Democratization and Party Cohesion

Evidence from the United States

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Abstract:
Many political parties around the Western world have democratized the processes for selecting candidates and party leaders. Some scholars fear that among the consequences of this trend will be a decline in party cohesion, which would undermine the ability of parties to perform the functions which democratic politics requires. Often the United States is presented as a polity in which that decline has occurred. However, taking advantage of the long sweep of time since the presidential nominating was democratized in the early 1970s, this study demonstrates with both qualitative and quantitative evidence that there has been no apparent decline in party cohesion, and by some measures quite the reverse. Others have found that in Congress and among the mass public, party cohesion has risen. The reasons include some factors that pertain to many party systems, notably the desire among party elites that party divisions be suppressed in the age of television, manipulation of the rules by party elites in order to undermine party insurgencies, and the legitimacy that democratization confers on the winner. Even in the United States, democratization need not lead to party disunity.

Keywords:
-candidate selection
-democratization
-party cohesion
-party unity
specter has been haunting the political parties of the Western world: the democratization of the process for selecting political candidates. In numerous countries, we are told, these processes have been opened to a larger number and wider range of participants, and often the processes have been decentralized geographically as well. Similar developments have occurred in the processes for selecting party leaders (Ware 1996: 264–269, 273–277, Mair 1997: 146–152, Davis 1998: 184–187, Scarrow et al. 2000: 138–142, Bille 2001, Hopkin 2001, LeDuc 2001, Pennings and Hazan 2001, Rahat and Hazan 2001: 309–317, Hazan 2002, Narud et al. 2002b, McCann 2003).

The selection of political candidates is one of the many aspects of the study of politics in which Henry Valen has long been engaged. In a recent essay, he and his co-authors explained the significance of the subject: “Nominations are the first step – and the primary screening devices – in the process of representation” (Narud et al. 2002a: 9) and “Nominations are important events because they are closely linked to the power structure of democratic societies” (Narud et al. 2002a: 10).

Frequently cited is the assertion by E. E. Schattschneider (1942: 64), that “he who can make the nominations is the owner of the party”. In short, it is fair to say that the process of nominating candidates is at the heart of what parties do and a central aspect of the democratic process. Changes in that process have profound implications for the functioning of political parties as well as how democratic government works.

For these reasons, scholars have paid great attention to the democratization of the nominating process and its consequences for political parties. What they have concluded is that such democratization may harm the parties in a variety of ways, notably by increasing the importance of candidates rather than the party organization, and therefore also augmenting the importance of raising campaign funds as well as the role of the news media. However, the most frequently hypothesized effect is the decline in party cohesion. In one of his earliest publications, Valen (1958: 188–90) wrote that parties that lack cohesion will be less able to perform the functions on which a healthy democratic process depends. While some scholars have found evidence of democratization harming cohesion (Rahat and Hazan 2001: 312–317), others have concluded that parties might prevent this ill effect by careful counter-measures, such as a tacit alliance between leaders and party masses that isolates party activ-
No matter where they stand on the question of whether democratization damages party cohesion, most scholars have cited a worst-case scenario, the United States. As Jonathan Hopkin (2001: 349) has written: “increasing inclusiveness will not necessarily weaken party cohesion in Western Europe as it apparently has in the US”. Lawrence LeDuc (2001: 337–338) has also suggested that democratization could produce some of these dire American consequences. Hopkin was undoubtedly referring, and LeDuc was explicitly referring, to the consequences of the proliferation of primary elections in the United States, notably in the presidential nominating process after the Democrats’ McGovern–Fraser reforms in the early 1970s. Numerous American scholars have argued that those reforms did indeed harm cohesion (Cavala 1974: 41–42, Polsby 1983: 88, Reiter 1985: 127–131). Others have found that a ‘divisive primary’ can hurt a party’s chances of winning a state’s presidential vote later that year (Lengle 1980, Kenney and Rice 1987, Lengle et al. 1995). However, more recently Lonna Rae Atkeson (2000) found that voters in primaries and participants in caucuses did not differ in their tendency to unite behind the victor, and that the quality of the candidate better explains whether the party is united than the method of nomination; and William Mayer (1996) found that Democratic disunity was not caused by the reforms, but rather by the long-standing heterogeneity of the party’s base.

Some of these studies suffer from one or both of two problems. One is that several of them were written too soon after the reforms were adopted to enable us to discern long-term trends. Critics of the reforms point out that the first Democratic presidential nomination after they were adopted, George McGovern’s in 1972, was a divisive disaster. Four years later came a close-fought and sometimes bitter race on the Republican side, between Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. Four years after that, the Democrats suffered another fratricidal contest, between Jimmy Carter and Edward Kennedy. While these blows to party cohesion suggest that the reforms had a deleterious effect, observers often overlooked the fact that in the two presidential races that preceded the reforms there were equally divisive contests. The controversies surrounding Barry Goldwater’s Republican nomination in 1964 and Hubert H. Humphrey’s Democratic nomination in 1968 suggest that
the reforms may have coincided with, rather than causing, an era of bitter intraparty contestation.

The other problem is with the ‘divisive primary’ literature, which equates closeness of the vote with divisiveness. The problem with this operational definition is that a closely fought contest can be civilly conducted, while a landslide may embitter the losers’ supporters. In 1968, Richard Nixon won barely a majority of the delegates at the Republican convention, while Hubert Humphrey easily coasted to victory at the Democratic convention; but no political observer would have denied that Humphrey’s party was far more divided than Nixon’s. Similarly, in 1992 George Bush won 98 percent of the Republican delegates, while Bill Clinton won ‘only’ 79 percent of the Democrats, but Clinton’s party was far more united than Bush’s. Closeness of vote is an imperfect measure of divisiveness.

The post-reform era is now more than three decades old, so we now have enough time to evaluate the long-term consequences of the reforms. Moreover, this study will use more valid measures of divisiveness than closeness of the contest. It will show that there was no decline in cohesion associated with the adoption of the reforms.

**COHESION OF ACTIVISTS**

Party cohesion can be difficult to quantify. If we are interested in the cohesion of the party’s activists, there are no easy measures to use. Party organization stalwarts are a very small fraction of Americans, and therefore national sample surveys do not provide numbers of a party’s activists that are sufficient to produce reliable inferences. As a first step in this analysis, I rely instead on a qualitative assessment, assigning each presidential nomination to one category of a rough three-part schema. The categories are:

1. **High cohesion.** Either the party did not have a nominating contest, or the contest was amicable and produced no post-convention bitterness.

2. **Medium cohesion.** The contest may have involved some bruised feelings, perhaps because it reflected long-standing factional divisions, but the party reunited fairly easily and there were no significant defections to another presidential candidate.

3. **Low cohesion.** The contest left the party sharply divided, with large numbers of activists hostile or indifferent to the victor, and there were significant defections to other presidential candidates.
These descriptions are sketchy and impressionistic, as are the assignments of them to the nominations since 1940. Starting with 1940 gives us a length of time bisected by the adoption of the reforms.

**Table 1.** Degree of party cohesion after major-party presidential nominations, 1940–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year and party</th>
<th>Nominee</th>
<th>Degree of cohesion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940: Democratic</td>
<td>Roosevelt*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940: Republican</td>
<td>Willkie</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944: Democratic</td>
<td>Roosevelt*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944: Republican</td>
<td>Dewey</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948: Democratic</td>
<td>Truman*</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948: Republican</td>
<td>Dewey</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952: Democratic</td>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952: Republican</td>
<td>Eisenhower*</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956: Democratic</td>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956: Republican</td>
<td>Eisenhower*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960: Democratic</td>
<td>Kennedy*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960: Republican</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964: Democratic</td>
<td>Johnson*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964: Republican</td>
<td>Goldwater</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968: Democratic</td>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968: Republican</td>
<td>Nixon*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972: Democratic</td>
<td>McGovern</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972: Republican</td>
<td>Nixon*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976: Democratic</td>
<td>Carter*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976: Republican</td>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980: Democratic</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980: Republican</td>
<td>Reagan*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984: Democratic</td>
<td>Mondale</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984: Republican</td>
<td>Reagan*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988: Democratic</td>
<td>Dukakis</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988: Republican</td>
<td>G. H. W. Bush*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992: Democratic</td>
<td>Clinton*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992: Republican</td>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996: Democratic</td>
<td>Clinton*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996: Republican</td>
<td>Dole</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000: Democratic</td>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000: Republican</td>
<td>G. W. Bush*</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Won the election. Incumbents are underlined.
Table 1 gives the designations and Figure 1 indicates for each party the proportion of high-cohesion nominations. The trends in Figure 1 show conclusively that in the long run the parties have been more unified than ever. George Bush in 1992 was the only presidential nominee from 1984 through 2000 whose party was not united firmly behind him.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of major-party presidential nominations that were characterized by high party cohesion, 1940–2000

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**Cohesion of Voters**

The foregoing exercise may strike the reader as too impressionistic and difficult to replicate. Therefore let us examine the voters and use evidence of degree of cohesion that is based on large sample sizes found in national surveys. In short, is there evidence that the average voter is less satisfied with one’s party’s presidential nominees since the reforms were adopted than was the case before 1972?

The surveys of the American National Election Studies (ANES), which have been conducted since 1952, provide us with a time period almost as long as that of the preceding analysis. In order to maximum sample sizes, I will take advantage of the findings of Bruce Keith and his colleagues (1992), that respondents who claimed to be independents but leaned toward a party behaved in most respects similarly to those with a ‘not very strong’ party identification. In the following analysis, then, people who either identified with a party or claimed to lean toward that party are counted as partisans.
At first glance, I might ascertain the degree of satisfaction with the party’s nominee by observing how many partisans failed to vote for him. However, this is a measure partly of dissatisfaction with one’s party nominee, and partly of the attractiveness of other candidates. Many Democrats voted for Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 because of his immense personal appeal, and not primarily because of dissatisfaction with the Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson. Therefore our measures should not confuse the ‘push’ from one’s party’s candidate with the ‘pull’ of the other party’s candidate.

During every presidential campaign since 1952, the ANES has asked each respondent to state if there is anything one likes or dislikes about each of the major-party candidates. Subtracting the mean number of positive responses from the mean number of negative responses provides an index of how dissatisfied a voter was with one’s own party’s nominee. Figure 2 shows the trend in this measure over time for both parties. Notice that the higher the line, the more negative the attitude toward the presidential nominee of one’s own party.

Certain presidential candidates stand out as unusually unpopular with their party. Among Democrats, McGovern and 1972 and Carter in 1980 were exceptionally disfavored; among Republicans, Goldwater in 1964 took the prize, and he was followed by Nixon in 1972, Ronald Reagan in 1980, and George Bush in 1992. Most important for our purposes is the trend over time. For the Democrats, there is no upward or downward trend. Most of the values of the trend line were within a fairly narrow range, and there was no obvious break beginning in 1972. For the Republicans, the first three values were exceptionally low, but the values in 1964 and 1968, before the reforms took effect, were comparable to those after 1968. Whether the low values from 1952 through 1960 were unusual, or reflected equally high cohesion before 1952, is impossible to know.

Another measure, perhaps more important from the viewpoint of party leaders, is the proportion of party identifiers who did not vote for their party’s candidate and were more negative about him than positive about his major-party opponent. This can be measured with the same data used in Figure 2; what proportion of a party’s identifiers (1) did not vote for their party’s nominee, and (2) had more negative comments about their own party’s nominee than positive comments about the other
major party’s nominee? This measure does not include among the disaffected those Democrats who voted for Eisenhower purely because of his personal appeal. The proportions of each party’s identifiers who fulfilled these criteria appear in Figure 3.

Like Figure 2, Figure 3 shows no trend for either party. For the Democrats, only exceptionally high percentages for Humphrey in 1968 and Carter in 1980 stand out, and for the Republicans, Goldwater, Reagan and Bob Dole in 1996 lost the most voters. Otherwise there is a very slight upward trend for both parties, but hardly evidence of a major increase in divisiveness beginning in 1972.

A final test of whether the proliferation of primaries weakened party cohesion is to see if partisans who supported a loser in the nominating process were especially unlikely to vote for the winner. Unfortunately, the ANES asked respondents whom they had supported in the nominat-
ing process only from 1964 through 1992, and not in 1972. Therefore we have a less complete series than in the other years. My measure of party divisions is the difference between the general election voting behavior of those who supported the winner of the nomination and that of those who supported a loser; if the reforms hurt party cohesion, then we should expect to see that difference increase after 1968. Figure 4 shows the trends.

There is no evidence of an increasing gap in general election voting behavior between supporters of the winner and supporters of the losers. For the Democrats, the gap seems to have shrunk, although there is only one data point before 1972. For the Republicans, there is no apparent trend.

Figure 3. Percent of party-associating voters who did not vote for their party’s nominee, and had more negative comments about their party’s nominee than positive comments about his opponent, 1952–2000. (Source: ANES.)
OTHER INDICATORS OF PARTY COHESION

If the democratization of the nominating process had caused a decline in party cohesion, we would have seen evidence of that in other party arenas. However, there is convincing evidence that in the past generation the mass constituencies of both major parties have become more united ideologically (Hetherington 2001). Moreover, around the same time, party cohesion in Congress began to increase to levels that had not been seen in years (Sinclair 1996: 93, Fleisher and Bond 2000: 3–4, Jacobson 2000: 17).

Not only is there no evidence that the party loyalty of activists and voters was adversely affected by democratization of the presidential nominating process, but there is evidence that in a number of respects party cohesion in the United States is higher today than it has been in many years.

Figure 4. Percentage support for one's party's nominee in the general election; difference between behavior of those who supported the winner of the nomination, and that of those who supported a loser, 1964–1992. (Source: ANES)
EXPLAINING THE PARADOX

This study has established that by several measures there was no decline in party cohesion after the proliferation of presidential primaries in the 1970s. This finding is truly paradoxical, as it violates the expectation that democratizing the candidate selection process would harm party cohesion. It is now the task of this study to explain why, as Sherlock Holmes would say, the dog did not bark, and to suggest implications for parties in other nations.

A couple of the reasons why political parties in the United States have withstood the potentially centrifugal effects of democratization involve the presidential nominating process itself. First, the advent of television seems to have made party elites fear the effects of showcasing the party’s divisions through the mass electronic media. It is probably no coincidence that the most recent multi-ballot presidential nominations were in 1948 (Republicans) and 1952 (Democrats), as televising of conventions began in 1948; the new medium was probably one factor in parties’ not wanting long roll-call votes that made the party look divided. The televising of the fractious conventions that nominated Goldwater, Humphrey, and McGovern may well have contributed to the defeat of those candidates.

As a result of those famously embarrassing conventions, party elites have tried to engineer conventions as pageants of party unity. They persuade losing candidates to drop out of the race before the convention so that it can be united behind the winner. The last time a Republican candidate who did not do so was in 1976; the last Democrats who did not do so were in 1992. Party elites have also “front-loaded” the process, moving primaries and caucuses earlier and earlier in the year so that the contest will be over in plenty of time to reunite the party (Sabato 1997). Front-loading also shortens the process and increases the likelihood that the candidate of the party establishment will win; insurgent candidates lack enough time to build momentum against the party favorite, as John McCain and Bill Bradley discovered in 2000. Front-loading also makes it necessary for candidates to raise a great deal of money early in the contest, which also favors candidates of the party establishment (as well as wealthy insurgents) (Cohen et al. 2001).

Television is of course a universal phenomenon, as is party elites’ desire to present a unified face to the public. Front-loading is a peculiarly
American example of a broader phenomenon, the tendency of party elites to alter the formal rules in order to protect their interests even after democratization occurs. Parties in other nations have experienced analogous developments, but the details differ according to the institutional context (Hopkin 2001, Hazan 2002: 119–123).

More specifically American are broader trends that help to explain the increase in party cohesion in Congress, among the mass public, and even according to some of the indicators used in this study. The nationalization of politics in the United States that occurred during the New Deal eventually led to a realignment of voting blocs, with Democratic conservatives (mostly in the south) becoming Republican, and Republican liberals (especially in the northeast) moving to the Democrats. This was a long and complex development, and by the 1980s and 1990s it made each major party far more united ideologically than it had ever been. Democrats no longer give serious consideration to conservative presidential candidates, and Republican liberals no longer seek their party’s presidential nomination.

There is one final, more general reason why democratization did not produce a decline in party cohesion, and it is that democratization can legitimize a party’s decisions in the minds of its members. In a recent study of the adoption of the direct primary in the United States in the early twentieth century, Alan Ware (2002: 200) has written of “a set of beliefs dating back to the Jacksonian era that, if parties were at the center of political life, they should be highly participatory, providing access to the political system for all those who wanted it”. Similarly, I have argued that the democratizing reforms of the 1970s have helped to institutionalize and legitimize a process that had been evolving toward a candidate-centered process for decades (Reiter 1985: 149–154). The precipitating event for the Democratic reforms of the early 1970s was Humphrey’s nomination, which many Democrats believed was illegitimate because party elites manipulated the process. Today, it is difficult for the supporters of a losing candidate to claim that the process was biased against that candidate when the process is as open as it now is, and when the victor earned the nomination by winning the most votes in the primaries and caucuses.

Parties in other nations may experience similar legitimizing consequences of democratization. Indeed, several scholars have argued that
the desire for legitimacy was one of the motives for parties’ adoption of more democratic procedures (Ware 1996: 268, Mair 1997: 148, Hopkin 2001: 345, Rahat and Hazan 2001: 313, Hazan 2002: 117–119). The almost universal valorization of democracy that has been developing in the Western world at least since the French Revolution has made it more difficult for parties to justify oligarchic practices. In an era when partisan loyalties in many nations have apparently eroded, democratization has become one route to restoring faith in political parties. Within those parties, procedures seem fairer when they have been democratized.

CONCLUSION

Many political parties around the Western world have democratized the processes for selecting candidates and party leaders. Some scholars fear that among the consequences of this trend will be a decline in party cohesion, which would undermine the ability of parties to perform the functions which democratic politics requires. Often the United States is presented as a polity in which that decline has occurred. However, taking advantage of the long sweep of time since the presidential nominating was democratized in the early 1970s, I have established that there has been no apparent decline in party cohesion, and by some measures quite the reverse. The reasons include some factors that pertain to many party systems, notably the desire among party elites that party divisions be suppressed in the age of television, manipulation of the rules by elites in order to undermine party insurgencies, and the legitimacy that democratization confers.

This is a happy conclusion for party scholars, nearly all of whom, like Henry Valen, have emphasized the vital importance of effective parties. That democratization can co-exist with cohesive parties, even in the United States, demonstrates both the resiliency of parties and the viability of more inclusive party processes.

Notes
1. The designations that appear in Table 1 were based on independent ratings by two leading scholars of the nominating process, William G. Mayer of Northeastern University and Gerald M. Pomper of Rutgers University, and myself. When there was disagreement among us, majority rule prevailed. The Bush nomination in 1992 produced no
consensus, so I designated it as medium in cohesion. I am grateful to these eminent scholars for assisting me.

2. In each year except 1972, up to five responses to each question were recorded; because only three responses were recorded in 1972, I will use three as the ceiling for all the years.

3. Nixon and Reagan are surprising in this group, as both won election easily. The most common negative comment about Nixon from fellow Republicans was about the war in Vietnam; the most frequent negative comment about Reagan was about his age.

References


