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Author(s): Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller
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Polls or Pols?

The Real Driving Force Behind Presidential Nominations

By Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller

Since the publication in 1971 of David Broder's influential book *The Party's Over*, pundits and scholars have written of the decline of political parties. Although observers now recognize a party "revival" of sorts in Congress, within the electorate, and in the recruitment and funding of congressional candidates, most regard presidential nominations as driven by momentum, money, and the luck of the state-by-state sequence of contests. Few analysts see signs of party influence. We hope to put another nail in the coffin of the party-decline thesis by arguing that party elites have regained a large measure of control in presidential nominations.

Polls vs. Pols

In his recent essay "Forecasting Presidential Nominations," William Mayer shows that polls taken before the start of presidential primary voting predict candidate primary vote shares extremely well from 1980 to 2000. We have collected data that show the same thing. Across all contested nominations since 1980, the final Gallup poll before the Iowa caucus explains around 90 percent of what happens in the state-by-state voting. (In technical terms, the correlation between pre-Iowa polls and delegates won in the primaries is r=.93.)

Taken at face value, this correlation seems to show that a candidate's pre-primary public support reliably determines the outcomes of presidential primaries. But our observation of nominations has led us to believe that party insiders also play a big role. To test this possibility, we developed a measure of insider support for presidential candidates by tallying all publicly reported endorsements in a broad range of publications, including local and national newspapers, political magazines and newsletters, news wires, and Internet sources. The measure covers all candidates in contested nominations from 1980 to 2000 and is based on endorsements made before the Iowa caucus.

Some of the endorsements, which averaged roughly 300 to 400 per contest, were more important than others. In 2000, for example, Michael Jordan endorsed Bill Bradley and Bill Clinton endorsed Al Gore. To capture such differences, we sorted endorsers into categories—celebrity, state legislator, incumbent president—and asked knowledgeable coders to rate the significance of people in each category. We then weighted our endorsement measures according to these judgments so that each candidate's score could be interpreted as his or her percentage share of politically important endorsements. The correlation between the share of delegates won in the primaries and the weighted endorsements is .89, which is nearly as high as that between poll share and delegate share. Moreover, a multiple regression analysis shows that polls and endorsements are almost equally important predictors of primary outcomes: each 1 percent of pre-Iowa poll share adds 0.68 percent of delegate share; each 1 percent of pre-Iowa endorsements adds 0.60 percent of delegate share.

These results, however, are ambiguous. The party insiders who make endorsements do so against a backdrop of nearly continuous polls about voter preferences. What if these endorsers simply follow these polls? They would have several incentives to do so. They might want to choose a poll frontrunner to settle on a winner as quickly as possible to avoid intra-party bloodshed. They might simply want to pick a popular candidate. Some endorsers, wishing to ingratiate themselves with the likely winner, might jump on the poll leader's bandwagon. In any of these scenarios, public support, as measured in polls, would be the real cause of primary success, and endorsements would be secondary.

But an entirely different scenario is equally tenable. Political insiders know that pre-Iowa polls may reflect little more than name recognition—and perhaps confused recognition at that. In the current cycle, supporters of John Edwards joke nervously that their candidate's poll standing may be partly due to confusion with the popular psychic from the television show "Crossing Over." One might expect, then, that party leaders, who know much more about the candidates than do rank-and-file voters, make independent judgments. They may judge that the poll leader would make a poor general election candidate or a poor president. Or they may want to back a winner, but one who is acceptable to party interests. Insider cues might directly shape the

Marty Cohen and Hans Noel are doctoral candidates and John Zaller is professor of political science at UCLA. David Karol is a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School.

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opinions of some voters or might lead to increased media coverage that in turn affects voter opinion.

Which alternative is it? Do polls drive endorsements or do endorsements drive polls? The answer is that both scenarios have some importance, but one is much more important. According to our statistical analysis, changes in either polls or endorsements at an early time lead to changes in the other at later times. But the influence is strikingly asymmetrical: endorsements influence polls about three times more than polls influence endorsements.

We regard this as a major finding. We saw earlier that pre-Iowa polls and endorsements overwhelmingly determined the outcome of the primaries, with each having roughly equal impact. Now we see that these polls and endorsements are formed in a process in which opinion polls respond to party insiders much more than party insiders respond to polls. Together, these findings imply that party insiders mainly drive the dynamics of presidential nominations.

To be sure, the support of party insiders does not guarantee success. Presidential nominations are still fought and won in the primaries. A candidate who enjoys massive insider support but campaigns poorly or runs up against a very strong opponent may fail to be nominated. Such was nearly the fate of Walter Mondale in 1984. If party establishments choose wisely, their candidates will usually prevail, but nothing in our analysis ensures this result.

Our findings also depend on the degree to which insiders agree among themselves. In almost every year, they reach a strong pre-Iowa consensus. But consensus is not inevitable. In 1988, Democrats failed to settle on a nominee ahead of Iowa, leaving it to primary voters rather than to insiders to nominate Michael Dukakis.

Nor do our findings show that party insiders make decisions independent of public opinion. Insiders are acutely sensitive to voter sentiment, as would be expected in any nomination process. They simply do not take polls as the only indicator of popular appeal.

Parties in Contemporary Presidential Nominations

We have so far called these endorsers "party insiders." But perhaps they are too loose a collection of influential individuals to be considered a real party. In what sense, indeed, are they a party, and what is the basis of their power? Furthermore, how do these party insiders go about deciding whom to support?

In his classic 1942 book, *Party Government*, E. E. Schattschneider defines parties as an organized attempt to gain control of government through elections and says that the most important activity of party members is to form a "united front" behind candidates capable of winning office. Other definitions exist, but this one is reasonable, admirably general, and widely used. And by this definition, the presidential endorsers in our study do constitute a party. Our data show that they often work for their chosen party over long periods of time, in many different contests, and in all parts of the country. As regards presidential nominations, the endorsers make strenuous efforts to form a united front and almost always succeed. For example, leaders of the religious right in the Republican party have ignored factional candidates like Pat Robertson and Gary Bauer and lined up instead behind candidates more capable of uniting the party and winning the fall election. A similar argument can be made for organized labor in the Democratic party. In these ways, the endorsers in our study are much more like a party than a collection of mere candidate enthusiasts.

> Our findings imply that party insiders mainly drive presidential nominations and that polls have secondary importance.

The support of party insiders might be unimportant if the voters who determine presidential nominations all lived in one small state. A rich or charismatic or merely skilled politician might be able, by his or her own exertions, to assemble the resources necessary to win an election in a single small state. But no individual candidate can contest 50 separate state elections in a short time without a great deal of help—the most natural source of which is the pool of people who regularly work, raise money, and campaign for a party. A few candidates—Pat Robertson in 1988 and Steve Forbes in 1996 and 2000—have been able to run campaigns without tapping into party networks. But for most candidates in most elections, the need to compete for office over a vast area makes them dependent on party regulars for help. When, as has happened in recent elections, most of these partisans mass behind one candidate, that candidate gains an important advantage over the rest of the field.

If the invisible primary is the most important phase of the nomination process, how does it work? Savvy candidates know who the party insiders are and travel the country building support among those who control the resources necessary to mount a mass campaign. As in 1960, when a minor senator from Massachusetts trounced the powerful majority leader of the Senate, standing in national politics is not a particularly important asset. What seems to matter instead are insiders' estimates of each candidate's character, skill, positions on key party issues, and electability. The 1980 election nicely illustrates these and other general features of the nomination process. In early 1979, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford topped preference polls of Republican voters, with Reagan generally ahead of Ford by a small margin. Reagan had also spent many years traveling the country and impressing local party officials with his character and vision. Hence, Reagan took a strong lead in the endorsement derby. But many Republicans, recalling the Barry Goldwater debacle of 1964, wanted someone more moderate. Ford tried to capitalize on this feeling, but insiders worried about his poor electoral performance in 1976. Hence, despite his poll standing, Ford never won significant party support and eventually decided not to enter the primaries. The next most likely moderate alternative to Reagan was Howard Baker, the Senate minority leader who had become a national icon during the

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Watergate hearings. But despite poll support hovering around 10 percent throughout 1979, Baker never attracted many endorsements. George H.W. Bush, though nearly invisible in the polls, was able to use his legendary network of personal relationships to garner endorsements, raise money, build a campaign organization, and become the principal alternative to Reagan. Briefly, during the Iowa and New Hampshire campaigns, it appeared that Bush might even beat Reagan. Meanwhile, Democrat-turned-Republican John Connally raised more early money than anyone else by tapping his personal network of Texas millionaires, but he won relatively few endorsements and, when primary voting began, little public support.

Scenarios like these have played out many times since. In every cycle, estimable national politicians present themselves to party insiders as candidates for the presidency, but most get no further. In 1988 an unusually impressive trio of power players—Paul Laxalt, Al Haig, and Donald Rumsfeld—tested the waters but failed to win enough insider support to mount a campaign. That same year, Gary Hart, the runaway early poll leader, could not win the endorsements of his peers even before the Donna Rice affair drove him from the race.

Similarly, in 1992 Jerry Brown led Bill Clinton three to one in early polls but nonetheless got trounced by the Arkansan—first in the endorsement derby and then in the primaries. Former vice president Dan Quayle might have expected to be a strong candidate for his party's nomination in 1996 or 2000. But in both contests, his efforts to secure the nomination were rebuffed by the establishment, leading him to withdraw before voters had a chance to render their verdict.

The 2000 Republican nomination is a textbook illustration of insider influence. Just two weeks after Bill Clinton was inaugurated in 1997, Ronald Brownstein wrote in the *Los Angeles Times,* "The great mentioners scoping out potential GOP candidates for the year 2000 already have their eyes on at least half a dozen governors. Everyone's list starts with Bush." Six weeks later, Brownstein added, "Almost every day, some prominent Republican calls Karl Rove, Bush's chief political strategist, offering to enlist for 2000 as soon as the governor gives the word." This clearly is the kind of insider support that makes for successful candidacies. At the same time, however, Bush was the front-runner in every poll taken. What, then, was driving his candidacy—the judgment of insiders that he would make a strong candidate or the polls? On the basis of the statistical analysis reported earlier, we can say that if Republican insiders had massed behind Elizabeth Dole or especially John McCain, Bush would probably not have won his party's nomination—or perhaps even entered the race.

But Republican insiders were unlikely to have massed behind McCain. They distrusted the Arizona maverick for many reasons, especially his support of campaign finance reforms that they believed would disadvantage the Republican party. Yet McCain could have been at least as formidable a campaigner as Bush. As already noted, party insiders are looking for someone who can win and who can be an effective leader for their party. Polls have some relevance for the former, but almost none for the latter.

Does Money Predict Presidential Nominations?

We should not end without saying a few words about the role of money in presidential nominations. As would be expected, pre-Iowa fund-raising predicts success in the primaries, but it predicts much less well than either pre-Iowa endorsements or pre-Iowa polls. Moreover, in a statistical analysis that controls for polls and endorsements, the effect of money falls to near zero—a finding that suggests that the direct power of money in presidential nominations is less than usually assumed. No insider favorite ever lacks for funds, but several important examples—John Connally in 1980, Pat Robertson in 1988, Phil Gramm in 1996, and Steve Forbes in the last two contests—attest that money alone does not go far toward a nomination. Candidates who drop out complaining about the difficulty of raising the vast sums of money needed to compete for office would be more honest if they admitted that party insiders were unwilling to support their candidacies.

How Insiders Shape Presidential Choices

Some observers may be heartened by our conclusions that presidential nominations are driven neither by polls nor by money. But should we worry, then, that party insiders are too powerful? There is some reason to do so. The party establishments that we believe largely control presidential nominations tend to be more ideologically polarized than the American electorate, and their partisan interests may further lead them to oppose policies, like campaign finance reform, that most Americans favor. But party insiders have two important attributes going for them. First, they are usually familiar with the candidate they choose to support. Sometimes they will have worked with the person in some capacity, and in most cases they will have a personal acquaintance or at least direct personal observation of the candidate in action. Such peer review has been considered vital to ensuring the character and ability of presidents ever since the time of the Founders. The second important advantage of party insiders is that they are, in Schattschneider's sense, a party. That is, they are concerned with working with one another to gain control of the government on behalf of a general program, and they are recognized as such by the majority of voters. This induces in them sensations of responsibility and accountability that are likewise vital to democratic governance.

With their ideological programs, interest group ties, and personal ambitions, party establishments are far from being the humble servants of popular sovereignty. Yet they have information and incentives that make them useful and perhaps even good servants. Their influence in presidential nominations makes for a system in which, whatever the perils of the times, voters should always have a general election choice between candidates of character and ability who differ on many issues. This is no small thing for a party system to deliver. ■

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