

## **Lessons Learned?**

### **Presidential Nominations 40 years after McGovern-Fraser**

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The 2008 presidential nomination campaign re-affirmed many existing truths and understandings about America's most truly odd electoral institution.<sup>1</sup> It did, however, challenge a few others that have arisen in what I will variously call the "reformed nomination system," the "nomination system of 1972" or the "era of the primary." Perhaps most evidently, in 2008, the candidate who appeared to be the winner of the "invisible primary" (in command of resources of all sorts when Iowa opens the actual campaign), Hilary Clinton, lost by running out of those resources due to the unusual length of her contest with Barak Obama. On the other side, the major candidate apparently faring worst in that "contest" in 2007, which is to say during it, John McCain won easily in the real campaign, almost as if he had vanquished his rivals in the invisible primary, whereas only months earlier he had appeared to be the one vanquished in the invisible primary. Secondly, qualifying for federal matching funds continued its downward spiral from its original sign in the 1970s and 1980s of high potential for victory, to becoming a signal now of a campaign in desperate straits. For a third (and perhaps most important) example, the candidate of the new generation, Barak Obama, seemed to be very successful at integrating a new set of technologies with the old to create what might well serve as the model organization for the future. All this being so,

perhaps the most impressive lesson of 2008, as we look forward to the 2012 campaign, is how truly robust this very odd “institution” for nomination is.

Observers typically seek answers to four questions about presidential nominations: Who runs? Who votes for Whom? Who wins? and, With what consequences? I use these four questions to structure my investigation. The primary objective is to remind readers that scholars have actually made a lot of scientific progress in this area, and therefore are actually able to address questions I imagine non-academics would like to see answered. And also, I consider what the open questions are and how future research might profitably be focused.

### Who Runs?

This question is a fairly settled one that, I believe, is ready for reconsideration and theoretical extension. What I have elsewhere called “the calculus of candidacy” is at least implicitly accepted as one of the most successful rational choice explanations in political science. The question was first really studied systematically by Joseph A. Schlesinger in his theory of political ambition (1966). His two major theoretical contributions were to transform the understanding of political ambition to be little more than the desire to have a long, happy, and rewarding career in politics, and to see just how profound that idea was for the proper functioning of democracy. He developed a three-part typology of political ambition – discrete, static, and progressive. Rohde transformed those ideas into a more formalized version of careerism (1979; drawing from Black, 1972), one expressed in terms of decision theory and, in particular, as expected utility

maximization. It was the close formal analogy to the expected utility maximization account of turnout that suggested the title “the calculus of candidacy.” One of Rohde’s theoretical insights was that the difference between static and progressive ambition was more contextual than intrinsic. He assumed, that is, that an ambitious politician would take higher over lower office if offered it free of cost or risk, and this appears to be a safe assumption, at least in our context, that of presidential nominations.

I applied this calculus to analyze the question of who runs for president (1980a). Abramson, Rohde, and I have used it since then to consider this question in our election book (e.g., 2009), and we once used it as a forecasting tool, predicting reasonably successfully which Senators were most likely to run for president in 1988 (in a 1987 publication). A reasonable number of implications of this model have stood the test of time under the reformed nomination system of 1972.

The first is the set of offices from which most presidential contenders emerge. The summary can be found in Table 1, taken from Abramson, et al, 2009. If anything, the offices from which candidates emerge has concentrated even more tightly on the highest of offices – president, vice president, senator, and governor. Of course, at any given time there are at most one eligible president<sup>2</sup> and a one or very small number of current or former vice presidents, but there are 50 sitting governors, 100 senators, and 435 representatives. Thus, if we consider the numbers in Table 1 as a percentage of all potential candidates from that particular office, those percentages are high for all but only the first four offices.<sup>3</sup> Candidates from the House are a much smaller percentage of that potential pool, with all other sources of candidates trailing even more.

[Table 1 about here]

Second, in 2008 as in other years, a significant number of candidates were no longer in office (former senators Edwards and Gravel on the Democratic side<sup>4</sup> and former senator Thompson, former governors Huckabee, Romney, and Thompson, and former mayor (of NYC) Guiliani on the Republican side<sup>5</sup>). This pattern fit the theory well, as the cost (and risk) of running while in office are likely to loom large, and it is easier and perhaps cheaper to run from a base of having left office without political damage than from holding that office at the time of the campaign.

There are other signs of the applicability of the calculus of candidacy in this form, as well. Some things that seemed important early on turned out to become empirically less important. For example, Abramson, et al. (1987) predicted that senators up for reelection were less likely to run in 1988, and that seemed to apply that year (and earlier and for other offices, as in Aldrich, 1980a). However, that is less true empirically today, likely because the run for the presidency is either over and lost before the campaign for the current office is seriously affected or the presidential nomination is close to or actually in hand.<sup>6</sup>

Even with slight revisions such as that noted above, there is an apparently high degree of consensus on the plausibility and utility of the calculus of candidacy. In fact, however, it is likely incorrect. Consider a second major regularity, one that Abramson et al. (e.g., 2009) regularly note. In races with an incumbent president seeking the nomination, there are very few challengers (modally zero) but in other contests there is not only a much larger field, but there is something like a typical number with fairly small variation. To quote from Abramson, et al., 2009 (page not yet known):

There have been ten such campaigns since 1980, and the number of major candidates that were in the race as the year began varied remarkably little: seven in 1980 (R), eight in 1984 (D), eight (D) and six (R) in 1988, eight in 1992 (D), eight in 1996 (R), six in 2000 (R), and nine in 2004 (D), to go along with the two eight-candidate contests in 2008. The major exception

to this regularity is that only Vice President Al Gore and former New Jersey senator Bill Bradley sought the Democratic nomination of 2000, even though many others seriously considered doing so.

The non-incumbent 1972 and 1976 cases had similar numbers of contestants. If this is a regularity rather than a series of coincidences, the only explanation I can think of for such a finding is that the number of candidates is an equilibrium solution of a game, such that the addition of extra candidates lowers the prior probabilities potential candidates employ in their thinking to too small a value to be worthwhile entering. There is no such model, but the reason it is game theoretic are that the strategies of any given potential candidate, such as whether or not to enter, is contingent on the behavior of other potential candidates. This indeed should be a generally relevant point.

How such a model should be developed is unclear, but the idea that this is the appropriate form and not a decision theoretic account seems quite evident.<sup>7</sup> That potential candidates scan the field, at least in their own party if not also on the opposition side, and consider the actual or anticipated strategies of others seem obviously appropriate. It does not immediately follow that one should jump to the game theoretic formulation.<sup>8</sup> It could be, for example, that the calculus of candidacy traces the Nash or Perfect Bayesian Nash best response strategy, through successive application of elimination of dominated strategies. That is, it may be that presidents have dominant strategies and therefore ignore the considerations of all other potential candidates. After that, potential current or former vice presidential candidates have dominant strategies, and then, after they are taken into consideration, so do senators and governors, etc.<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely that any senator or governor has a dominant strategy, but instead must consider what others, at least those in their equivalence class (that is, other senators and

governors), are doing. However, it is not yet obvious that, other than explaining the pattern of the numbers of contenders, much is to be gained from moving to a game theoretic formulation. But, then, that is just a guess.

More serious is the attenuation of variables that seemed to help predict who will run, such as the “up for reelection” case noted above. We have a good idea of the shape of the field – that it will be filled with presidents, vice presidents, senators, and governors – and the size of the field, 1 to 3 if there is a president in the field, 6 to 10 otherwise. And that tells us a lot. Mayors, Members of the House, notables not in elective office need not apply, if they want to win the nomination. Or, at least, all such are a real long shot. What is missing, instead, is to tell us which senators and governors will fill the field. For this, I believe that we need a larger model of democratic politics than a simple career maximizing design, something I will return to later.

### Who Votes for Whom?

Presidential nomination campaigns pose a relatively difficult decision making context for voters (where by “voters” I mean actual or potential participants in either a primary or caucus – or, in the case of Texas in 2008, both). We cannot round up the usual suspect variables and explain much. It is an intra- rather than inter-party contest, so party identification counts for little if not actually nothing. On occasion there are substantial differences in the issue positions of candidates, but in an increasingly polarized partisan era, they are rare and typically rather slight, offering little in the way of expected differences on anything but the unusual issue (a Poole-Rosenthal “second dimension” issue for example, such as immigration). Third, there are only a few cases in

which there are but two serious contenders, at least at the beginning of the contest, so crucial decisions have to be made in a multi-candidate context, something Americans are not otherwise accustomed to. And, finally, there are often informational asymmetries. In races that begin with two candidates, they are usually those that involve a president, and so the usual case is two candidates, one having the (dis-)advantage of being extremely well known. The one exception was Gore-Bradley in 2000, although in 1999 a good number of other candidates were seriously considering or actually running, but even in that case there was still a reasonable informational asymmetry. In the other contests, there may be one candidate reasonably well known at the outset (e.g., Reagan in 1980, Mondale in 1984, Clinton in 2008), with the other candidates being little known.

Media tend to interpret being little known as being a weak candidate, as they did in 1988 by referring to the Democratic race as featuring “Gary Hart and the Seven Dwarfs” (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1991, 11). Certainly being little known is a negative asset, but eventual presidents Carter, possibly even Reagan [1976], G.H.W. Bush [1980], Clinton [1992], G.W. Bush [2000], and Obama [2008] – that is every president, or every president but one, elected via nomination in the primary era – began as a “dwarf” in that respect. Voters may be familiar with this situation from congressional races, where there is either one massively advantaged candidate or all are, most commonly, little known (i.e., in open seat races), but we as political scientists have not chosen to model presidential primary campaigns as if they were general election contests for House seats – and with good reason. Thus, our standard repertoire of ideas, insights, and models from the study of voting in presidential general election campaigns are not particularly helpful. There are, instead, three points about our understanding of

voting in presidential primaries (focusing here on candidate choice) that help guide modeling voting behavior, to which I now turn.

First, the standard race in the reform era presents an interesting dilemma, one that has often been seized upon as criticism of the empowerment of voters under the nomination system of 1972. Voters are choosing over candidates about most or all of whom they know very little, and perhaps choosing in an asymmetric case, where one is reasonably well known, the others are not. Thus, learning and choice are happening simultaneously. And, the crucial decisions may be made before much is known about these lesser-known candidates, given the importance of Iowa, New Hampshire, etc. Presumably, candidates who are not well liked among those who do know them do not choose to run, so races with information asymmetries are also asymmetric in their chances. And, most of the “dwarf” candidates are in fact “winnowed out” (to quote George H.W. Bush [and Don Meredith]) before they get a chance to be known.

However, one of the findings we do have about such contests is that it is rare that a candidate gets an early knockout blow (as the media call it), eliminating every other contender. Rather, at least one (often exactly one) additional candidate survives to become at least reasonably well known. The Democratic contest in 2008 was, of course, an extreme version of this (mimicking the one we know about, Mondale-Hart in 1984), but even the Republican race let Huckabee become reasonably well known (starting from an unusually far remove) by the time he was eliminated. Indeed, at least with a fairly loose standard about what constitutes one who becomes a “reasonably well known candidate” (McCain and Bradley in 2000, e.g.), there is no non-presidential primary contest in which there was no real choice.

The simultaneous learning-choice decision making dilemma raises a number of very important normative issues about presidential nominations, but the practical matter that few if any races end before there is any real choice between at least two modestly well known contenders allows for a first set of empirical findings. Unfortunately, there are few races with good data.<sup>10</sup> Bartels' study of 1984 (1987, 1988) provides the key observation. There, he shows, Mondale was consistently well known, of course, and Hart was the contender who went from unknown to reasonably well known. And the crucial finding is that the race shifted from a contest in which it was a choice for or against Mondale, with Hart support being in aggregate primarily the repository of votes from those disenchanted with Mondale to a choice between Mondale and Hart, looking much like a standard two-person race such as in a presidential contest.<sup>11</sup> We don't know, of course, if that describes 2008 (either contest) particularly well, but it is the pattern to look for.

Of course, the Mondale-Hart two-person race was not quite like a general election presidential contest. As is typically the case from just about that year to now (that is, in the polarized partisan era beginning perhaps in the mid-1980s), there was little difference in where the candidates of the same party stood on issues (although a pro- and anti-Mondale vote in the early phase of the campaign might have led to Hart receiving support from those not close to Mondale on issues, even if there was no candidate representing those views). Using national opinion polls, Aldrich and Alvarez (1994) showed that the data were quite clear in demonstrating that the basis of choice was on the matching between salience of issues for the voter and emphasis of the candidates.<sup>12</sup> They concluded that, while Mondale and Hart both were seen to hold similar positions on most

issues and this corresponded with their actual campaigning, Mondale was the choice of more old-style, New Deal – Great Society types, while Hart was chosen by those more concerned with the then new issues (the environment, technological development, and the issues that were then labeled as the issues of “Atari Democrats”). This issue emphasis resonates well with the literature following Petrocik’s idea of “issue ownership” (1996), which was applied to the 2000 (Aldrich and Griffin, 2003) and 2004 nominations (Aldrich, Rickershauser and Griffin, 2005). Rickershauser and Aldrich (2007) showed experimentally that, at least early in the contest, candidates could change choices by changing the relative emphasis of issues by the candidates. This finding is similar therefore to the Hillygus and Shields (2008) account during presidential general election campaigns.

The final category of variables that seem particularly important in primary elections is perceptions of chances (the voter side of “momentum” discussed below), whether “viability” (chances of winning the nomination) or “electability” (chances of winning the general election). Primary voters are often criticized precisely for their apparent tendency to back winners (with citation to Simon, 1954). If it is because they like to support winners because they are winners, then the criticism may be well placed. If, instead, however, they are making calculations about what will serve their interests in the long run, then such criticisms are unfounded. Bartels (1987; 1988) suggests that such might be the case in his work using the 1984 campaign. More clearly, the use of the “super Tuesday” rolling cross-section by Abramson et al. (1992) to estimate models of rational choice-based sophisticated voting, suggests that “bandwagon voting” may better be understood as strategically backing candidates likely to win, particularly when they do

not stand for much different in the way of policy. The finding that there is no significant endogeneity between preferences and expectations of outcomes reinforces this claim. Still that leaves open the critical question of learning and choosing simultaneously, to say nothing of the question of whether choices made by a non-random and rather small subset of the population, such as voters (and worse, caucus attendees) in Iowa, New Hampshire, and other such early events, yields a reasonable estimate of what the national party supporters would choose, and presumably would choose if well enough informed. That leaves the question of the choice set – well informed over the long lasting candidacies? all those who choose to run? those who would have chosen to run if they could have foreseen they would eventually become well known?

There is one final concern that is much too little studied systematically. The focus in what little voting behavior research there is in primary elections focuses on policy and/or the horse race. There is surprisingly little scholarship on “candidate qualities,” what is it that makes one candidate seem like a strong leader, another one who is especially good at empathy with the public (as measured in the general election by responses to “cares about people like me”) and so on. There is good reason for this. First, the data are scanty. Second, while we have a fairly good justification of measures of candidate traits and the like, they are rarely embedded in campaign effects and thus we have little basis by which to imagine hypotheses about their development. That nominees are seen by their partisans as having high scores on such measures in the fall (and vice versa for opposition partisans) tells us too little to fashion hypotheses about how such assessments develop even for winners let alone their dynamics in intra-party competition. We can only hope the rich new data for 2008 will enable study of these questions.

## **Who Wins**

In a manner similar to the “Who Runs?” question, “Who Wins?” is a question with an apparently consensual answer. As is also true with “Who Runs?” there is a gap, in this case, a large but very clearly identifiable gap in our answer.

The new nomination system was fully in place for the first time in 1976, and the open contest on the Democratic side laid out the prominent features of the new system quite clearly.<sup>13</sup> This system was designed to empower the general public, offering it opportunities to participate more fully in the selection of delegates to the national party conventions, often even instructing them in how to vote. Our federal system yielded a sequencing of state delegate selection contests, from the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries early in the season (in January and February, that is) to the end of the delegate selection season in June, featuring primaries in California, Ohio, and New Jersey, and thus selecting, as the final event of the season, the largest set of delegates on any single date.

It was the sequencing itself that was most theoretically interesting. Among other things, it permitted a largely unknown candidate to work an early small state or two through the “retail” politics of door-to-door campaigning to achieve a surprising success that would attract media attention and, then, money, volunteers, and greater popular support. In practice, this was exactly the route Jimmy Carter followed. In more academic terms, it was this process of “momentum” that Aldrich modeled with a very simple dynamic (1980b; for empirical application, see 1980a; for discussion from which this section is largely drawn see Aldrich, 2009 and Abramson, et al., 2009). There have

been extensions and additions to this basic original model – the most important being Bartels’ extension to the study of the attitudes and behaviors of the public (1988) – but, perhaps rather surprisingly, the basic contours of the original result, at least with respect to its account of the fortunes of the presidential candidates, has not changed.

The model of momentum yielded two results. First, there are no stable equilibriums to this process, except those that have one candidate winning outright and absorbing all subsequent support. That is, the forecast outcome is that one candidate will invariably win, in the fullness of time. In practical terms, this result predicts that there will not be a contested convention. Further, the tendency to rapid concentration of the process on a single winner increases the more candidates there are, *ceteris paribus*. This, of course, was the reverse of what was originally thought and, indeed, what at the time seemed commonsensical: The greater the number of candidates, the longer it would take to reach victory. But, common sense was not a helpful guide in this case, theoretically or substantively.

There was, secondly, one exception to these pure momentum results. There was the possibility of an unstable equilibrium with two candidates locked in nearly precise balance.<sup>14</sup> But because this is unstable, any significant perturbation off equilibrium will lead to one candidate dominating and going on to win nomination, much like described above for all other cases, even if the ascension to victory would be slower than if there were many candidates.

The world offered two illustrations of two candidates in (unstable) equipoise early on, the 1976 Republican and 1980 Democratic cases.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, there was a relatively unpopular incumbent challenged by a strong contender who represented the

ideological heart of their party opposing this more moderate and less popular incumbent. In both cases, the campaigns lasted for a considerable period in this nearly even balance. In both cases, the incumbent eventually moved ahead sufficiently so that they achieved a majority of committed delegates by the end of the primary season. It had remained close enough in each case, however, that the challenger could imagine upsetting that majority through a rules change at their respective conventions. In both cases, these hopes were (unsurprisingly) dashed – dashed because the incumbent actually had majority support and the rules changes, no matter how otherwise desirable in the abstract, were evidently and obviously ploys to try to shake loose part of the incumbent’s majority support. The two important points for here are, first, that the case of two well known candidates going head-to-head appeared to be a rare anomaly not often repeated. Even more importantly, the theoretically interesting point is that the model does support the possibility of this unstable balance lasting for a sustained period.

The existence of an unpopular moderate incumbent challenged by a popular senior leader in the party who stood as the embodiment of the party’s beliefs is sufficiently rare empirical circumstance that there has never been a comparable case since then, nor does it seem likely that those circumstances will reappear in the foreseeable future. It turns out, however, that there is a second empirical route to a two-candidate, unstable equilibrium campaign, a route that has now also appeared twice. As with the first pair of cases, these two cases are also surprisingly similar to each other. In both the 1984 Democratic and 2008 Democratic cases, the campaigns began with a large number of candidates, none of whom were an incumbent president or even vice president. There was a strong, well financed, well known, well organized candidate who, it turned out,

was challenged strongly by a heretofore little known (to the public) candidate who offered a new direction for the party. The path was that a multi-candidate contest quickly reduced to just two candidates, with the little known challenger having surprised (and even passed) the well known and financed candidate. The latter, however, remained very closely competitive and, with great resources, retained sufficient resiliency to be locked in an even balance, when all others had dropped by the wayside. This rapid narrowing of the many to the few was, of course, the prediction. That every once in a while, that narrowing ends with two candidates nearly tied for the lead instead of one candidate being ahead is obviously possible, if not likely to be common. In any event, rather early on, occasionally we should expect the campaign to reduce to a two-candidate, balanced contest – balanced in unstable equilibrium.

There are good reasons to imagine two candidates emerging in competitive balance and that this would occur among Democrats in 1984 or thereafter. One of these good reasons is the coming of the superdelegates. This is a feature of these two contests that was not included in the formal accounting, because they did not yet then exist (see Price, 1984, for an account of how they came to be). If in addition to two candidates emerging from a larger pack to be in uncertain equipoise, there is a large block of uncommitted party elites available to woo, we can easily imagine the existence of a competitive opportunity for candidates that goes beyond a primary-season selection of delegates bound as the public chose them in nearly even proportions.

In the more usual case of momentum yielding one leader (who is therefore the soon-to-be-winner) the emergence of frontloading, the movement of primaries and caucuses to earlier in the primary season, has not changed the application of the model.<sup>16</sup>

Frontloading does, however, provide changes in supporting observations, especially in accelerating the already rapid dynamics of multi-candidate contests.

In Figure 1 are reported the number of candidates running for nomination in races in which there was no incumbent president seeking nomination, using the data in the various Abramson, et al. Change and Continuity books. Only two candidates contested in the 1976 Republican and three in the 1980 Democratic contests, and, using the usual coding conventions, these were the only two races in which incumbents were challenged in their own party. In Figure 1 one can see that there is no particular trend observable in the number of candidates contesting in the absence of an incumbent. Indeed, if we make an exception of the 1976 Democratic case as an anomaly of learning about the nature of the system, then only the 2000 Democratic case stands out at all from the others. In that year, there were a large number of candidates who had entered but dropped out before January 1, leaving only Gore and Bradley. Had we used a date in 1999, a more typical number of Democrats would have contested.

[Figure 1 about here]

Frontloading has had a number of effects. Frontloading really began in earnest in 1988, when a number of southern states agreed to coordinate their primaries to early in the calendar, two weeks after the first primary (South Carolina chose to move theirs to the Saturday before the other southern state primaries). This day, eventually joined by other states was the first to be called “Super Tuesday” for having so many delegates chosen on the same day (see Norrander, 1992). But 2008 generated even more frontloading. In Figure 2 is reported the cumulative percentage of delegates chosen by the number of weeks elapsed since the Iowa caucuses opened the season, in 1976 and in

2008. The ability of Carter to use “retail” politics for weeks in 1976, as he built his name recognition, financial base, and organizational capacity is clear, and it is clearly absent in 2008.

[Figure 2 about here]

We can put these two observations together to help us understand the data in Figure 3. In Figure 3 we report the length of all campaigns, measured as the number of weeks between the New Hampshire primary and the end of the campaign. We use the date from Abramson, et al., on which they find the nomination was effectively won by the eventual nominee (as conceded by the last remaining major candidates and as reported widely in the media). The standard campaign until 1988 was that campaign lasted until the end of primary season, in part because so many delegates remained to be selected. Beginning with 1988, on the Republican side, and extending with no exceptions until this year’s Democratic contest, the campaigns have ended relatively shortly after New Hampshire.

[Figure 3 about here]

George H.W. Bush had all but won nomination by Super Tuesday. Three Democrats, Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, and Jesse Jackson essentially divided the Super Tuesday events, however, with one winning the most states, another won the most delegates, and the third secured the most votes. Dukakis broke this deadlock by defeating his opponents in New York shortly thereafter, leading Gore to concede defeat. Jackson, however, continued his campaign through the convention, even though Dukakis amassed a clear majority of the delegates. In part he was able to do so because of the proportional allocation of delegates on the Democratic side, slowing the accumulation

process for Dukakis. More importantly, Jackson was raising issues and attracting attention to his causes, rather than running exclusively to try to win a simple majority of delegates, a strategy that benefitted from continuation of campaigning, even after all hope of victory was dashed.

The two special cases of multi-candidate contests that settled on a lengthy two-candidate contest deserve special consideration. Mondale in 1984 had begun the campaign as the front runner. Hart then emerged, however, as the surprisingly successful “outsider” challenging. He did, however, fall (or remain) behind while remaining closely competitive, rather like Clinton in 2008. After the last primary, Mondale was still a few delegates short of a majority. He was able to convince sufficient numbers of this new feature, superdelegates, to endorse him, such that his nomination was assured the day after the last primaries. This precisely parallels Obama’s circumstances in winning in 2008, but securing a majority via superdelegate pledges the day after the last primary. In Figure 4 are the relative delegate totals of Clinton and Obama, as a percentage of the majority needed to win nomination, for the crucial two-and-a-half months after the New Hampshire primary, that is through the bulk of the majority selection process. The points to observe are how these lines diverge little from a 50-50 split, and how neither is able to climb to the 100% (victory) mark.

[Figure 4 about here]

As far as I can tell, there is general acceptance of the model of momentum. It, however, only tells us of the general shape of the campaigns, the various possibilities within the dynamic account. It does not tell us who will win, only how it is that some will, in fact win.

Several have proposed forecasting models for this purpose, and I review two of them here (see Aldrich and Pearson, 2008, Abramson, et al., 2009, from which this section is drawn). The first of the two models is by Randall E. Adkins, Andrew J. Dowdle and Wayne P. Steger (“ADS”) who test their model with contests between 1976 and 2000 (Adkins and Dowdle 2001; Steger, Adkins and Dowdle, 2004). They have applied their model through 2004, and Aldrich and Pearson update it to 2008. Barbara Norrander (2000) developed the second model and tested it over the 1980-1996 period, and we updated it through 2008 as well.

ADS base their predictions on several considerations. One is popular support, as measured in the last national Gallup poll prior to the Iowa race.<sup>17</sup> They also examine financial support--both incoming and spending.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, they differentiate southern Democrats from all other candidates.<sup>19</sup> Finally, because of the importance of the opening events, they look at who won in Iowa and New Hampshire and the candidate’s vote share in each.<sup>20</sup>

Norrander’s model is similar. She also includes candidate standing in the last Gallup poll and performances in Iowa and in New Hampshire. And she considers financial support, here the amount a candidate raised in the year prior to the campaign as a proportion of that raised by the leading fund-raiser that year. She includes a variety of other considerations as well: whether Democratic and Republican races differ (because of the more heterogeneous Democratic constituency over much of this period), whether the primary is proportional or some version of winner-take-all, the effect of front-loading (measured as the proportion of delegates selected before March 31), and whether the

candidate comes with a strong electoral background (including the four offices described above and adding being a member of the U.S. House).

Both has forecast rather well through the periods, especially as tested by the original authors. The forecasts of the two models for both races in 2008, expressed as a predicted probability of winning, are presented in Table 2. On the Republican side, the ADS model predicted accurately and by a comfortable margin McCain's eventual emergence as the nominee. The model predicted that Huckabee would end up in second place, consistent with his strong showing. The surprises in this model were Romney and Giuliani, but for opposite reasons. Giuliani was predicted to be a top-tier candidate by this model, but perhaps because of his untraditional strategy of pulling out of Iowa and New Hampshire (possibly attributable to unusual strategic reasoning or to his anticipation of poor performance), he underperformed the position forecast by the model. Romney, by contrast, performed considerably better than expected. Norrander's "attrition" model accurately predicted the two final candidates. It did, however, have a "flatter" prediction, with only modest differences from the first two to the next two candidates (Romney and Giuliani). The original prediction of pundits that the Republican race would be wide open is supported here.

[Table 2 about here]

For the Democrats, the ADS model predicted the three strongest candidates, but in doing so it made Clinton a much heavier favorite than Obama. However, the model did accurately forecast a well-defined first and second tier of candidates. Norrander's forecasts are very similar in terms of ranking the strongest and weakest candidates. Like the ADS model, Norrander's model predicted that Clinton would have an advantage over

Obama. However, because her model is designed to predict attrition, that is, who fails, it is only fair to the model to note that it did accurately predict the final two candidates in the race. Like the ADS model, Norrander's model also suggested two well-defined tiers of candidates with Obama and Clinton on one tier and Biden, Dodd, and Kucinich on the other with Edwards in between, as in the ADS predictions.

The models, therefore, predicted the sets of strong and of less strong candidates quite accurately. They were weaker, especially on the Democratic side, in assessing which of the stronger candidates would actually win. The mechanics of the model predict that Clinton's victory in New Hampshire and her strong pre-campaign fundraising prowess should result in her obtaining the lead. Obama, doing well in fund raising in 2007 and winning in Iowa was elevated to a strong second place candidate.

Both models failed, however, to forecast the ability of Obama to raise huge sums of money during the primary season itself. Given that this was an innovative use of internet and related technologies, failure to embed this in the models' forecasts should not be considered a serious weakness, but does suggest how forecasting needs to be attuned to technological (and other) innovations. What is a serious weakness of our discipline's current state of the art forecasting technology is that the forecasting depends upon the outcomes of the first two events. Let's consider why this is so (the point is originally developed in Aldrich, 2009).

The momentum model is a simple positive feedback account, in which success in one primary spirals upward. What gives this dynamic kick to a candidate (whether upwards or downwards) is performances compared to expectations. Thus, Mondale in 1984 essentially did as well as everyone expected—winning with no knockout blow in

Iowa followed by a narrow loss in New Hampshire—and his poll numbers were stagnant, at 37% before Iowa and 34% afterwards. Conversely, Hart became the surprising new candidate showing strength (winning in New Hampshire, for example) and his poll numbers went from 3% to 38%. Senator John Glenn, the second candidate expected to be a strong contender in the primaries did poorly in both, and he withdrew after the second, seeing his poll numbers decline from 18% to 6%.

While the simple model of momentum has a number of equations to describe it (Aldrich, 1980b), it can be truncated to the following equations, where  $S$  will denote success and  $E(S_t)$  denotes the expectations for a candidate in primary  $t$ :<sup>21</sup>

$$\text{Equation 1a: } S_t = (1 + \beta)S_{t-1}, \quad \text{where } 1 > |\beta| > 0 \text{ and where,}$$

$$\text{Equation 1b: } \beta = (S_{t-1} - E(S_{t-1}))$$

Thus, if success is higher than expected, the candidate gets a boost (or  $\beta$ ) that is positive, while if the candidate fails to meet expectations, the boost is negative and it is zero if expectations are just met. If  $S_{t-1}$  is positive, then at the next time point ( $t$ ),  $S$  will be larger, and then it will be larger at  $t+1$ , and again still more at  $t+2$ —the candidate benefits from momentum, the vote analogue to the miracle of compound interest. And poll data seems to support it (as calculated by the uthor from Gallup data, various sources). Over the 10 non-incumbent races in this period, the candidate who came in first in Iowa and New Hampshire saw poll standings increase by an average of 19.3 points. Those who came in second averaged an increase of 5.7 points, while the third candidate increased 0.8 points on average, and all others averaged negative results. After even the next round of primaries, someone who started as an “asterisk in the polls,” (i.e., under 1%) would have nearly 40% support after winning New Hampshire and one more primary.<sup>22</sup>

All of this is very nice for explaining why the candidate who starts out with a sufficiently large boost from Iowa and/or New Hampshire is harder and harder to beat and why nominations end well before the convention even with crowded fields. What is left to explain is  $t_0$ , that is, the starting point. Indeed, that is the nature of all self-generating, or positive dynamical feedback, systems.

And it is here that the pre-primary campaign plays its role. It is what sets the opening position. One might have argued (as I still do) that in 1999, George W. Bush and Elizabeth Dole were equally plausible competitors for the same constituency of relatively moderate conservative Republicans before the invisible primary began. It was Bush, however, who moved first and most rapidly to lock up most of the relevant resource providers for that constituency in 1999, so that, by the time they even neared the actual starting line, they were no longer in nearly equal position, but Bush had a sizeable lead. Indeed, it was so sizeable that Dole could not imagine defeating Bush where it would really count, in the early primary and caucus states. That is, she seemed to reason that because someone who started at, say, 15 or 20 points, like Bush after just one round of momentum-induced gains in the polls would make them nearly invulnerable. Suppose for a second example that a candidate who does get a strong starting point from this invisible primary but is only the second strongest out of Iowa and New Hampshire. That candidate (call him “Mondale”) gets “only” a 5-point or so boost. That would put that candidate at about the same level as an asterisk candidate (call him “Hart”) getting the first place boost in momentum. Perhaps this helps us understand how a frontrunner can lose the largest momentum gain to an unknown and yet continue to be in a strong and possibly winning position.

Thus, the thesis of this section is that the importance of  $t_0$  has been realized by the candidates and has been something close to the center of candidate strategy. This invisible primary is called that precisely because it is a critical part of the campaign determined by elites and not by the public.

Once we know this starting point—the next and final step—in understanding nomination-campaign dynamics is the comparison of actual and expected outcomes. Expectations are a function of all the resources and the like (e.g., money, campaign staff, and poll support in the public,) that translate, somehow, into support in Iowa and New Hampshire, as in the following equation.

$$\text{Equation 2: } E(S_{t_0}) = f(\text{Resources}) + u.$$

This step is appending different translations of resources into different starting points. That is, how do predictions of resources become transformed into support in the first primaries and caucuses—how do they get translated into expectations for Iowa and New Hampshire? This is akin to standard “money-votes” equations, such as in Jacobson (1978). If we (meaning academics, media personnel, politicians, etc.) actually knew how expectations form in any systematic way, we would need only one empirical observation to solve this system: the Iowa results compared to expectations.

We do not know how expectations are actually formed, but we do know a lot about what is necessary, even if we know little about what is sufficient, for resources to translate into expectations. Consider a few examples. Early on the media used the standard of qualifying for matching funds and, when that proved too low a hurdle, how soon a candidate qualified for matching funds. When that proved not very telling, when John Connally could raise and spend \$6 million and yet win but a single delegate in 1980,

the concluded that cash could not be the full story. Poll standings appeared promising. Bartels (1988), however, showed that Mondale in 1983–84 had high standing only because he was an acceptable alternative and most voters did not know who else was running until the campaign began. Similarly, Howard Dean’s initial popularity and web-based fundraising drew a lot of attention in 2004, but he could not translate that into actual support. Organization seems important and indeed is my explanation for why Bush won so easily in 2000. But, as Dean’s showing suggests, the best-organized campaign does not always win. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2008) argue the importance of party activists, something I fully agree with. It is also not merely the greatest number of activists, however, that predict victory, or Jackson would have soundly defeated Dukakis in 1988.

In sum, we know a fair amount about what sorts of resources are helpful—we have a set of necessary conditions. None of these individually is sufficient for understanding success, and it may not even be the case that they are collectively sufficient. This is the largest remaining challenge for the scientific understanding of who wins presidential nominations. How are expectations formed? And, therefore, how should we model them? Answering this pair of related questions would mean that the “only” remaining uncertainty would be the (by then much smaller)  $u$ , or term measuring what is unknown.

Two possible answers have been posed. One is theoretical. Paolino has developed a sophisticated formal model of the dynamics of this pre-primary period (1995). It has, as one might expect, terrific data demands, that is, it requires observing a lot of what scholars have not been able to observe. Cohen, et al., (2008) propose an

alternative, one that focuses on the importance of endorsements and, thus, party activists of one sort or another in the process. In fact, I think, the latter might profitably be understood as an indirect indicator of the former. We as scholars might not have any good way of looking inside every serious campaign for president. Party and related elites, however, have very strong incentives to figure this out – who is it that is doing well at the outset? They do because it can be very useful to their career to be on the right side of the nomination contest. Endorsements, therefore, can be understood as strategic decisions on the part of a variety of elites, which Cohen, et al summarize. At the top of their list (that is, most heavily weighted) are governors. Such elected officeholders have short and long term incentives to be on the winning side, and thus endorsements – at least from those whose incentives are to be correct in their own forecasting – are an indirect indicator of just who is and who is not doing well before the Iowa caucuses begins to reveal that fact publicly. Perhaps, that is why Elizabeth Dole found that her most likely sources of resources (money, endorsements, and so on) had committed to George W. Bush already. In any event, endorsements may best be thought of as an indirect indicators for academics of who really is doing well before we have actual data from Iowa and so on to measure that fact. They are thus useful data until we have better theory and better data.

### **With What Consequences?**

The most important question is the set of consequences that from from nomination politics. There are, of course, a myriad of consequences that one could

imagine investigating. I will discuss two – policy consequences, and consequences with respect to the “kind” of candidate elected.

John Kessel (1977) argued that nomination contenders typically discussed many and varied issues, issues that were largely absent from the general election campaign. There were relatively small numbers of issues discussed in the presidential campaign, but these were issues of inter-party division. In governing, presidents raised, once again, many issues, some reasonably large combination of these two sets. Thus, there is reason to believe that issues of concern in the primary season are relevant to understanding how presidents govern. Of course, he wrote in the days preceding elite polarization. It may well be true now that issues discussed in the primaries are simply dropped in office in favor of issues that tap party cleavages. I do not know of any extension of his work, so the question is open. As noted above, in many respects, polarization reduces the concern about intra-party differences – they are fewer and more modest. Issue emphasis may matter, and that is rather more the point of Kessel’s study. We have little clear investigation of whether that which is emphasized in the spring matters for the fall.

There are two broad theoretical accounts of policy: the spatial model (or proximity – the more similar one’s policy preferences are to the candidate, the more one favors that candidate) – and the directional model (in which distance is equated with intensity of preference; see Macdonald and Rabinowitz, 2009; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). The directional model, for the primary season, predicts that essentially all would vote for the most extreme acceptable candidate in the party. That seems to contradict most contests in the reformed nomination system (and before). I would be hard pressed to say that Obama and McCain were the most extreme acceptable

candidates in their parties in 2008, or Kerry in 2004, Gore and Bush in 2000, Dole in 1996, Clinton in 1992, Bush and Dukakis in 1988, for examples. Thus, as valuable as the model may be in other races, it seems less helpful in this case.

The spatial model thus seems more promising, but it offers a different set of problems. The theoretical advantage (rather than the empirical one, above) is that it seems well devised to study the unique institutional attribute of a two-stage electoral process. The problem, however, is that the model founders (just as does the directional) on a sort of impossibility result. In particular, if there is free entry, as in the presidential primary season, any given position can secure exactly no votes, for certain, because multiple entry could result in one candidate entering just to the left and another just to the right of any given position of interest, “squeezing” it to zero votes on the basis of that issue. (Exactly the same can happen in directional voting.) Thus, neither model can tell us who will win.

The spatial model (and perhaps both models) can tell us what kind of candidate can win in terms of policy. If it is true that voters are reasonably strategic, as the above evidence suggests, then they will want to pick a candidate taking issue positions that set him/her well for the general election. But, you might object, pure spatial theory predicts that either (as in any real world case) there is no best position, or it predicts that the candidates should converge to the center of the full electorate. And, while my claim above about directional voting is that there is definitely a centripetal pull, no one would seriously claim that any candidate (possibly after Ford and Carter, at least) ever tried, let alone succeeded, in converging to the center.

Many, indeed most, spatial models developed over the last twenty years do not predict convergence. There has been little success, however, in getting what I believe to be a tight theoretical account of the primary season (for the reason given above, most have abandoned the question in formal terms). It certainly seems plausible that positions taken in the primary season limit the freedom of movement in the general election campaign (of course, Kessel does present a cautionary tale – there is little constraint if they talk about different issues), and we do not have very good, systematic evidence on mutability of publicly taken positions in a year-long campaign (let alone theory of same).

But there is a second problem. In campaigns such as 2008, the selection of one's nominee is made simultaneously with the selection of her opponent for the fall. How can a voter know what positions she would most like to see taken in light of the general election campaign, if she has no idea what position the opposition will take? This, of course, is precisely the virtue of equilibrium outcomes. If she can infer what a rational set of opposing candidates (and voters) will do, she can figure out what is best to do in the primary season. Median voter results are attractive that way, which is why they are seductive models for theorists. Unfortunately, they are empirically false. It turns out that, recently a primary alternative has emerged. Here is a possible theoretical answer to this conundrum. Two different models predict almost exactly the same positions. One is Palfrey's Duvergerian equilibrium model, in which the parties (their candidates) diverge to block effective entry of any third party (1989). The other is Valasek's model of turnout (2008). With risk acceptant (that is, concave) preferences among voters, he finds that candidates will diverge (in similarly simple settings, to just about the same extent as in Palfrey) as they risk losing support from the extremes. This puts the candidates not

very far from where the spatial model with activists also (tends to) forecast optimal locations, although the model does not make tight predictions (see Aldrich, 1983; Aldrich and McGinnis, 1989). Thus, a convergence of three sources of divergence – to block third party entry, to get activists engaged, and to optimize in light of turnout – to more or less similar positioning in the general election, from which we might infer by backwards induction, that the candidates would seek to secure for nomination, as well. That is a loose argument, but reflects the literature about the “who votes” question. Interestingly, it predicts that all candidates will move to that moderately divergent position – an inference not terribly different from that that we seem to be observing. Once again, we conclude that candidates will differ more on issue emphasis than on positioning. It also implies that they will more likely differ over competence in execution and implementation of policy, but this raises our second argument.

The second sort of consequence we presumably care about is what sort of candidate is chosen, in terms of their abilities and qualifications. The “who runs” literature pretty much tells us who in general terms. It is interesting that that seems to be a fairly strong set of regularities. I once tried to assess the effect of changing nomination procedures, by looking at the resumes of major candidates (and nominees) since the end of reconstruction (1987). The perhaps surprising finding was that the candidates all looked alike, no matter what era. Of course, these are limited terms of the meaning of what “kind” of candidate. Still, it does say that candidates are likely to continue to be drawn from the ranks of the highest elected officials, and thus do appear to be supporting the “establishment” in the terms discussed by Cohen, et al. (2008). And it may be (as they [ad I, 2009] argue) that over time the party establishments have figured out how to

dominate the reformed nomination system, reducing the chances of “outsider” candidates (where “outsider” can include governors such as Carter and long time senators such as McGovern).

What is missing is any sense of analysis of the attributes and traits of candidates. This, then, replicates what I argued was missing from the “who votes for whom?” question. It is a serious weakness in our repertoire. We have, perhaps, focused too heavily on the policy positioning and emphasis aspects and much less on the leadership and effectiveness dimensions of presidential selection. Perhaps the most evident lacuna here is wondering just what lessons there are from having a race boil down to a long, close contest between a white female and an African-American male. This is true both with respect to why people voted the way they did and it is at least as true with respect to the consequences of the Democratic contest in 2008.

## **Conclusion**

The study of presidential nominations has made a great deal of progress on some questions. We know a great deal about the resumes that candidates will be bringing to the race. We have a decent idea how people choose candidates on the basis of issues and expectations, and that is at least two-thirds of what appears to be the important dimensions of the problem. And, we have a very well worked out understanding of the many aspects of the dynamics of the campaign, how it will proceed. Consequences are, for two major reasons, much less well developed. The reasons are either that the models are remarkably difficult to extend and may only now be ready for application to the questions of winning nomination and election, or that (as with candidate characteristics)

we have very little systematic data, perhaps only now having the data to address those questions. Each question has its own, unique set of unanswered aspects of importance. Sometimes it is theoretical, sometimes it is empirical, and sometimes it seems that we just are not asking the question and therefore cannot possibly know the answer.

It appears, therefore, that there are relatively few new lessons of 2008. In some measure, those two campaigns reinforced what we already believed we knew. In some cases (notably the long contest between Obama and Clinton), we had a reminder of what might have seemed idiosyncratic in 1984 might actually be a recurring sequence of events, at least on occasion. And, in others, notably the success of a female and African-American candidate, it is a question of major significance that we have not yet been able to address.

TABLE 1

Current or Most Recent Office Held by Declared Candidates for President: Two Major Parties, 1972-2008

Office held	Percentage of all candidates who held that office	Number 1972-2008	Number 2008	Prob '72-'08*
President	6%	7	0	1.00
Vice president	3	4	0	0.57
U.S. senator	39	47	8	0.47
Governor	20	24	4	0.48
U.S. representative	13	15	3	0.03
Other	7	8	1	_____
None	8	10	0	_____
Total	99	119	16	=====

Source: Abramson, et al., 2009, Table 1-1

\* Calculated by assuming there were 7 presidents and vice presidents in this period, and by assuming that there are, at any given time, 100 senators, 50 governors and 435 members of the US house.

TABLE 2

Estimated Probabilities of Candidate Nominations, ADS and Norrander Models, 2008

Republicans	McCain	Romney	Huckabee	Giuliani	Thompson	Paul
ADS	0.40	0.08	0.22	0.20	0.06	0.03
Norrander	0.21	0.17	0.21	0.18	0.13	0.09

Democrats	Obama	Clinton	Edwards	Richardson	Biden	Dodd	Kucinich
ADS	0.27	0.53	0.17	0.003	0.0130	0.005	0.001
Norrander	0.23	0.31	0.15	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.08

Data used in the calculation of these probabilities were at least in principle available before the 2008 campaign began. In particular, polling data are from the Gallup Poll of December 14-16, 2007, and financial data are from Federal Election Commission end of year reports for 2007 (although these were not released at that time).

\*Source: Abramson, et al, 2009, Table 1-2..

Figure 1

Number of Candidates in Multi-Candidate races

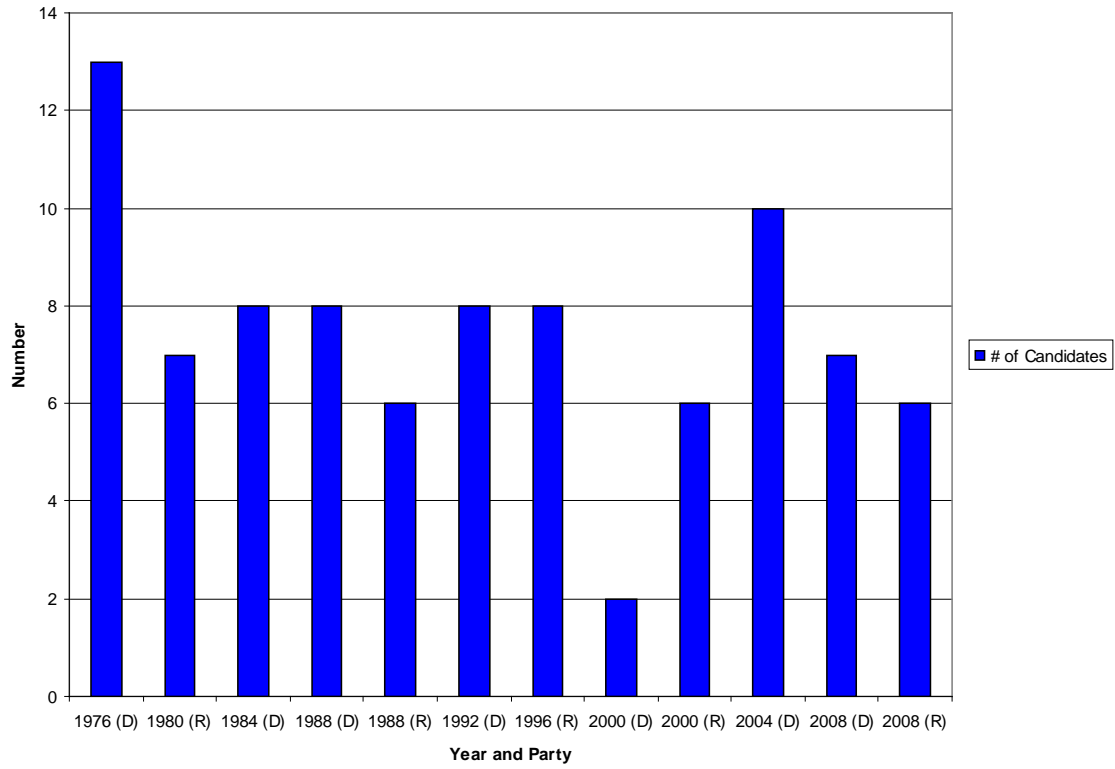


Figure 2: Delegates Awarded by week, 1976, 2008

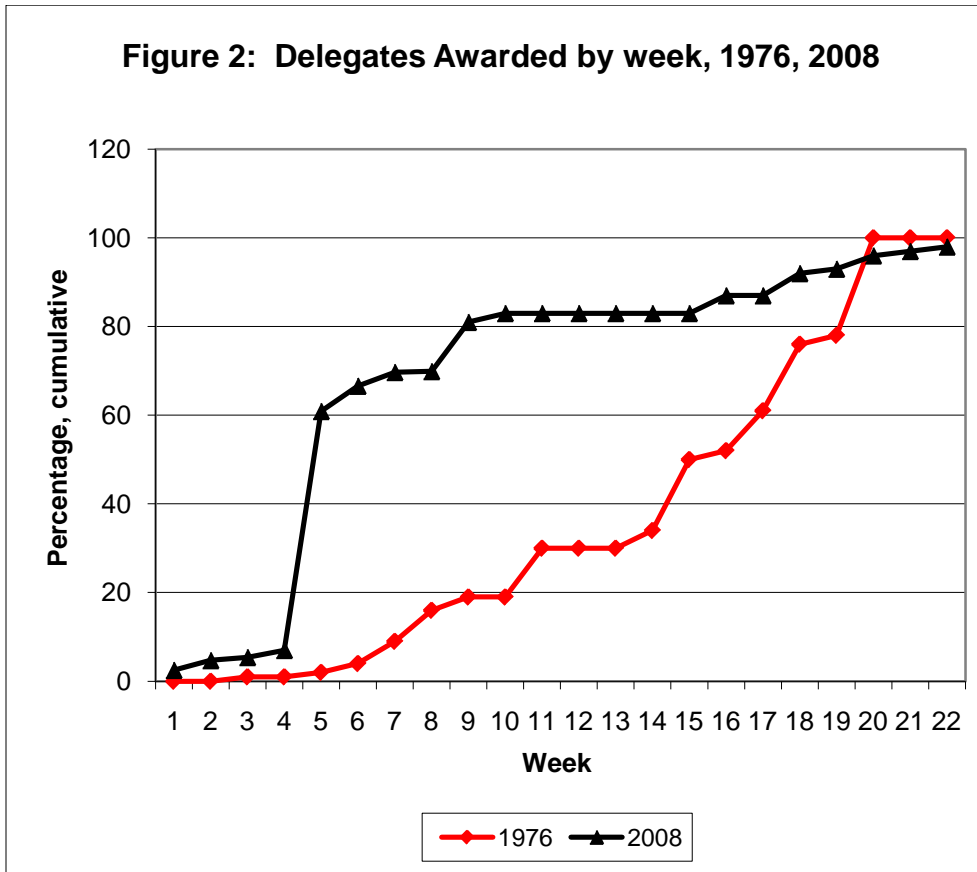


Figure 3

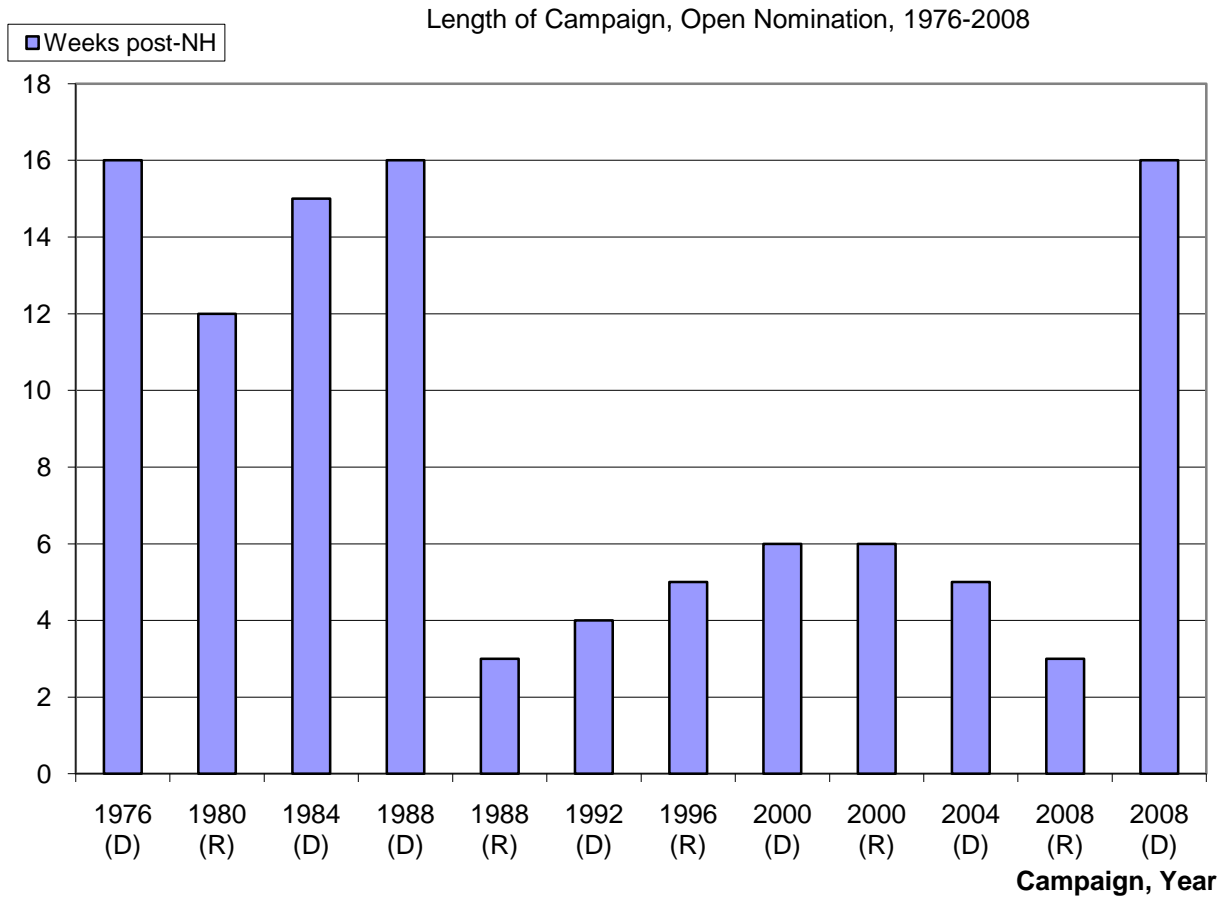
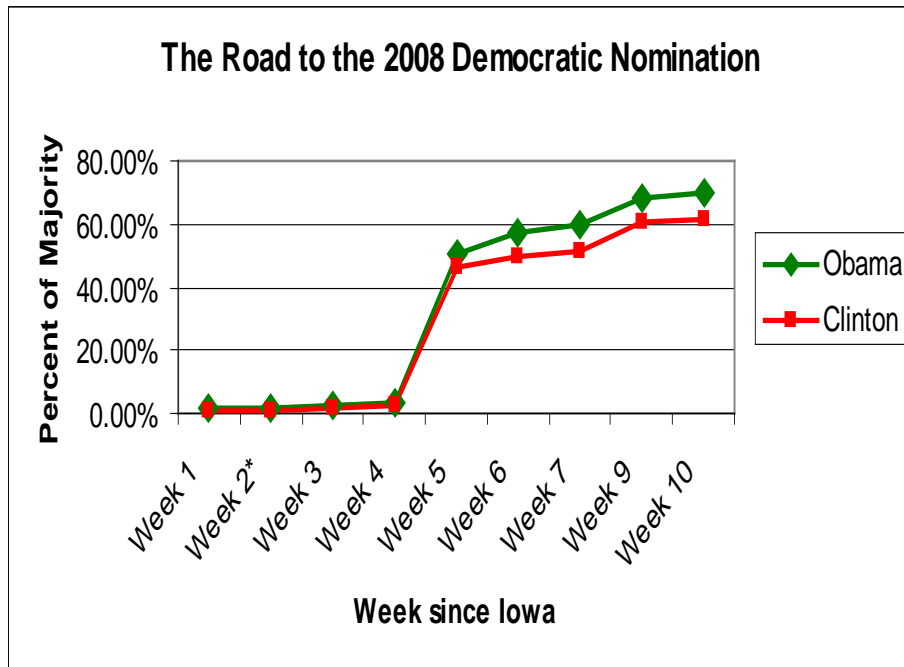


Figure 4

Obama and Clinton Support to the  
End-Game of the Primary Season, 2008



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I believe this is a much stranger institution than the Electoral College, the only real competitor to this “title.” The more difficult question is whether this is an institution.

<sup>2</sup> Former presidents are either constitutionally ineligible or were defeated for reelection and thus not credible candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Given that there are twice as many senators as governors, those two offices are essentially equivalent sources of candidates.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa, formally declared his candidacy but dropped out in 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Former governor Jim Gilmour (VA) and former Rep. Tancredo (Col) declared their candidacies but dropped out in 2007.

<sup>6</sup> The costs of losing the presidential contest are apparently not particularly high in the calculus for the reelection bid, excepting perhaps presidents (and possibly vice presidents)..

<sup>7</sup> One might look to Banks and Kiewiet (1989) or Aldrich and Bianco (1992) to begin to think through such a model.

<sup>8</sup> This parallels the calculus of voting, as it stood as the major rational choice version of turnout long after the first serious game theoretic models appeared – indeed, it is only now reaching a point that that calculus should give way to superior game theoretic formulations, see Vasalek (2008).

<sup>9</sup> That is the result in Banks and Kiewiet (1989).

<sup>10</sup> Between the inaugural CCAP and ANEW’s multi-wave panel design over the internet, 2008 may prove to be an exception.

<sup>11</sup> Please note that this is my interpretation of his data. Bartels (1987) reports an analysis in which the explanatory variables are considerations about Mondale and expectational measures. As Bartels notes, nothing about Hart, per se, is included in the regressions.

<sup>12</sup> We do not know, of course, if reported vote choices are at all close to actual behavior, such as if the nation were voting around that time.

<sup>13</sup> The 1972 Democratic campaign could also be included in at least this section (as in Aldrich, 1980a,b), but not all see that as a campaign conducted when the primary-centric nomination system really was fully in place (certainly campaign finance changed dramatically with the 1974 amendments to the federal campaign finance law of 1972 and then with Buckley v. Valeo, in early 1976). And, McGovern-Fraser rules were still unfolding and not actually ratified until the Democratic convention itself that year.

<sup>14</sup> Technically there are any number of unstable equilibriums, with  $n$  candidates in precise balance, each getting  $1/n$ th of the support. However, the two candidate balance point seems imaginable, any further equilibriums seem increasingly implausible empirically, and the world has given us a number of two candidate cases and no others.

<sup>15</sup> Actually, there was a third candidate in 1980, then Cal. Gov. Jerry Brown. It was this contest in which he received his nickname “Governor Moonbeam” and he received very little support, and so this case reduced almost immediately to a two major or serious candidate case.

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<sup>16</sup> Frontloading therefore differ from the creation of superdelegates, as doing so did create the new opportunity to have the primaries end with neither of the two having won fifty percent of the delegates.

<sup>17</sup> For the 2008 contest, this poll was conducted December 14-16, 2007

<sup>18</sup> For our replication, the first was measured by cash reserves on hand at the end of 2007, the second as measured as the proportionate share of a candidate's spending.

<sup>19</sup> They argue that southern candidates are advantaged since relatively few run. Moreover, they argue that since 1976 parties have often nominated southern candidates. The Democrats nominated southerners in 1976, 1980, 1992, 1996, and 2000, whereas the Republicans nominated southern candidates in 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2004.

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see John H. Aldrich and Brian Pearson, "Understanding the 2008 Presidential Nomination Campaigns," unpublished paper, Duke University, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, the actual change in, say, popular support is likely to be monotonically increasing but marginally decreasing. But even if it were, say, halved after the event(s) following New Hampshire, the asterisk candidate would still be supported by about one-in-three after two bumps, still a very large gain. This model is technically ill-defined here. Please refer to Aldrich (1980b) for formal definitions.

<sup>22</sup> Details on the numerical calculations are available upon request.