

Party Change and the Shifting Dynamics in Presidential Nominations: The Lessons of 2008*

Arthur Paulson

Southern Connecticut State University

Presidential nominations in recent years have been settled with increasing speed, most of the time in the early stages of the primaries and caucuses, and certainly before the national convention, which has become more of a rally. Even when the battle for the Democratic Presidential nomination continued to the end of the primary season in 2008, it was settled before the convention. Analysts have emphasized the importance of the “invisible primary” and the front-loaded delegate selection schedule in explaining the early resolution of Presidential nomination contests. However, not enough attention has been paid to a much more fundamental change in our political parties and party system: The old umbrella parties have been replaced by ideological polarization between the parties and ideological homogenization within the parties. Our new party system dates back about forty years, and features increased ideological unity and decreased factionalism, making it easier to settle nominations. Even today’s front-loaded nominating calendar would not have prevented some of the hotly contested conventions of the old umbrella parties.

Polity (2009) **41**, 312–330. doi:10.1057/pol.2009.4;

published online 11 May 2009

Keywords *parties; primaries; nominations; elections*

Arthur Paulson is Professor of Political Science at Southern Connecticut State University, where he has also served as the university Pre-Law Advisor. He is the author of *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy* and of *Realignment and Party Revival: Understanding American Electoral Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. He can be reached at paulsona1@southernct.edu

The contests for the major party Presidential nominations in 2008 were the most exciting and interesting in years. There were spirited and vigorous contests in both parties’ Presidential primaries. For the first time in eighty years, there was

*Thanks to William Crotty for his comments during the preparation of this paper, and to *Polity* for making this special issue possible.

no incumbent President or Vice President seeking the nomination of either party. The Republicans had no clear front-runner going into the primaries, and for the first time since 1972, an identifiable front-runner for the Democratic nomination was displaced and defeated. Super Tuesday on 5 February amounted to the closest approximation of a national primary yet. And, despite the fact that almost all political scientists, political journalists, political actors, and political junkies expected both nominations to be settled by Super Tuesday, the Republican contest lingered beyond that point, and the two leading Democrats battled each other all the way to the end of the primary season in June.

The one pre-nomination season expectation that was confirmed by reality in 2008 was that the contests in the delegate selection processes would determine the nominations, and that the national conventions of the parties would not matter. The fact that national conventions have become an almost useless appendage to the Presidential nominations is traced to a new nominating equilibrium that has emerged in the last four decades, commonly referred to as the “post-reform” system.¹

The “post-reform” system of Presidential nominations is aptly named, because of the importance of party reform after 1968, particularly among the Democrats, to structuring the nominating process we have today. Participatory, candidate-centered nominations, campaign finance reform, and the later development of front-loaded delegate selection calendars have all contributed to a radically different system of nominations than the one we had forty years ago.

However, the importance of reform notwithstanding, the analysis presented in this paper argues that emphasizing reform and the mechanics of delegate selection as the key factors in today’s Presidential nominations misses the point of more fundamental party change. What is of greater importance is the electoral realignment and ideological polarization between the major parties that reached critical proportions in the 1964–1972 period. Ideological polarization between the parties promoted an ideological homogenization within the parties that has decreased factionalism and increased party unity. This new ideologically polarized party system, with its ideologically homogenized parties, defines the context that has shaped post-reform Presidential nominations.

Parties and Factions in American Politics

The United States has had a two-party system almost throughout the life of the republic, although that system has been a dynamic one, going through periods of

1. See especially Barbara Norrander, “Presidential Nominations in the Post-Reform Era,” *Political Research Quarterly* 49 (1996): 875–915 and Norrander, “The End Game in Post-Reform Presidential Nominations,” *The Journal of Politics* 62 (2000): 999–1013.

fundamental change periodically. Party and electoral change has been widely illustrated using the concept of realignment, introduced by V.O. Key, and developed most notably by Walter Dean Burnham.² Realignment involves significant and persistent shifts in the electoral coalitions of our major parties, which tend to occur periodically, often resulting in new majority parties, governing coalitions, and policy agendas.³ Critical realignments have been placed in the 1830s, the 1860s, 1890s, 1930s, and more controversially, the 1960s. Whether electoral change since the 1960s is called “realignment” or not, the “sixth party system” emerged between 1964 and 1972.⁴

American political parties are best understood when examined as factional systems, rather than as rational-acting organizations. Across all alignments until the 1960s, the major parties were umbrella parties, loose coalitions among interests and factions, each spanning the ideological spectrum of American life.⁵ The Republicans, generally more conservative on economic issues, were also the party of “modern” values and more liberal on racial issues. The Democrats, more

2. See V.O. Key, “A Theory of Critical Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 17 (1955): 3–18 and Key, “Secular Realignment and the Party System,” *Journal of Politics* 23 (1959): 198–210; Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970).

3. My own analysis of electoral realignment and party change, with details and data to support the argument presented in the current paper, is presented in Arthur Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007). See also Kristi Andersen, “Generation, Partisan Shift, and Realignment: A Glance Back at the New Deal,” in *The Changing American Voter*, ed. Norman H. Nie, Sydney Verba, and John R. Petrocik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) and Andersen, *The Creation of the Democratic Majority: 1928–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Larry Bartels, “Electoral Continuity and Change, 1868–1996,” *Electoral Studies* 17 (1998): 301–26 and Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (2000): 35–50; Burnham, *Critical Elections*; Walter Dean Burnham, “Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?” in *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) and Burnham, “Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and its Implications,” in *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals*, ed. Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996); Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan and Nancy H. Zingale, *Voters, Parties and Government in American History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Everett Carl Ladd, “Shifting Party Coalitions—1932–1976,” in *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978) and Ladd with Charles Hadley, *Transformations in the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s* (New York: Norton, 1978); David G. Lawrence, *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority: Realignment, Dealignment and Electoral Change from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Gerald Pomper with Susan Lederman, *Elections in America: Control and Influence in Democratic Politics* (New York: Longman, 1980); Jeffrey Stonecash, *Parties Matter: Realignment and the Return of Partisan Voting* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2006); James L. Sundquist, *The Dynamics of the American Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983).

4. John H. Aldrich and Richard G. Niemi, “The Sixth American Party System: Electoral Change, 1972–1992,” in *Broken Contract: Changing Relationships Between Americans and Their Government*, ed. Stephen C. Craig (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

5. John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origins and Transformation of Party Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Paulson, *Electoral Realignments and the Outlook for American Democracy*.

progressive on economic issues, were also the party of “traditional” values, and on balance more conservative on racial issues, if only because of the southern white supremacist faction.⁶

The Democratic umbrella has covered a multi-factional system: the party regulars, including labor, the big city organizations, and a working class electoral base; the more middle class reformers; and the more rural, southern, and generally conservative faction.⁷ The first two factions are relatively liberal, and there was little to choose between them until they held the Presidency and emerged as a majority within the Democratic Party during the New Deal. Since then, party regulars usually have prioritized economic issues, while the reformers have focused more on the causes of emerging social movements.

The south was once, of course, the factional home of white supremacy in American politics. Southern conservatives held their power within the Democratic Party through seniority in Congress that landed them committee chairs when the Democrats were in the majority, and the two-thirds rule that gave the south an effective veto power over nominations at Democratic National Conventions. The two-thirds rule was finally replaced by majority rule at the 1936 convention, as FDR’s renomination was uncontested.

The multi-factional divisions of the Democrats are illustrated by the closest convention roll call on record, when the Democrats declined to condemn the Ku Klux Klan in 1924, and the 1948 roll call that endorsed a liberal plank on civil rights, causing the Dixiecrats to bolt and form a third party. The latter roll call on civil rights signified a significant shift of national power within the Democratic Party away from its southern and rural conservatives toward its more northern and urban liberal factions.

The Republican umbrella has covered a more bi-factional system: The relatively moderate-to-liberal Wall Street faction, with its more cosmopolitan, internationalist big business interests, and the Main Street faction, with its more conservative, small business, nationalist or isolationist interests.⁸ A somewhat more complex understanding is offered by Nicol Rae who has analyzed the Republicans as a multi-factional system: Wall Street composed of the progressives and the moderates, and Main Street composed of the stalwarts and the

6. Richard Jensen, “Party Coalitions and the Search for Modern Values,” in *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*, ed. Lipset; Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*.

7. William G. Mayer, *The Divided Democrats: Ideological Unity, Party Reform and Presidential Elections* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Paulson, *Electoral Realignment*; Nicol Rae, *Southern Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

8. Wall Street and Main Street terminology drawn from Nelson Polsby, “Coalition and Faction in American Politics: An Institutional View,” in *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*, ed. Lipset.

fundamentalists.⁹ While a majority of Republicans in Congress came from Main Street, the Wall Street faction delivered Presidential nominations for a generation after 1940 to Wendell L. Willkie, Thomas E. Dewey and Dwight D. Eisenhower, defeating Mr. Republican, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, three times. The Republican Party was the party of Lincoln, until the Goldwater revolt of 1964.

Electoral Realignment and Party Change

Electoral realignment has always been associated with the birth of a new political party (the Democrats in the 1830s and the Republicans in the 1850s) or a decisive shift in factional power within a major party (the nominations by the Democrats of William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and Alfred E. Smith in 1928). What makes the 1964–1972 period unique is that for the first time in American history, there were decisive factional shifts within both major parties almost simultaneously, with an enduring impact on the party system.

The sixth party system emerged in three stages: First, *liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans became the dominant factions in their parties*. Second, *party change between 1964 and 1972 was accompanied by electoral realignment in Presidential elections*. Third, *the 1964–1972 realignment in Presidential elections was followed by a period of frequently divided government, until realignment in Congressional elections reached critical proportions in the 1990s*. I will examine each stage in its turn.

In the first stage, *liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans became the dominant factions in their parties*: In an ideologically polarized party system, the parties have become ideologically homogenized internally.¹⁰ The shift of factional power was more gradual in the Democratic Party, more sudden for the Republicans.

Democrats: The liberals became a national majority among Democrats in the New Deal period, and asserted their power with the party's endorsement of civil rights reform in 1948. Once they became a majority within the party, liberal Democrats began to encounter a collective action problem. In 1968, liberal Democrats were deeply split among themselves over the Vietnam War, party regulars generally supporting the Johnson administration, and reform liberals

9. Nicol Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Rae, "Party Factionalism, 1946–1996," in *Partisan Approaches to Postwar American Politics*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (New York: Chatham House, 1998).

10. See Paulson, *Electoral Realignment* and Arthur Paulson, "The Invisible Primary Becomes Visible: The Importance of the Start to the Finish in the 2008 Presidential Nominations," in *Winning the Presidency 2008*, ed. William Crotty (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, forthcoming), for details and data for this analysis.

generally opposing the war. The commitment the party made to reform in 1968 reflected an effort to heal the divisiveness of that year's national convention.

In 1972, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, an anti-war liberal Democrat, defeated Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, a more moderate liberal, and Governor George Wallace of Alabama, a segregationist, for the nomination. Since 1972, liberal Democrats have generally retained their advantage in national nominating contests. Contested Presidential nominations have been won by moderate Democrats under two conditions: When the liberal Democrats failed to unite on a candidate (1976 and 1992), or when a moderate Democrat was an incumbent President (Jimmy Carter in 1980) or an heir apparent (Al Gore in 2000).

The infusion of African-Americans into the southern Democratic electorate, facilitated by the Twenty-fourth Amendment to the Constitution and the Voting Rights Act, has changed the national Democratic Party. While southern moderate Democrats like Carter, Clinton, and Gore have been instrumental in moving the Democratic Party back toward the ideological center in recent years, their emergence has nonetheless played a major role in the ideological polarization between and ideological homogenization within the parties. Their victories have eliminated the old "white supremacy" faction of the Democratic Party. Even in the south today, the Democratic Party is the more liberal of the two major parties. Today, voters who once would have supported George Wallace are practicing Republicans, no longer a factor in Democratic primaries.

Republicans: In 1964, conservative Republicans seized control of their party with the nomination of Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona for the Presidency. Since 1964, conservative Republicans have dominated Presidential nominations, except in 1976, when President Gerald Ford, an incumbent only because of the Watergate scandal, narrowly held off a vigorous challenge from Ronald Reagan.

It is instructive to compare the Presidential nomination endgames of 1964 and 1980 in the Republican Party. In 1964, moderate-to-liberal Republicans, who had supported Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York or Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania, resisted Goldwater right up to the convention balloting, even though the nomination was decided, and many refused to support him even after that. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan appeared to have clinched the nomination, George Bush withdrew before the end of the primaries, and the moderate Republicans who had supported Bush united behind Reagan. When Representative John B. Anderson of Illinois ran for President as an Independent, many of the more liberal Republicans who supported him drifted away from their party for good, only adding to the ideological homogenization of the GOP.

Since the nomination and election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, Republican Presidential primaries have become contests among conservatives and moderate conservatives. By 1988, there was little evidence of ideological factionalism in the

distribution of the vote in Republican primaries. In 2000, Governor George W. Bush of Texas inherited the coalition, which had supported Goldwater and Reagan to defeat Senator John McCain of Arizona for the Republican Presidential nomination.

Ideological homogenization within the parties is demonstrated in exit poll data from Presidential primaries analyzed by William G. Mayer.¹¹ Mayer assembled weighted averages from the exit polls during the “competitive phase” of nomination contests, and his data illustrate that while ideology remained an important factor in 1976 and 1980, it declined noticeably thereafter. According to Mayer, only the vote for “minor” candidates has been shaped by ideology. As Barbara Norrander puts it, these minor candidates are “agenda-seekers” who are motivated by issues and ideology, more than by ambition for office.¹² For the major candidates, called “office seekers” by Norrander, ideology is less of a factor in their electoral base in the primaries. The vote in the Republican primaries had an ideological slant in 2000 and 2008. In both years, Senator John McCain of Arizona carried the support of moderates and liberals while trailing among conservatives in the primaries. Even so, in voting for McCain, those who called themselves “moderate” or “liberal” were voting for a conservative. Analysis of state level aggregate data supports the conclusion that ideological polarization has been replaced by ideological homogenization in Presidential primaries since 1980.¹³

In the second phase, *party change between 1964 and 1972 was accompanied by electoral realignment in Presidential elections*. Rather than the sort of “surge” realignment in which a relatively uniform shift in the electorate results in a new majority party, the 1964–1972 period was the critical moment in an “interactive” realignment in which decisive minorities in each party coalition shifted toward the opposing party, with an enduring impact on party alignments.¹⁴

Today’s electoral map is virtually a mirror image of the map as it appeared before the 1960s, the reversal of the historic political geography of Presidential

11. William G. Mayer, “Voting in Presidential Primaries” in *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2008*, ed. Mayer (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

12. Norrander, “The End Game in Post-Reform Presidential Nominations.”

13. My own state-level analysis of Presidential primaries is found in Paulson, *Electoral Realignment*, Chapters 3–4, and Paulson, “The Invisible Primary Becomes Visible,” in *Winning the Presidency 2008*. The remarkable stability of state behavior in Presidential primaries and at national conventions has been demonstrated in the literature. See, for example, Larry Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Anne Costain, “Changes in the Role of Ideology in American Nominating Conventions Among Party Identifiers,” *Western Political Quarterly* 33 (1980): 73–86; Charles D. Hadley and Harold W. Stanley, “Super Tuesday 1988: Regional Results and National Implications,” *Publius* 19 (1989): 19–37; Frank Munger and James Blackhurst, “Factionalism in National Conventions, 1940–1964: An Analysis of Ideological Consistency in State Delegation Voting,” *Journal of American Politics* 27 (1965): 375–94; David Nice, “Ideological Stability and Change at Presidential Nominating Conventions,” *Journal of Politics* 42 (1980): 847–53.

14. Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale, *Partisan Realignment*.

elections.¹⁵ The blue states, today's most Democratic, were once generally the most Republican, particularly in the northeast. The red states, today's most Republican, were once generally the most Democratic, particularly in the south. Rhodes Cook has referred to the current alignment of Republican states in the south and interior west as the "Republican L."¹⁶ When William Jennings Bryan, Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt were running for President, these states formed a "Democratic L." The historic partisan alignment of states began to become unhinged with the Dixiecrat revolt in the Presidential election of 1948, followed by a secular realignment, reaching critical proportions after Goldwater won the Republican Presidential nomination in 1964.

The decisive electoral change was among white southerners, who moved from their historic home in the Democratic coalition toward the Republicans. Since 1968, Republicans have won seven out of eleven Presidential elections, carrying the south in all seven, and placing Richard M. Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush in the White House.

In the third phase, the 1964–1972 realignment in Presidential elections was followed by a period of frequently divided government, until realignment in Congressional elections reached critical proportions in the 1990s. Democrats retained their majorities in Congress for more than two decades after 1972, prompting many observers to note party decay and dealignment.¹⁷ But divided government turned out to be more the result of split tickets cast disproportionately in

15. J. Clark Archer, Fred M. Shelly, Peter J. Taylor, and Ellen R. White, "The Political Geography of U.S. Presidential Elections," *Scientific American* 259 (1988): 44–51; J. Clark Archer, Fred M. Shelly, Fiona M. Davidson and Stanley D. Brunn, *Political Geography of the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996); Burnham, *Critical Elections*; William G. Mayer, George Rabinowitz, and Stuart Elaine MacDonald, "The Power of the States in U.S. Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 65–87; Harvey L. Schantz, "Sectionalism in Presidential Elections," in *American Presidential Elections: Process, Policy and Political Change*, ed. Schantz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Sundquist, *The Dynamics of the American Party System*; Gerald C. Wright, Robert S. Erickson, and John P. McGiver, "Measuring State Partisanship and Ideology With Survey Data," *Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 469–89.

16. Rhodes Cook, "Dole's Job: To Convince His Own Party," *Congressional Quarterly Guide to the 1996 Republican National Convention* (August 3, 1996), 7–11.

17. David Broder, "Introduction," in *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*; William J. Crotty, *American Parties in Decline*, 2nd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1984); Walter DeVries and V. Lance Terrance, *The Ticket Splitter: A New Force in American Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1972); Gary C. Jacobson, *The Electoral Origins of Divided Government: Competition in U.S. House Elections, 1946–1988* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Everett Carl Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate: Electoral Dealignment and the Presidential Election of 1980," *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (1981): 1–25 and Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of "Realignment" for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics," in *The End of Realignment?* ed. Shafer, Joel H. Silbey, "Beyond Realignment and Realignment Theory," in *The End of Realignment?* ed. Shafer; Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). David Mayhew, unlike dealignment and party decay theorists, argues eloquently that realignment never has been a useful concept. See Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). My critique of his critique appears in Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, Chapter 1.

the south, where Republicans were carrying states and districts for President, and conservative Democrats were winning re-election to the House and Senate, in what James Q. Wilson called “realignment at the top, dealignment at the bottom.”¹⁸ Over time, however, as southern conservative Democrats retired, or switched parties, or lost primaries, many of their states and districts became as Republican in Congressional elections as they had already become in Presidential elections.¹⁹ In 1994, Republicans won control of the House and Senate, including majorities across the south, and national electoral coalitions of states and voters looked very similar in Presidential and Congressional elections.²⁰ These electoral coalitions have remained relatively stable ever since. This process of electoral change has been alternatively called, “critical realignment at the top, secular realignment at the bottom,” or, “staggered realignment.”²¹

Ideological polarization between the parties in Congress increased slowly after 1980, and became pronounced after the 1994 election. Since the New Deal, the voting records of southern conservative Democrats had been clearly distinguishable from northern Democrats, particularly when civil rights was at the top of the Congressional and public agenda. Scattered Republicans in Congress tended to vote on the liberal side of issues. But after 1994, party line voting became the rule.²²

Ideological polarization between the parties and staggered realignment has resulted in a new swing vote in the electorate. For about a generation after the realignment of 1964–1972, the swing voters were mostly conservative Democrats who usually voted Republican for President and Democratic for Congress, and occasionally for a southern Democrat for President. Now, with these voters mostly Republican, the swing voter is more genuinely independent and moderate. This leaves behind party electorates in the primaries that are more ideological: conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats.

The Dynamics of Post-Reform Presidential Nominations

The basic scheme for today’s Presidential nominations can be traced to the party reforms and campaign finance reform that came about initially between

18. James Q. Wilson, “Realignment at the Top, Dealignment at the Bottom,” in *The American Elections of 1984*, ed. Austin Ranney (Durham, NC: American Enterprise Institute/Duke University Press, 1985).

19. Paulson, *Electoral Realignment and the Outlook for American Democracy*, Chapter 5.

20. Burnham, “Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and its Implications”; Clyde Wilcox, *The Latest American Revolution? The 1994 Elections and Their Implications for Governance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

21. See, respectively, Paulson, *Electoral Realignment*, Chapter 5, and James E. Campbell, “Party Systems and Realignments in the United States,” *Social Science History* 30 (2006): 359–86.

22. In 1999, *Congressional Quarterly* stopped publishing its scoring of the “conservative coalition” in Congress, roll calls on which majorities of Republicans and southern Democrats voted against a majority of northern Democrats, because that sort of vote no longer occurred often enough to be statistically useful. See “Influential Since the 1940s, the Conservative Coalition Limpers Into History,” *CQ Almanac 1998* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1999): B9–B11.

1968 and 1974, almost simultaneously with the critical turning point in electoral change. The early party reforms were a product of conflict among the Democrats, as a divided Democratic National Convention in 1968 agreed to establish what would become the McGovern-Fraser Commission. The commission produced reforms requiring participatory delegate selection processes, resulting in a proliferation of Presidential primaries and candidate-centered caucuses and conventions. Reform was contagious, promoting state law that would influence the nomination processes of both parties.

Comprehensive campaign finance reform followed the Watergate scandal. Its centerpiece was federal matching funds, requiring Presidential campaigns to begin operation as corporate structures well in advance of the Presidential election year.

Although party and campaign finance reform have changed the politics of Presidential nominations, not all the changes have been intended by the reformers.²³ The nomination campaign today, for example, starts sooner, and ends faster, than was the case with pre-reform Presidential nominations, a fact that fueled the reasonable expectation that the 2008 nominations would be settled quickly. Consider the following:

1. *Campaign finance reform, designed to create a more equal playing field in Presidential nomination contests, has in practice promoted an earlier start to campaigns (now known as the “invisible primary”) and advanced the fortunes of front-runners.* Campaign finance reform created the Federal Election Commission and federal matching funds for candidates who raised sufficient funds from enough donors in enough states. Even before case law altered the rules, it was the candidates who could raise money who would get more money. Then, *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) rendered federal matching funds voluntary.²⁴ Candidates who accepted federal matching funds had to follow the fund raising limits of campaign finance law, but candidates who chose to eschew federal matching funds could avoid spending limits. Furthermore, in *Buckley v. Valeo*, the Supreme Court of the United States also ruled that no limits on political spending could be placed on candidates spending their own money, or on supporters spending money independently, leading to the growth of what we now know as “soft money.” At first, the impact of *Buckley v. Valeo* seemed limited. But in 2004, Howard Dean enjoyed such success raising money on the internet that he

23. William Crotty, *Party Reform* (New York: Longman, 1983); William Crotty and John S. Jackson III, *The Politics of Presidential Selection* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985); Michael G. Hagen and William G. Mayer, “The Modern Politics of Presidential Selection,” in *In Pursuit of the White House 2000: How We Choose Our Presidential Nominees*, ed. William G. Mayer (New York: Longman, 2000); Nelson Polsby, *The Consequences of Party Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischief of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

24. *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) 424 U.S. 1.

decided not to accept federal matching funds in his bid for the Democratic Presidential nomination, and Senator John F. Kerry of Massachusetts soon followed suit. In 2008, declining federal matching funds became general practice among the front-runners for both Presidential nominations.

2. *The invisible primary effectively shapes and limits the field of candidates for Presidential nominations.* Between the mid-term Congressional elections and the start of the voting during the Presidential election year, prospective candidates for Presidential nominations set up exploratory committees, raise money, seek endorsements, and try to establish their standing in public opinion polls.²⁵

Conceptualized by Arthur Hadley, the “invisible primary” is, in a way, nothing new.²⁶ Going back to the advent of scientific public opinion polling in 1936, early front-runners have won Presidential nominations more often than not.²⁷ What is new is that the post-reform invisible primary is, like the nomination contest itself, more candidate-centered, and, because of campaign finance reform, more visible.

The pattern of the early front-runner winning nominations has been illustrated in a model for forecasting Presidential nominations developed by William Mayer. His model is a simple one, based on two variables: standing in the public opinion polls before the voting starts in Iowa and New Hampshire, and standing in fundraising. For the period of 1980–2000, each variable works brilliantly, predicting outcomes accurately in nine out of ten contested nominations. The winner of every contested nomination between 1980 and 2000 led in either polls or fund raising, and all seven candidates who led according to both measures at the end of the invisible primary went on to win his party’s contested nomination: Democrats Jimmy Carter in 1980, Walter Mondale in 1984, and Albert Gore in 2000; and Republicans George Bush in 1988 and 1992, Robert Dole in 1996, and George W. Bush in 2000.²⁸ Mayer’s model did not successfully forecast the nominations of 2004 and 2008, but while the invisible primary is not necessarily decisive, it sets the field of candidates for the contest that follows. Prior to reform, the primaries winnowed the field, and the convention settled the nomination. Now, the invisible primary does the winnowing, and the actual voting in the primaries and caucuses decides the nomination.

25. Emmett H. Buell, “The Invisible Primary,” in *In Pursuit of the White House: How We Choose Our Presidential Nominees*, ed. William G. Mayer (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996); Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “The Invisible Primary in Presidential Nominations, 1980–2004,” in *The Making of the Presidential Candidates*, ed. Mayer; Mayer, “Forecasting Presidential Nominations,” in *In Pursuit of the White House*, ed. Mayer.

26. Arthur T. Hadley, *The Invisible Primary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

27. William R. Keech and Donald R. Matthews, *The Party’s Choice* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1977).

28. Mayer, “Forecasting Presidential Nominations”; William G. Mayer, “Forecasting Presidential Nominations, or, My Model Worked Just Fine, Thank You,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36 (2003): 153–57.

Larry Bartels has classified three types of Presidential nomination campaigns, defined by different sorts of candidate fields.²⁹ Regardless of the field, which the invisible primary plays such an important role in shaping, the early front-runner is the likely nominee.

First, the nomination campaign may feature a crowded field, which describes the Democratic contests of 1976, 1988, 1992, and 2004 and the Republican contest of 2008. Democrats Jimmy Carter in 1976, Michael Dukakis in 1988, Bill Clinton in 1992, and John Kerry in 2004 and Republican John McCain in 2008 all emerged out of crowded fields to assume the mantle as front-runner in the early primaries. All won the nomination.

Second, there is the front-runner against the field, increasingly common since 1980. Republicans Ronald Reagan in 1980, George Bush in 1988, Robert Dole in 1996 and George W. Bush in 2000, and Democrats Walter Mondale in 1984 and Albert Gore in 2000 were all front-runners against the field, and all won the nomination. All but Gore suffered at least one early defeat in the primaries and caucuses, but all recovered to clinch the nomination in advance of the convention. Hillary Clinton expected to win the nomination as a front-runner against the field in 2008.

Finally, there is the one-on-one race between two leading candidates. Republicans Ford versus Reagan in 1976 and Democrats Carter versus Kennedy in 1980 were the most recent examples of such contests until the Clinton versus Obama race turned into a one-on-one contest in 2008. The one-on-one race is most likely to produce a long contest for the nomination, as it did for the Democrats in 2008.

3. *The front-loading of the delegate selection schedule has worked to the advantage of the front-runner.* Front-loading has been an increasingly important characteristic of post-reform Presidential primaries and nominations, particularly over the last two decades.³⁰ Since 1988, when front-loading first became pronounced, every Presidential nomination in both parties has been effectively settled well in advance of the end of the primaries, except for the Democratic contest between Clinton and Obama in 2008.

While front-loading does not by itself explain why early front-runners win nominations so frequently, it certainly works to their advantage. When upsets occur in early primaries and caucuses, as they often do, the upset winner seldom has the time in the front-loaded schedule to raise the money necessary for the

29. Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice*, 166–71.

30. Hagen and Mayer, "The Modern Politics of Presidential Selection"; William G. Mayer, "The Presidential Nominations," in *The Election of 1996*, ed. Gerald Pomper (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1997); Mayer, "The Presidential Nominations," in *The Election of 2000*, ed. Gerald Pomper (New York: Chatham House, 2001); William G. Mayer and Andrew E. Busch, *The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004).

numerous contests soon to follow. The front-runner, with advantages in finance, is able to outlast the opposition and secure the nomination.

4. *Presidential primaries decide Presidential nominations; national conventions ratify them.* The national convention is no longer a nominating convention. It has become an appendage to the nomination campaign. As noted above, primaries once did the winnowing; national conventions did the nominating. Prior to reform, victory in the primaries did not guarantee Presidential nominations. Republicans Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 and Thomas E. Dewey in 1940, and Democrat Estes Kefauver in 1952, all came out of the primaries as front-runners, only to lose at the convention. But defeats in the primaries served to eliminate candidates, particularly insurgents with little support in the party establishment, such as Wendell Willkie in 1944 and Harold Stassen in 1948. As late as 1960, John F. Kennedy was entering and winning primaries to persuade party leaders to nominate him at the convention. As late as 1968, Hubert H. Humphrey was winning the Democratic Presidential nomination at the convention without entering any primaries. Since reform, only the Democratic conventions of 1972 and 1980 and the Republican convention of 1976 faced lingering contests for Presidential nominations. But since 1980, no convention has served anything but a pro forma nominating function.

5. *Ideological polarization between the parties, and ideological homogenization within the parties have as much or more to do with outcomes in the post-reform nominating system as reform.* Ideological change has altered the national nominating equilibrium in both parties. The early settlement of Presidential nominations in the post-reform era (even the Democratic nomination of 2008, in historical perspective) would not be the rule if we still had the Democratic Party of 1924, 1948, 1968, 1972 or 1980, or the Republican Party of 1912, 1952, 1964, or 1976. In those cases, rules, platforms, and nominations were vigorously contested between ideologically opposed factions all the way to the convention, even when the nomination had been effectively decided in the primaries. In some cases, party unity was never achieved, even after the convention. If the same ideological factionalism existed within parties today, it would not matter how early the delegates were selected, or even that the nomination had been clinched. We would still have floor fights at the convention.

Now, with more ideologically cohesive parties, contests may be vigorous, but they are resolved before the convention, and party unity follows more predictably. The delegate count and campaign finance may decide the timing of the withdrawal of the runner up, but the runner up invariably withdraws before the convention. The ideological differences among candidates for the nomination of either party are simply no longer that pronounced, and the factional lines within parties are much more fluid. The Democrats are America's liberal party, and the Republicans are America's conservative party.

The 2008 Presidential Nominations

The Presidential primaries and caucuses provided surprises for both parties, particularly for the Democrats. In neither party did the invisible primary produce a front-runner who went on to the nomination. A Republican front-runner was determined by Super Tuesday, and while the GOP contest lingered, the nomination was settled before too long. The Democrats, however, found their early front-runner displaced, and their party locked in a marathon series of primaries and caucuses between two evenly matched candidates who battled all the way to the end of the primary season.³¹

The Republicans

“Democrats fall in love, Republicans fall in line.”³² That generalization about the Republicans was true going back to 1988, until 2008. As the 2008 invisible primary ended, the Republicans still had no one to fall in line behind.

Usually the administration in the White House produces an heir apparent, like Vice President Nixon in the Eisenhower administration, or Vice President Bush in the Reagan administration, or Vice President Gore in the Clinton administration. But President George W. Bush and his administration were so unpopular as 2008 approached that there was no heir apparent, least of all Vice President Richard Cheney, who at sixty-seven, was in questionable health, and even more unpopular than the President. The result was that no President or Vice President was a candidate for the first time since 1928.

Campaign finance and the invisible primary. The invisible primary did not produce a prohibitive front-runner. The leading single reason for that was that conservative Republicans never united on a candidate, during the invisible primary or thereafter.

If Republicans were to fall in line behind the candidate who was waiting his turn, as they did with Vice President Bush in 1988 and Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole in 1996, it would have been Senator John McCain of Arizona, who had run for President in 2000, and retained a national following. But McCain was a maverick who was never popular with the Bush administration or its supporters around the country. There were still scars from the bitter primary fights between George W. Bush and McCain in 2000, and McCain had cooperated with Democrats on too many issues (i.e., campaign finance reform and immigration) to be trusted. Even so, he was a loyalist on the Iraq War, and was gaining traction

31. See Paulson, “The Invisible Primary becomes Visible,” in *Winning the Presidency 2008*, ed. Crotty, for data and detailed analysis of the 2008 Presidential primaries.

32. This reference was heard frequently in the media covering the 2008 campaign, particularly from the late Tim Russert on NBC.

with the party establishment until the popularity of the war, the administration, and by association McCain, dropped around the 2006 mid-term elections. McCain's nomination would require a real revival of his campaign from somewhere. By the end of the invisible primary, there were only hints that such a revival may, indeed, be brewing.

The front-runner in opinion polls at the close of the invisible primary was former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York, a moderate Republican who was not popular with conservatives because of his relatively liberal record on social issues, particularly his pro-choice position on abortion. Some GOP conservatives, however, were willing to accept him, so long as he maintained his lead among Republicans in the polls and appeared to be the best candidate to beat the Democrats in the general election. Giuliani even got as far as winning the endorsement of Pat Robertson, whose 1988 campaign did so much to infiltrate Christian conservatives into Republican organizations across the country. But Giuliani made two major strategic blunders at the start that ultimately proved fatal to his candidacy. First, he skipped New Hampshire, and put off battle until Florida, when it was too late. Second, Giuliani gambled too much on making an appeal to conservatives, rather than distinguishing himself as a moderate Republican in a crowded field of conservatives. These tactics opened the door for McCain to win the New Hampshire primary and emerge with the moderate Republican banner.

Although Giuliani raised more money in net contributions, the front-runner in the money game at the end of 2007 was former Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, if only because Romney's own loans to his campaign made the difference. Romney was making a pitch for the support of conservatives by taking conservative positions on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. But the fact that these positions represented relatively recent conversions by Romney, plus the problem his Mormonism posed for evangelical Christians, made conservatives reluctant about Romney. To be nominated, he would have to unite conservative Republicans in the early primaries. He never did.

The emergence of former Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas as a serious contender illustrates the hunger of conservative Republicans in their search for a candidate. Despite his limited supply of money, Huckabee was personally appealing and had superior organization on the ground. He bested Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas and other ultraconservatives in the invisible primary, and won the Iowa caucuses to earn his way into the early primaries, where he outlasted Fred Thompson. But by the time Romney was eliminated after Super Tuesday, it was too late for Huckabee to threaten McCain seriously.

The front-loaded primaries produce a front-runner. Historically, contests in Republican Presidential primaries have usually narrowed to two candidates (such as Eisenhower and Taft, or Goldwater and Rockefeller, or Ford and

Reagan), but Nicol Rae's multi-factional analysis of the GOP seems a better fit to the field that made it through to the primaries in 2008. The crowded field, with conservative Republicans divided, is the main reason why McCain won the nomination.

Applying Rae's analysis: In the primaries, the "stalwarts" for the most part chose Romney, while Huckabee won the "fundamentalists." McCain had the united support of the "moderates" and "progressives" against the divided conservative Republicans, and won a national victory on Super Tuesday. With McCain established as the front-runner, Romney withdrew almost immediately. Huckabee persisted as an "agenda-seeker," withdrawing after McCain won the Texas primary on March 4.

Ideological homogenization of the GOP. The ideological homogenization of the Republican Party is illustrated by the fact that all of the GOP candidates repeatedly advertised themselves in the debates as the latest embodiment of Ronald Reagan. Even after McCain had clinched the nomination, there was unrest about him among conservative Republicans. However, despite any doubts, they lined up. President Bush endorsed McCain in a Rose Garden ceremony at the White House, the acrimony of their battles eight years before apparently forgiven.

Moreover, John McCain is not Nelson Rockefeller. Although John McCain may not be a conservative Republican, he is a conservative and a Republican. By uniting the minority faction of his party against a divided majority, John McCain won the Presidential nomination of America's conservative party.

The Democrats

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York was the early front-runner for the Democratic Presidential nomination, leading in both public opinion polls and fund raising.³³ She was hoping to clinch the nomination early with the support of party regulars. But her lead was hardly unassailable, and the long race between her and Senator Barack Obama of Illinois should have not have come as a surprise.

Campaign finance and the invisible primary. The invisible primary winnowed the field much more effectively for the Democrats than for the Republicans prior to the 2008 primaries and caucuses, yet still did not settle the Democratic Presidential nomination. Clinton and Obama gained so much early support in both the polls and finances that they took the oxygen out of the atmosphere for the remainder of the Democratic field. Only former Senator John Edwards of

33. William G. Mayer, "Handicapping the 2008 Nomination Races: An Early Winter Prospectus," *The Forum* 5 (2008): 1-15.

North Carolina retained any chance of threatening either of them, and he was counting on a victory in the Iowa caucuses that did not materialize. The rest of the Democratic entrants were apparent also-rans even before the voting started. Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware and Senator Chris Dodd of Iowa withdrew after Iowa, Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico withdrew after New Hampshire, and Representative Dennis Kucinich of Ohio lingered briefly only as an “agenda-seeker.”

Clinton apparently expected to win by Super Tuesday and planned accordingly. But she was unable to clinch the nomination because Obama had more than enough money to compete on Super Tuesday and beyond. Moreover, both leading candidates were not taking federal matching funds, and Obama had not exhausted contribution limits among individuals in his network, leaving him much better positioned than Clinton to raise funds throughout the ensuing nomination contest. Finally, the results revealed that Obama was much better organized on the ground in caucus states than Clinton was.

Front-loaded primaries and the search for a front-runner. Although the invisible primary did decisive winnowing, the events of the campaign to follow shifted fortunes back and forth. When Obama won the Iowa caucuses and Clinton won the New Hampshire primary, the two-way race for the Democratic nomination was solidified. Rather than settling the nomination, the Super Tuesday primaries on 5 February set up a long, close fight for the duration of the primary season.

Ironically, while Clinton was unable to clinch the nomination when she had the early lead, Obama was able to take advantage of his lead in the delegate count, once he got it, largely because he was better positioned to take advantage of the mathematical impact of proportional representation on the Democratic race. In the many Congressional districts with only four delegates, a landslide of over 62.5 percent for Obama or Clinton was necessary to net any delegates at all. Therefore, when Obama proved better prepared for the caucuses, and focused more on small states than Clinton, he was able to build large delegate leads in small states, while Clinton was gaining only small leads in some of the larger states that she won. Once Obama assumed a national lead in the delegate count with a series of victories in primaries after Super Tuesday, he was almost impossible to stop.

Ideological homogenization, Democratic style. Ideological homogenization is almost as much a fact of life among the Democrats as it is among the Republicans. All of the Democratic candidates were liberals of one sort or another. All of the candidates were now against the Iraq War. All were for national health insurance in some form. All of them supported government action to intervene in the economy. Whatever small differences there were among the candidates, there were no wedge issues dividing Democrats, as civil rights or the Vietnam War once did.

Issues did make a difference. According to exit poll data, Democrats who prioritized opposition to the Iraq War favored Obama, while those who prioritized economic issues and health care leaned to Clinton. But the differences between the candidates and their voters were matters of degree.

The underlying ideological unity of the Democratic Party may in fact have sharpened the divide between Obama and Clinton supporters. Without clear ideological cues, the Democratic voter's choices apparently were more personal or demographic. Obama won among African-Americans and Clinton won among white women, but it wasn't that simple. Particularly after the Clintons made a pitch for the white vote in South Carolina, Obama won overwhelmingly among African-Americans, building the base for his victories across the deep south and in the Chesapeake region. Clinton generally won among Hispanics, by about 2:1, margins that contributed to her victories in California and Texas.

Among whites, there were age, class, and gender divides that seemed to replicate the 1984 race between Walter Mondale and Gary Hart. Clinton won among labor and working class voters, and older voters, contributing to her victories in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Ohio. Obama won among younger and relatively upscale voters. Additionally, consistent with previous findings about racial voting behavior, Obama seemed to win primaries and caucuses in small states by large margins when he gained the support of whites who lived in racially homogeneous areas.³⁴ The resulting coalitions of African-Americans and upscale whites for Obama against working class whites for Clinton reflected what was widely foreseen forty years ago as characteristic of a postindustrial realignment replacing the class-based voting of the New Deal era.³⁵

However, the contest for the Democratic Presidential nomination was not as divisive as it appeared. There were no deep ideological divides at the start, and once the nomination was settled, there was a common interest in uniting the party to win the general election. The credentials controversies concerning Michigan and Florida were settled dramatically, but without threatening party unity. All the Democrats needed, all along, was a nominee on whom to unite. After Obama had secured a majority of the delegates, Clinton withdrew and endorsed her opponent vigorously. Such a close race for the nomination could not have been settled without convention floor fights in the Democratic Party of 1924, 1948, 1968, or 1972. But in 2008, Barack Obama was the nominee of America's liberal party.

34. Sundquist, *The Dynamics of the American Party System*.

35. Walter Dean Burnham, "American Politics in the 1970s: Beyond Party?" in *Parties and Elections in an Anti-Party Age*, ed. Jeff Fishel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Everett Carl Ladd, "Liberalism Upside Down: The Inversion of the New Deal Order," in *The Party Symbol: Readings on Political Parties*, ed. William J. Crotty (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1980); Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Howard-McCann, 1970).

Conclusion

Ironically, the participatory system of post-reform Presidential nominations has not led to more wide-open nomination contests and conventions. On the contrary, Presidential nominations since 1980 have been marked by decreased factionalism and increased party unity. Certainly the rules make a difference. Front-loading and the advantages that front-runners enjoy have contributed to early nominations in the primaries and decline of the nominating functions of national conventions. But in 2008, the Republicans did not have an early front-runner, while the Democratic front-runner was displaced and the front-loaded calendar did not decide the Democratic nomination. Indeed, had the Republicans selected their delegates more according to the proportional representation in Democratic rules, or had the Democrats selected their delegates more by the winner-take-all method more common in Republican rules, we may have seen contested conventions in one or both parties. Nevertheless, party unity ultimately prevailed for both Republicans and Democrats. Despite some unusually vigorous primary fights, and some unexpected results, both nominations were once again settled before the convention.

This pattern of outcomes found in post-reform Presidential nominations is explained by fundamental party change that predates and extends beyond reform. Today's political parties are ideologically homogenized parties in an ideologically polarized party system. So long as this "sixth party system" persists, our parties will settle Presidential nominations, sooner rather than later, more often than not.