight the party needed. As columnist Robert Novak wrote at the start of the Thompson bubble:

In just three weeks, Fred Thompson has improbably transformed the contest for the Republican presidential nomination. It is not merely that he has come from nowhere to double digits in national polls. He is the talk of GOP political circles, because he is filling the conservative void in the Republican field.

Republican activists have complained for months that none of the big-three contenders -- Rudy Giuliani, John McCain and Mitt Romney -- fits the model of a conservative leader for a conservative party.....<sup>12</sup>

Yet when Thompson eventually entered the race and showed little zest for campaigning, his support melted away. One of the first to desert him was James Dobson, a leading religious conservative. "[Thompson] has no passion, no zeal, and no apparent 'want to,'" complained James Dobson in a private email that became public. "And yet he is apparently the Great Hope that burns in the breasts of many conservative Christians? Well, not for me, my brothers. Not for me!"<sup>13</sup>

Despite Thompson's lack of success in the Invisible Primary, the flurry of activity around his candidacy reflected more than simply his own efforts. It reflected, in particular, the efforts of party insiders to identify and coordinate behind someone who would be acceptable to all major wings of the party. Thompson was the modern equivalent of the late-entering candidate who used to

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<sup>12</sup> "Thompson's White House Talk Is No Act," *Chicago Sun Times*, April 2, 2007, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Finnegan, "Evangelicals split on GOP field," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 1, 2007, p. 1.

be called a dark horse. Except for unexpected flaws in the candidate, the ploy might have succeeded.

Meanwhile, Giuliani redoubled his efforts to convince social conservatives that they could trust him as party nominee, promising in a major speech to the Federalist Society that he would appoint Supreme Court justices in the mold of Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. This signal was sufficiently clear and credible that the leader of an abortion rights group was startled and confused:

“Obviously, judges in the mold of Thomas and Scalia are going to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, no doubt,” [said the leader] in a telephone interview, adding that her group was uneasy about Mr. Giuliani’s recent statements. “We really feel like, out of the glare of the cameras, we have to sit down with him and his colleagues and ask, which is the real Rudy Giuliani?”<sup>14</sup>

We find it notable that the response of a group leader to a candidate’s public speech is to seek a private meeting to find out what the candidate really thinks. We further suspect that such meetings are a routine part of the process that leads to the public endorsements that, as our statistical analysis indicates, drive much of the Invisible Primary.

In the candidate-centered view of politics, candidates command endorsements and donations by virtue of their political strength. In our theory of party-centered politics, policy-driven actors give or withhold support based on their estimate of whether a candidate will advance issues they care about. And when no candidate seems likely to advance their issues, they may do nothing at all. Given this, we find further support for our theory in the fact that many top Republicans held back making an endorsement in 2008. In 1996, 27 of 31 GOP governors made an endorsement by the time of the Iowa caucuses, usually in support of Bob Dole. In 2000, 28 of 30 made an endorsement, usually in support of George W. Bush. But as of this writing, only 8 of 22 Republican governors have endorsed anyone for the party nomination in 2008.<sup>15</sup>

Donors, too, seem to have been holding back. As Fred Thompson began fundraising in June, Matthew Mosk wrote in the *Washington Post*:

... Thompson is aggressively pitching himself to conservatives uncomfortable with Giuliani, McCain and Romney, and hoping that he will be seen as a viable -- and fresh -- alternative to the current Republican field ... “People have been waiting for a candidate who fits their profile,” said Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), who was a Bush Pioneer in 2004 and recently signed on with Thompson.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Cooper, “Giuliani Vexes Audiences with His Abortion Views,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> These data count only endorsements by governors of a candidate outside their own state.

<sup>16</sup> “Defections to Thompson pose major threat to McCain,” June 8, 2007, p. A1.

Thus, despite Thompson's late entry into the race, party donors still had plenty of money in their pockets. "Of 630 supporters Bush named Pioneers for their ability to raise at least \$100,000 or Rangers for collecting at least \$200,000, fewer than a third had joined a campaign as of March 31," Mosk wrote.

These glimpses of party activity are no more than that. They are non-systematic and partial evidence that elements of the Republican coalition were trying to coordinate behind a winning candidate under circumstances that were not very favorable. By themselves, they prove little. Together with more systematic evidence from previous elections, they make a plausible case that a party that has been notably successful over 20 years in picking nominees before the voters weigh in has not suddenly given up trying in 2008; it is only having a tough time of it.

To the surprise of many, including us, the Democrats are exhibiting more party-like behavior in 2008 than the Republicans. That is, their leaders, groups, and activists are doing the better job of coordinating on someone acceptable to all of them. One big question for the Democratic contest has been the role that anti-war activists would play. In 2004, they obstreperously refused to countenance any candidate who did not take a strong stand against the Iraq War. The initial refusal of most Democratic candidates to do this created an opening for Howard Dean to emerge as the factional favorite of militant anti-war Democrats. Liberal bloggers were the leaders of the anti-war faction and many backed the former Vermont Governor.

Yet by August of 2007 when Hillary Clinton visited the Yearly Kos convention -- the spiritual home of the anti-war netroots -- the mood was more accommodating. Clinton stood her ground, telling the bloggers that "We can't just wake up and say we will move 160,000 troops. That is dangerous." The bloggers let that statement go, but booed when the New York Senator said she would continue to take campaign donations from registered lobbyists. Clinton responded nimbly. "I have been waiting [for that]," she said with a smile. "It gives me a real sense of reality in being here. I have a good idea about bringing about change. I wish it were as simple as doing this or that. I will take money from lobbyists, because some represent real Americans like nurses and social workers, and they represent businesses that employ a lot of people. And I ask you to look at my record. I do want to be the president for everybody."

For those follow-up comments, which conceded nothing, Clinton got some applause. Afterward, Markos Moulitsas, the group's founder, told a reporter, "[Clinton] did a good job in reducing hostility. Half the battle is getting the proper respect, and she got that. She doesn't have to get total agreement." Moulitsas certainly wasn't endorsing Clinton as his first choice, but he was saying, in terms of our argument, that she was acceptable. Reflecting on this episode, some

commentators praised Clinton's skill in taming the netroots. This would be a candidate-centered interpretation. Our view is that, having lost two straight presidential elections, the bloggers saw that, whatever her shortcomings, Clinton might still be a good bet to unite the Democratic Party and win in November. On this view, the bloggers had come to realize that the country has only two major parties and that, to be effective, they needed to behave as regular members of one of them.

Clinton, however, is not the overwhelming favorite of Democratic insiders. She has more support than any candidate had in 2004, but notably less than Al Gore or Bill Clinton had when they won their party's nomination.<sup>17</sup> The rate at which governors are making endorsements also falls in between the 2004 rate and that of the previous two cases. Clinton thus seems the choice of party insiders, but a somewhat lukewarm one.

Clinton's lead in support from party insiders will make the primaries interesting. A number of commentators have compared the Clinton-Obama fight to the Mondale-Hart duel of 1984. We concur, but note this key difference: Insurgent Gary Hart held views on labor issues that made him unacceptable to union leaders; in this circumstance, many voters had reason to follow leadership cues and did. But Obama has no Democratic group with a comparable grudge against him. So for Democrats it is mainly a question of who can best lead the party to victory in November. Will rank-and-file Democrats follow their leaders on this kind of choice? We shall soon find out.

On the Republican side, there is little positive party leadership for voters to follow. The greater part of the late endorsements were going to either Romney or Thompson, but in the final weeks before Iowa, McCain's campaign revived on the strength of a few eleventh hour statements of support, most notably from the *New Hampshire Union-Leader* and the 2000 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, Senator Joe Lieberman. At the same time, Mike Huckabee began to rally grass-roots religious conservatives with a novel mix of fundamentalist Christian and populist rhetoric. Huckabee "criticized executive pay, sympathized with labor unions, denounced 'plutocracy,' and mocked the anti-tax group the Club for Growth as 'the Club for Greed.'"<sup>18</sup> He also attacked President Bush's leadership on Iraq.

In the Republican party, this is apostasy, but Huckabee rose to first place in Iowa surveys and was challenging for the lead in national surveys. At this point, something like a national Republican voice weighed in. "Why have you joined the 'Bush bashers?'" asked Bob Dole, the party's 1996 nominee, in an open letter to

<sup>17</sup> The rates for Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Howard Dean were 69 percent, 82 percent, and 27 percent.

<sup>18</sup> "Shake, Rattle and Roil the Grand Ol' Coalition," David Kirkpatrick, "Week in Review," *New York Times*, December 30, 2007.

Huckabee. Rush Limbaugh, the dean of talk show conservatives, chastised Huckabee as “not anywhere near conservative,” and the Club for Growth took out Iowa ads that scored him as a tax-and-spend addict. Matt Drudge, Peggy Noonan, Robert Novak, George Will, and Phyllis Schlafly indicated opposition. Even religious leaders expressed reservations. “I think out of respect to the other members of the coalition, some evangelicals have held back because [Huckabee] is a challenge to some in the foreign policy ranks and even some fiscal conservative groups are opposed to him” said Tony Perkins, president of the Christian conservative Family Research Council.<sup>19</sup>

Most likely, these attacks -- and the further attacks that will come if needed -- will stall the Huckabee bandwagon. Still, the possibility that someone as heterodox as Huckabee might do “better than expected” in Iowa and ride a wave of momentum to nomination is a big part of the reason parties usually give their voters stronger positive guidance than the Republican party has given this year.

### CONCLUSION

The give-and-take of party coordination was easy enough to observe when it took place within the halls of a traditional party convention. Even when the major decisions were made by bosses in the legendary “smoke-filled room,” the provisions of deals often became known. Party coordination is also easy to observe in Congress, where votes are recorded and the decisions of secret party caucuses are frequently leaked to the press. Party coordination is not so easy to observe in the reformed nominating system. And not always so easy to accomplish either. But it takes place for the same reason it takes place in other venues: because the policy demanders who form the core of political parties can get more of what they want from government by working together. Scholars who, as most do, focus on candidate activities alone are missing a big part of the action. Presidential parties may not be the 800-pound gorilla that they seemed to be in the period 1980 to 2000, but they are an awfully big player.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* See also “Can Huck Hang on”? Jonathan Martin, *Politico*, December 30, 2007.

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