THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY: ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AND REFORMS

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History of the Presidential Nominating Process

In the entirety of United States history there has never been complete satisfaction with the method of choosing presidential candidates. (Pious 2009) This idea or sentiment can be found in some of the earliest scholarship on the president and helps explain why some believe the best candidates are often not elected to the office. (Bryce 1888) A reason for this is that unlike other aspects of elections, offices, and other procedures that were explicitly laid out in the Constitution, there is an absence of instruction in this area that laid a poor foundation for the process for later generations. Because of this, the process for selecting candidates has always been one that fit the particular needs of the times which they were created in. This arrangement has created a problem because the method for selecting presidential candidates was not set up to last like many items the Framers created. The reason for this is that the Framers were adamant that political parties not be established and not have the influence, and more importantly, the corruption that was present in the Parliament of England. In addition, there was no possible way for them to foresee just how powerful many of the later political bosses would become and how their influence through the course of the 19th century became greater than anyone would have thought possible, especially for people not subjected to democratic elections. Furthermore, the original concept of how powerful the office of the
President would be has changed considerably in the last 235 years. The Constitution was designed specifically to prevent the possibility of one person or office having too much power, and some contend that the type of control presidents enjoy today exceeds what the founding generation would think safe. The Framers were keenly aware that an “unenlightened” person would, at least occasionally, end up president and they took every precaution to prevent them from becoming something like a king. To be sure, the Constitution was set up to prevent a poor president from having much influence as Congress was to be the primary source of power and the president was in place to handle crises and work with Congress on what was to be the best course of action for the country. Because of these reasons, it is no surprise that there was not a considerable amount of time invested into setting precise rules and regulations on how nominees were selected as it was not the highest of priorities.

What has been evident over time is that the system in place for nominating candidates was one that was normally most convenient to those ruling the parties in the times that they were created. Because the process for nominating was set up to cater to the needs and whims of the parties in the time it was created, it has tended to have many undemocratic aspects and, while it was somewhat efficient for the parties, has always become outdated and therefore has been in need of occasional reform. A positive aspect of the need for reform is that, as mentioned, there are no rules or regulations found in the Constitution so changes can be made without going through the process of an amendment. However, a constant negative is that it is necessary to convince the respective parties to change the rules because they are the ones that can change them and it goes without saying that influential people who have grown accustomed to knowing
how to manipulate a system to their needs are not readily willing to reform. Therefore, a key aspect to comprehend is that reform has always needed to come about by popular support of the people who, over time, have tended to make the process more democratic once it had become apparent that the system in place was not representative of what they wanted.

The first means of selecting presidential candidates after the Constitutional Convention was given to Congress to decide which people would run. This process was acceptable at first because at that time people were often hesitant to run for president and often only did so after the encouragement of others who said they would be a good candidate. In no way did this early means of selection resemble the modern primary system other than the fact that it was fairly democratic as elected officials selected candidates so, at least in theory, they were accountable to the voters for the choices that they made. This continued until 1824 when the political parties, whose influence had already grown considerably, took over the means of choosing presidential candidates through what became known as the national convention. The people of each of the prominent parties began to understand the importance of picking their own candidates in order to assure that they had the party’s interests and, more accurately, a duty to reward favors back to those who allowed them to win the nomination. Like many things during this time, the convention gave the impression of a democratic process as party officials would vote on their favorite candidates yet the rest of the citizenry had no voting input whatsoever. The only means of influence at this time for the people was through communication of their preferences with the delegates themselves through letters or newspapers which provided little accountability to the people. This system shows the
overwhelming control that the political machines, bosses especially, had on the
government of the United States throughout most of the 19th century. This influence
continued into the early 1900’s until there was enough popular support for the
Progressive reforms which included instituting a primary system.

The primary system was put into place in states that desired to have one, and this
marked the first time in United States history that voters had any direct influence on the
presidential nominations. The primaries allowed people to show their support for the
candidates of their party by voting in elections held in the months prior to the presidential
election. Unfortunately for the people, the primary system was only a small success as it,
just like the early means of selecting candidates, only gave the appearance of being more
democratic as less than half of the states even had them. Worse yet, the primaries were in
no way binding according to their results. Therefore, while the people were able to show
their preferences, the delegates were not responsible for the results of the primaries and,
as they were unelected, were not held accountable if they went against the vote. So in
essence, while the Progressives made considerable headway into having meaningful
reform for the process of selecting the candidates, they still did not possess any real
authority. Furthermore, the national convention still had an extraordinary amount of
influence throughout the early 20th century as evidenced by the Republican Convention
held in 1912.

At this convention, despite the way the primary elections turned out, there was a
massive rift in the Republican Party as the more progressive Roosevelt supporters were
not seated by the conservative Taft delegates after Roosevelt and his supporters had been
so openly critical of President Taft’s administration which had abandoned many of the
Progressive reforms of Roosevelt’s time in office. That national convention, and its
decision to award the nomination to Taft, did not represent the views of many Republican
voters. In modern times, at the very least, an unfavorable president would tend to
acquiesce to the party base on some of their policy if they were as unpopular as Taft was
with many Republicans at the time. In 1912, however, there was no chance of that
happening and instead both Taft and Roosevelt ended up running for office and splitting
the Republican vote allowing Woodrow Wilson to win the election.

Moving forward through the 1950’s and 60’s, there was not a considerable
amount that changed in the process as primaries continued to be held by less than half of
the states and their results were still non-binding. Moreover, the candidates still relied
heavily on the political party machinery to influence the final outcome of the nomination
decisions. As there was not enough of a public outcry over the 1912 election to change
the national convention system, those who wanted to reform the process needed to wait
until a more controversial event happened. The only real change during this time was the
primary in the state of New Hampshire, which simplified its qualifications and process
for holding a primary and was able to hold it in March of the year the presidential
election which was well ahead of the others. This became a significant change that
would have a lasting impact up to the modern day and was really the first example of a
primary having more influence than a political party. For example, in the 1952 primary
season the electorally popular Eisenhower defeated the much more politically connected
“Mr. Republican” Robert Taft in no small part because of the election results from the
earlier New Hampshire primary that undoubtedly had more influence on the national
convention, especially considering that it was one of the first primaries to be covered
nationally on television which heightened the awareness of Americans to the presidential race much earlier than ever before. Furthermore, 1952 was also significant for the Democrats as the incumbent Harry Truman surprisingly withdrew from the presidential race after being defeated by Estes Kefauver in the New Hampshire primary and who would eventually go on to win the Democratic nomination that year.

As mentioned, despite the fact that the popular election primaries were growing in their influence on who would be the presidential nominee, the system was still flawed because the primary votes were not binding in any way. It would take a monumentally controversial primary for this necessary reform to take place and the prime example of this happened in the 1968 Democratic primary season. This was when the vehemently anti-Vietnam candidate Eugene McCarthy, structured his entire platform around that issue, won a majority of primary votes throughout the spring and summer but still lost the nomination to Hubert Humphrey through “back room politics” at the party convention as none of the delegates were actually committed to McCarthy. In response to the uproar that this caused, the Democratic Party formed the McGovern-Fraser Commission and tasked it to offer reforms to the nomination system. The Commission’s report helped create another vital change in how presidents are nominated. Starting in 1972, the Democrats’ rules made all primaries binding for the victorious candidate. This was a monumental changing point because that finally ended the national convention as the primary means of picking candidates. The Republican Party adopted similar rules as the 1970’s wore on. Conventions still had some influence throughout the 70’s and 80’s but it has decreased steadily to a point now where they are essentially ceremonial in nature. Ironically, because of this newfound importance of the presidential primary, the process
of making the current primary system outdated began immediately as states began competing over who could have the most influence. Regions tried to align themselves together so potential nominees would cater to their interests, especially in the South where the Super Tuesday primary was first started for that exact purpose. (Moreland 1991) Therefore, over the last two decades, there has been a steady shift of states trying to make their primaries earlier and earlier so that they can be near the top which obviously brings much more influence to those states in regards to who eventually gets selected to run for president in November.
Current Flaws of the System – Money, Fame, and the Invisible Primary

Understanding the flaws of the system is important because the current system, constructed out of necessity with good intentions, has outlasted its usefulness. There are many flaws to the contemporary system, all of which lessen the impact of the voting populace as a whole, increase the influence of the parties and big campaign donors, make the party conventions somewhat needless and ceremonial and overall decrease the feeling of involvement that many voters should have during this important time. There are many examples of this that can be found over the last thirty years but there are plenty that have been evident recently that supply ample evidence that the primary system yet again is about as undemocratic as it can be and in need of reform. The flaws could not have been more evident in the 2008 primary season and has continued to become increasingly evident throughout the early portions of the 2012 primary season.

In the 2008 primary, John McCain easily secured enough delegates to get the GOP nomination despite the fact that he had only managed to obtain 39.3% of the vote during the primary season. (Tolbert 2009) McCain’s campaign had out earned all of the other candidates by a wide margin and after Mike Huckabee had a great showing in Iowa
he was eventually overtaken by McCain despite the fact that Huckabee was fairly close with McCain through the first several primaries in the number of votes received.

Huckabee was a strong candidate because he was considered to be more representative of the base of the party while McCain, who was more moderate politically, was someone many in the party felt was unelectable because of his inability to unite the party. (Primary Results 2008) These issues showed the flaws of the current system, since it demonstrated both that it was possible for a candidate to overwhelm others with money, and that being somewhat successful with the number of votes obtained did not necessarily translate to delegates. There were other issues that came up on Democratic side as well, albeit in different ways and for different reasons.

The unusual closeness of the race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama also showed another flaw that should be reformed. So rare was their dual during primary season that for the first time in several decades, states that held their primaries in April and May actually had some impact on who the candidate for president was going to be. The fact that so many people are often left out of the process has increased the amount of apathy and left even fewer people in charge of actually deciding who the nominee would end up being. Indiana for example had an important role and regular campaign visits from the Democratic candidates for the first time since the modern system has been in place. This is simply an unacceptable practice if the process for selecting candidates is to be considered fair and democratic. These flaws are evident and are likely to persist into the future and continue to be problematic for selecting candidates.
The primary season in 2012 has once again illuminated many questions about the effectiveness of our election process, most of which concerned how truly left out many Americans are when selecting the presidential nominees. For example, the importance of what some people call the “invisible primary” has only continued to increase. The invisible primary is the time before the first nominating event but after candidates have declared their intention to run. (Cohen 2010) This is time that the respective campaigns use to raise much of their money, which they need to do since primaries are held earlier. And since many thought that it was entirely possible that in 2012 the Republican candidate would be decided before the first of March, the advantages go heavily toward the more financed candidates. For example, during the primary seasons for both parties from “1980-2004 all but one candidate who raised the most money the year before the primary won their party’s nomination.”(Donovan 2004) This pattern will only continue to grow as the ability to raise funds increase before the first nomination event. Because of the importance of the invisible primary, there are ever only a few people who have any real chance of getting a party nomination and they are the ones that have name recognition and a well-established fundraising and volunteer network established long before the primaries of the election year.

One of the best examples of this so far is the amount of money spent during the Iowa caucuses between the two leading candidates. On average, the winner Mitt Romney spent approximately $49 per vote in Iowa while Rick Santorum spent about seventy-three cents. (Somnez 2012) Even more impressive for Santorum is that figure does not include money raised by PAC’s, of which Romney had an advantage over everyone else in Iowa
and New Hampshire as well. The interesting thing about this number in relation to how
the primaries favor the wealthiest campaigns is that some political pundits have been
characterizing Santorum’s Iowa success as similar to that of Obama’s in 2008 because of
how they were both the under-the-radar type candidate taking it to the strong and
established front runner. Unfortunately, this comparison is fairly unfounded as the
difference in fundraising between Obama and Clinton was much more comparable and
Obama had already built extensive networks in New Hampshire and other early primary
states because he had the money to do so which was an obvious reason for his success in
2008. Santorum’s campaign, as of the week of the Iowa Caucus, was polling at about 4%
in New Hampshire as, by his own admission, his campaign had not focused a great deal
on New Hampshire where he was going to “let his record speak for itself.” While that is
certainly a hopeful goal for Santorum, if he does not do well in New Hampshire, his
presidential bid will be practically over, especially if Romney wins going away as the
numbers indicate he might. Suffice it is to say that Romney, who suffers from the same
“moderate” “flip-flopping” characterization that John McCain dealt with is not the most
popular candidate for the Republicans, especially the conservative wing of the party. He
is practically the only moderate that is running and could not even obtain one third of the
vote in Iowa against four other very conservative candidates that made up over 60% of
the vote put together. However, because of his fundraising capabilities and network
already in place he will most definitely be a strong candidate throughout the primaries
and will likely become the winner barring some miraculous change in the polls.
Current Flaws of the System - The Homogeneous, Apathetic, and Predictable Characteristics

The general consensus that comes out of the academic scholarship about direct primaries, and specifically how it is set up today, agrees that it while it served its purpose in the 1900’s it has become stagnant, fairly predictable, and in need of change; the fiasco of the 2008 election is the best example of the necessity of change. The reason that direct primaries are in place today is as previously discussed, rooted in the Progressive ideas that became prominent during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency which were largely a response to the “Gilded Age” of politics where party bosses had extensive control of everything that had to do with politics. Because of this, it was thought that a direct primary would be better than the private caucuses that had been dominated by the bosses for so long and had produced no real choice in candidates, only those who had been loyal to the party, and most importantly, would continue to be. The process was immediately successful by the standards of the day as by 1916 twenty states had direct primaries. However, most delegates were still selected at the party conventions that came at the end of the primary and caucus season. (Ware 2009) This reform was successful because it
wrested some of the control of the nomination process from the local bosses and provided a more democratic process overall. A sign that this was true was that voter turnout increased as a result of the reforms as people undoubtedly felt that their votes had some influence on the results. Again, as already discussed, this process continued for much of the next half century until there was a great push for even more democratic reform that would allow for more delegates to be elected by direct primaries and over time, convention politics, had become just as crooked and undemocratic as the time of the bosses, and things finally reached a point of no return during the 1968 Democratic convention. (Rorabaugh 2009)

Not long after this time, the McGovern-Frazier Committee in 1972 allowed for more direct election of delegates which helped to increase voter turnout again, and most importantly rid the conventions of tumultuous conflict that were detrimental to the nomination process. States using the direct primary has increased steadily during this time as 37 states used them during the last election in 2008. Initially, this reform continued to increase voter turnout and get better candidates involved however these benefits were short lived as loopholes in the system created many problems which in many ways has brought the nomination process back to where it started at the beginning of the 20th century; where fewer people have any real influence and the candidates with the most money typically succeed. While the 2008 primaries did see an increase in voter turnout over the previous two elections, many of the limitations of our current system showed themselves during this election year.

Early on, voter turnout was high for the Republicans as the competition between John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Mike Huckabee was still contentious, however voter
turnout declined sharply once it was apparent that McCain was going to get the nomination. This brought to light several flaws in the current system. First, for the Republicans, McCain received only 39.3% of the total votes after Super Tuesday yet he had already secured around 75% of the delegates because the Republicans award delegates on a winner take all system as compared to the Democrats who use a much more proportional system where Obama, who received 45.7% of the vote, received 50.5% of the delegates. (Adkins 2001) For the Republicans, the winner take all system allowed a candidate that, in reality, only won many of the early states by a few percentage points to easily secure the nomination early in May which left many people out of the process. The voters in primaries after Super Tuesday had for all intents and purposes become disenfranchised because they had no say in who their presidential nominee was going to be.

A big cause for people being disenfranchised is another problem with our current system that many say began in 1976 with Jimmy Carter’s surprise win at the Iowa Caucus. That is that the Iowa Caucus and New Hampshire Primary have a disproportionate amount of influence in the system and this arrangement over the last few years has produced an inequitable situation because what happens in these two elections has more influence than a primary or caucus in any of the other states. (Mayer 2004) In fact, it is estimated that Iowa “has 6-20 times more influence (than other states) and heavily favors big spenders who can afford the necessary organization and staff to win a caucus.”(Redlawsk 2011) This is because it also has “produced an increasingly greater share of national media attention over the time of 1980-2004.”(Donovan 2007)
Therefore, as the nomination process is often times over quickly, people that vote in primaries afterwards have no influence on who their nominees will be. This has been exacerbated recently as the presence and influence of the media continues to grow because of increased “24-7” news coverage and advancements in internet technology. For example, for the first time in 2008 people all over the country began to follow the Iowa caucus results on their internet capable phones and then had a multitude of news shows to go home to that could recount and provide commentary on the day’s happenings. In 2004, the internet technology did not exist and in 2000, with the exception of CNN, twenty four hour news coverage was in its infancy. In 2008, the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primaries were national news stories for days and because of this, the implications of those early elections were discussed endlessly during those times which help to explain the increased significance of the two elections then and going forward. (Winebrenner 1998) Because many people understand who is doing well long before their primaries, in many cases they feel as if the results have already been determined. This has led to an increasingly low turnout in primaries and caucuses that occur after the party nomination for president has been declared. So not only are people disenfranchised at a national level, many of them do not have any motivation to get out and vote for their local elections as well. (McDonald 2006) This effect of having smaller and smaller turnouts in states after the national candidates are established has had a negative effect on participation especially at the local level which was supposed to be what the original progressive reforms were supposed to prevent. Another problem that surfaces when looking at the extent to which Iowa and New Hampshire influence the national selections is the reality that neither of these two states are accurate
representations of the nation yet they are allowed a disproportionate amount of power. For example, in 2010 Iowa was 91.3% white and New Hampshire was 93.9% while the country as a whole was 72.4%. In addition, the national average of African Americans is 12.6%, while both of those states had less than 3% and obviously were underrepresented in other minorities as well. (United States Census 2010) The lack of demographic representation does not stop with race however as the economies of Iowa and New Hampshire, like most states, have their own unique composition and therefore the needs of those industries would be most likely to have an advantage over other economic sectors. For example, both states rely heavily on manufacturing so candidates would be more likely to adopt platforms ahead of time that cater to those needs while leaving out a state like Florida that relies more on tourism and service industries.

The most important of these problems that needs to be addressed is that during election season, most of the grassroots time and effort of both parties is spent in Iowa. (Hull 2007) Because candidates cannot afford to get off to a terrible start there continues to be an enormous effort, months or even years in advance, aimed at swaying voters in Iowa by devoting large sums of cash and man power to the state. In fact, it is common for politicians to visit and campaign in Iowa years before the caucus that will eventually help to make them a party nominee. Moreover, when a potential candidate wants to test the waters and see how much support they would get, one of the first things they will do is get research from likely Iowa voters to see how they can most effectively appeal to those citizens. (Beaumont 2011) Consequently, other states are denied the benefit of having potential candidates visit them in an attempt to win their votes. Even worse, in most of the recent election years, less than ten percent of voters tend to turn out
for the Iowa caucuses while in 2008 it was sixteen percent. In addition, the people who
tend to participate each year are the most partisan and most loyal to their parties. This of
course narrows the scope of voters who decide the outcome even more which, again, was
not the intention of the direct primary. Finally, yet another flaw with the current process
for nominations is that because there is so much emphasis on Iowa and New Hampshire,
it is possible for a candidate to raise enough money to nearly almost ensure their early
victories and pave their way to the White House. In fact, over the course of the last seven
elections, thirteen of the fourteen eventual presidential nominees were the ones that spent
more than their opponents. (Redlawsk 2011)

Because of these many flaws to the nomination process, the 2008 election saw
reactions from other states that are likely to grow and continue in the future unless
meaningful reform is made. For example, Florida, with an understanding of how
influential being the first primary can be, moved their election before the Iowa caucus.
While they were penalized for this and it caused a lot of controversy it was understood by
many to be the logical next step in order to make sure that their voters have more
influence than they normally do. A consensus among many of those who critiqued the
2008 primary agreed that states will continue to move primaries ahead regardless of the
punishments and bad press because it is abundantly evident that it is to their benefit to do
so in order to get their needs ahead of other states. While there is a general consensus
that the current system is flawed, there are many different suggestions and plans for
changes that should be made to the process. While some of them overlap, it is clear that
there are many differing opinions on what a successful direct primary would look like.
For the most part, the common area that is shared is that it should remain as a direct
primary that should be set up to encourage the maximum number of people to have meaningful votes for candidates who aspire to represent Americans as a whole. It is overwhelmingly evident that, as earlier mentioned, the way to reform is to make it more democratic, national, and fair for anyone that wants to compete regardless of money earned. If the reforms do not move that way then it is evident that they will not be meaningful. With the way our media and technology are today the need for state primaries and caucuses is outdated. This of course hints at the idea of a national primary or at the very least something that feels more like a national decision as opposed to one made by the same few states every four years that the rest of the country is forced to accept because of an outdated system long bereft of having true national democratic characteristics.
The Proposals

The most simple and common proposal found is one that supports a national primary where all of the states have an election on one day and the nominees are declared immediately. This of course eliminates many of the flaws of our current system by not allowing candidates to concentrate their efforts on one or two small states, it allows everyone to participate and have meaningful votes which would be more likely to increase participation, and it allows for the selection of a candidate that is a more accurate representation of most Americans. There are however some issues that would not be cleared up or presented on their own by using a national primary. The most common agreement is that a national primary would not allow for sufficient time for the public to know all of the possible candidates. (Smith 1992) Whereas under the current system, possible nominees are weeded out over the period of a couple of weeks requiring less knowledge and research as there are fewer candidates before the majority of people vote; with a national primary people would need to be familiar with more candidates and could allow for situations where a candidate gets nominated and then a few weeks later it turns out they have some serious character flaws or were misleading on their policy goals
because they only had to fool people for a short time. (Norrander 1992) The national primary also does not solve the problem of eliminating the possibility of an ideologue getting nominated from either party because it would be possible with eight or more people per party running that someone could get a majority with only ten or fifteen percent of the vote, much like what happens in some European countries because of the large amount of political parties present in different countries. Furthermore, the national primary would heavily favor the most well-known and well financed candidates. While the current system tends to do this as well, the national primary would make this problem worse as there would be no chance of a lesser known candidate getting stronger over a longer process. This is also true because a candidate that could afford to fly all over the country to campaign would have a noticeable advantage over the Santorum-like pick-up tour through Iowa seen throughout November and December of 2011. So overall, while the national primary fixes some of the flaws of the current system, it still allows and even exacerbates one of the more critical characteristics that money can and will allow a candidate, no matter how bad, to buy their way to getting a shot at the White House.

The next proposal that enjoys some serious support is the rotating primary which basically keeps the system that we have now but instead of having Iowa and New Hampshire first, it proposes having a rotating group of states go first. This would definitely be more effective however this proposal has one major flaw that makes it unlikely to be the reform that fixes the whole process. That flaw would be that there is still a chance for later states to have little to no influence on the outcome of the nominations. However, this would allow for everyone to at least have a chance, over the course of many elections, to be the “most important states” when it comes to the
nominating for president. Another benefit would be that if the states were not announced until a specific time close to when the primaries start it would keep a well-financed person from taking over a small state and helping to ensure at least early success. A rotating primary would still allow for a grassroots type of movement where candidates are regularly talking to the people of that state and there are many face to face meetings, yet it would keep people from being there well over a year before the primary actually starts like they do now. It also would add the dynamic that a candidate could not necessarily tailor a platform around what the people in a few states they know they will be campaigning in will want to hear. As noted before, Iowa and New Hampshire have many similarities and do not force candidates to have to have radically different ideas in order to do well in both places. If the first few states picked happened to be Washington and Mississippi, or Massachusetts and Arkansas, or some other very different combination it would be conceivable that there would be no candidate with a strong start as it would be unlikely for them to succeed in both states. This could theoretically allow for later states to also have more of a stake in the process and still allow for as many people as possible to cast meaningful votes.

Another potential option is the regional primary where there is a weeding out process because there is a regional primary first followed quickly by a national primary consisting of the remaining states. In this proposal an entire region, randomly assigned, gets to have the first presidential primary. This would eliminate the focus on one narrow area, get more states involved early on, be less predictable based on money spent, allow for a longer time to get to know the candidates before a nomination is made, and lessen the impact of one state’s priorities becoming a focus for the candidates. This is a very
valid concept and idea yet it still has a few remaining flaws, one of which is that it is still possible that a region’s interests could still trump others. However, the fact that it would be an entire region would lessen the negative effect of this regional bias. Yet it is still conceivable that if there were an all Southern, New England, Midwestern, or West Coast primary first that would have too much of an effect on the later election and still allow for many people to be left out. While there are many different states in the regions, there are unquestionably issues that would become more important in each region and therefore could eliminate some candidates that might do well nationally who will never get out of the regional primary. In addition, the size of a particular region and the amount of delegates they might receive could make one candidate be so far ahead of the others that the national primary afterwards could be a moot point. This could even make things worse as there are numerous regions for both of the major parties that would produce drastically different results on the nominees and could quite possibly provide nominees that are not in any way representative of what the majority of the people in the country would like to see. Although it is not mentioned, this problem could be solved by just declaring two winners for each primary and create a runoff type of election in the national race. While that would not prevent what was previously mentioned, it could possibly address some of the flaws in that system.

The last academic proposal, the Graduated Random Presidential Primary, was the most comprehensive and contemplative of getting ahead of potential problems. To many who support it, it is simply known as the American Plan. The way that it works is that each year a rotation of small states gets to hold the early primaries much like they do today, yet under this system it is unlikely that one candidate can get off to an
insurmountable lead. This also allows for the field of candidates to become more well-known and pared down without giving too much of an advantage to a single state. Also, because it rotates, it would allow for different states to host every election year and be a part of the nomination process and help to eliminate some of the racial and economic biases that come with having Iowa and New Hampshire as the permanent trendsetters. Following the initial small state primaries, the country would then have a national primary a few weeks after to determine the winners of both parties. The benefit of this is that it does not prolong the primaries which have made so many of them irrelevant. It allows for a good length of time to get to know the candidates without being too short or long which, as mentioned, have their own problems.

Regardless of the reform proposal it is apparent that there are numerous flaws to the system that is currently in place to select presidential nominations. Some claim that reforms would eliminate the grassroots style campaign that is rooted in talking to the people of the early states, and that a more national approach would favor the more well-known and connected candidates. This of course is alleviated by the rotating small or regional primary. In addition, most of the reservations about making changes to the process would be that it would meet resistance from those who have benefitted from the current arrangement who would tend to oppose and obfuscate any of the reforms that would be made. However, the abundance of reform proposals that point out these flaws is evidence that some type of change should be made and the fact that some might oppose it is hardly a reason not to do so. While there is no general consensus to what type of reform should be made, it is obvious that something should be done. In addition, while all of the proposals do not agree 100%, there are still common themes found throughout
such as the realization that the current process is too long and recently has heavily favored the candidates that spend the most money. There is without question agreement about what problems need to be fixed; the disagreement simply lies in the method to alleviate those problems.

As mentioned, the only reason that many reforms happened was because of the outcry of the people. That is why the change from the convention system to the primary system occurred; it helped to limit party influence by allowing people to vote and have a real albeit limited say in their party’s nomination decision. As long as America is continuing to try and diminish the major party’s influence and let more members and independents decide, as the independents are the ones that are largely left with the “lesser of two evils” approach to presidential voting, then any reform will be helpful to the process. The continued spread of these ideas also helps to deepen our understanding of American political life because it allows us to take a look at a system that is not working the way that it should and see what problems that is causing the voters. It then gives a chance to see what different people are saying about possible ways to fix the system and what their motivations for saying them are. Finally, it should be important to everyone in the country that the process for choosing presidential nominees is as effective as possible. If it is not then we are left with a system that is less desirable to participate in because instead of having two strong candidates who best represent the ideas of both political spectrums in the country, we are left with the unexciting prospect of voting on the “lesser of two evils” which hardly invokes the idea that the two best candidates are actually up for election. All of these things would, in turn, lead to a more democratic process as well as less politically constrained candidates which could help to alleviate polarization and
get a president to be not as attached to their party’s platform and more concerned with what is right for the country.
The Influence of Technology

While it is still too early to fully understand the role that media will play in the future of all elections, it is clear that it will have a tremendous effect on the way that they will turn out. The internet has already begun to revolutionize presidential campaigns and has yet to reach its full potential. In relation to presidential primary reform, there are several intriguing possibilities that could assist the current reform proposals. For example, one limitation with a national or regional primary is that candidates would have too much ground to cover and would still favor the most heavily financed candidates. However, new technology should be able to allow candidates to get their message out faster and more cost effectively which should prevent the need for excessively long primary seasons and some of the monetary advantage a candidate has over others. In addition, citizens in the future will be able to find out information about the candidates and keep track of them even easier which will allow the “vetting process” that typically takes several months to shorten to weeks. So not only will this level the playing field financially, as candidates will not have to pay as much to show videos or speeches, it will
still allow the people to see and hear the messages of the candidates without even needing to find a 24 hour news station.

Technology for such things has only recently become available for the current election cycle as smartphones were in their infancy in 2008 but nearly half of the people in the United States currently possess this technology and it only continues to grow. (Bimber 2011) With smartphones likely to become more common, have a higher processing speed, and develop software or “apps” that will allow people to update themselves on articles, videos, speeches, etc. of all of the candidates in a matter of a few hours, it’s likely the speed of the nomination season could increase greatly. The best part is that all of this will be done without sacrificing the quality of the vetting process as a candidate’s past and present will be even easier to get now than it has been for even the last few elections. (Richie 2009)

Another interesting change in how media will affect the presidential nomination process is the use of social networking by candidates and their staff. Currently, Twitter and Facebook are the most commonly used forms of social networking but over the next few elections there will undoubtedly be more and more formats candidates will use regularly. The reason that these will have a large influence on improving nominations is that they are inexpensive and allow candidates to communicate with the voters without spending hundreds of thousands and even millions on ad campaigns. Social media is an equalizer for those that can utilize it effectively which is obviously an advantage for getting not just the most well financed candidates to pick from every election. Another interesting aspect of social media is that it allows ordinary people to connect and communicate with the candidates without having to go through several filters. While
presidential candidates have their staffs largely manage their accounts, it was not uncommon in 2008 for Obama to send out his own messages and respond to some of his followers on Facebook and Twitter. (Howard 2005) In a primary setting, this could allow people to feel more connected to a candidate and allow them to cover more “ground” because they can send a short personal message to people following their campaign which to many people means just as much as personal contact. In 2008, Barack Obama had slightly over 100,000 Twitter followers during his campaign but currently has eclipsed the 12,000,000 follower mark and will only continue to grow. Once this form of interaction becomes standard between candidates and the people it should improve the nominating process.

The most intriguing aspect of social media however is what it will be able to do for the undecided voters. It is obvious that turnout in primaries is embarrassingly low, even for those with a great stake in the outcome. An explanation for this is that undecided voters and independents largely stay away from these elections as they are often distracted and uninterested in the elections at such an early stage. The best thing that the new technology could do would be to help get the undecided voters involved at an earlier stage because all the information they could need to make informed decisions could be found easily on their phone and could bring them up to speed in a faster and more convenient way than ever. Even more radical, there is currently a movement beginning where people go around the parties and elect their own candidates to put on the ballot. A group called Americans Elect is seeking to get the first non-partisan presidential ticket on the ballot for the 2012 presidential election. (Mach 2011) While still a small movement, this seems like it would be the type of nomination process the
Framers would have preferred and will now be increasingly possible with new and existing technology. Whatever the future changes may be, it is obvious technology will play a great role in that change and if used correctly will be able to make the process fairer to all candidates and get more people involved and hopefully lead to better candidates for people to choose from.
The original motivation for researching this topic came from The Real Making of the President and the general idea from that book is that presidents are made and not elected. This is troublesome because the foundation of a republic comes from the citizens expressing their desires for the direction of the country by voting for people who will represent them accordingly. Having people who are created as an image that is not what they truly are should not be something that the country should strive for. A big reason that primary reform is necessary is because it should make the process more democratic and representative of what it should be. Therefore, it was interesting to understand more about why this process was that way and how it could be improved.

Other readings have also contributed to this idea as the president being judged on their appearance and not necessarily their substance which has continued to foster an atmosphere that produces substandard candidates. The Rhetorical Presidency covered the benefits to the president of being outspoken and as public of a figure as possible. In addition, The Institutional Presidency also reinforced the idea that the president is no longer just a person but more of an ideal persona created by their staff. Moreover, the
President is more proactive in getting his agenda passed by being a public figure stumping for his policies; it is also something that the public expects from the president. This idea was also reaffirmed in the article *The Presidency and the Press: The Paradox of the White House Communications War* which also focused on the idea of the president having to take advantage of appeals to the people and using communication in order to have the desired amount of influence that the president needs in the modern day.

All of this research supports the idea that presidential nominations should be shorter, but at the same time more inclusive of all voters and allow the best candidates to make themselves apparent regardless of their campaign’s finances. In all of the previously mentioned articles, the thing that they have in common is that as the citizens of the country are increasingly relegated to the role of the bystander, the less influence they have on politicians and by extension the presidential nomination and election becomes less and less democratic over time.

It was evident that since the 1960’s the way to get elected was to look, talk, and most importantly to be perceived as a well polished candidate. Cultural changes and the use of the television undoubtedly played a large role in changing so dramatically the way that the president was elected however it was the process of getting elected that was so intriguing. In order for a president to “stay on script” for such a long time would obviously take an enormous amount of effort and questions whether the current process was in fact producing the best candidates for president or merely the best looking or perceived candidates. In the course of research for the paper, the excessively long process of electing presidents has clearly been a significant factor in building this system that caters to those that have the most money, best presentation, and best overall staff.
Overall, the research for this paper reinforced many of the ideas that were presented in Rorabaugh’s book. For example, “scientific studies completed in the last decade using focus group methodology have proven that “how it is said” is more important that “what is said.” Focus groups have alerted media consultants to the importance of auditory stimuli to increase attention, recall, and persuasiveness.” This idea has been one of the most influential in the course of understanding the presidency during the semester.

Taking away this understanding of presidents being perpetually in campaign mode has influenced my perception of the presidency in a negative way. It is readily apparent that since the election of 1960 presidents and their staffs have upheld this idea of the previous quote that it’s not all about what is said but how you say it and what is heard. This has had a deleterious effect on politics for many reasons, not the least of which is that presidents are becoming increasingly overproduced and their staffs and managers are worried more about how presidents are perceived rather than what they do for the benefit of the country. Fixing the nomination process to de-emphasize these characteristics is the most important step of many that would help to improve the quality of candidates.

Presidents that are perpetually stuck in campaign mode are not going to accomplish many useful things but will instead focus on useful legislation for their campaigns which are often times two different things. Furthermore, as the office of the president continues to get more influence, improving the way that they are nominated would help to alleviate many of these problems are more likely to continue and grow over the course of the next several presidential terms. So while presidents would still have enormous staffs and still be judged mostly by their appearance, they would still be better people to begin with and that is definitely a step in the right direction.
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Works Consulted


8. Various authors and contributors at www.nationalprimary.info